

“Lo and Behold! What’s Next?”

Acts 13:44-52

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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My grandmother’s name was Lucille, but almost everyone called her “Lucy.” My grandfather – her husband – however called her “Cille” and he had a way of speaking to her when he was frustrated or trying to make a special point. He would say, “Law, Cille!” as in “Law, Cille you burned the chicken again!” or “Law, Cille! We’re going to be late for church!”

The word “law” had nothing to do with legal matters. It was a word to denote emphasis. She knew – and we *all* knew – when he prefaced her name with the word “law” that he meant business.

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If you look on the cover of the bulletin and read again the words to Jesus’ Great Commission, you’ll see the word “remember” there in the last verse. (*“Remember, I will be with you always even to the end of the age.”*) But just as “law” did not literally mean “rule” for my grandfather, the word “remember” here doesn’t literally have anything to do with memory.

Throughout January all the sermons have been based on the action words in The Great Commission.¹ They are actions found throughout the book of Acts telling the stories of how the church got started.

The church was thriving because the disciples of Jesus followed his commands: Go. Make disciples. Baptize them. Teach them. And then we come to that wonderful last line in The Great Commission that brings immense comfort to us in times of loss and loneliness.

The New Revised Version translates it this way:
Remember, I am with you always even to the end of the age.

The great King James Version translates it slightly differently:
Lo, I am with you always even to the close of the age.

Other translations go with “Behold, I am with you always . . .” or “Look, I am with you always . . .” or “Listen, I am with you always . . .” How is it possible that we get so many translations from a single little word?

An English-speaking friend married to an Arabic-speaking husband told me once that in the on-going effort to understand her husband’s language, she has occasionally

¹ Matthew 28:19-20

asked him how to say a certain word in Arabic. “There is no word for it in Arabic,” he’s been known to say. Or he might say, “There are many words for this in Arabic.”

This is the situation for the Greek word *idou* (pronounced *id-oo*).

Idou I am with you always, even to the close of the age.

You can’t really translate the word into English. It doesn’t mean something as much as it implies something, just like the word “law” for my grandfather when spoken to his wife.

Idou is a “marker of attention.”² It tells us to pay special attention to this part. Be sure you are *listening* to this and *remember it*. It means: *Get this! Focus! Hold on to this part.*

Jesus wanted everyone to remember these words. They were practically the last words he spoke directly to the disciples and he really wanted them to hold onto to them:

I am with you always – to the end of time. Don’t ever forget it.

This little word – *idou* – is used 23 times in the book of Acts³ and twice in the passage read today. In fact, it’s used twice in a single verse:

*Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying
“It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you
but **since you reject it**, and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, **we are now
turning to the Gentiles.**”⁴*

That little word -- *idou* -- can be found in the phrases about rejecting God’s word and turning to the Gentiles, as if to say,

*LO you have rejected God’s word
and
BEHOLD now we are sharing it with someone else – namely, the Gentiles.*

It was Paul’s practice, as he traveled from town to town telling people how following Jesus could change their lives, that he would go first to the local synagogue in town. This is what he and Barnabas did when they ventured into Antioch.⁵ They went first to the synagogue where they reviewed the history of Israel but with a twist:

² See <http://lists.ibiblio.org/pipermail/b-greek/2005-March/033692.html>

³ *ijdouv* is used 59 times in Matthew’s gospel, 56 times in Luke’s gospel, and 29 times in the book of Revelation.

⁴ Verse 46.

⁵ This is not the same Antioch in which believers first called themselves “Christian” (Acts 11:26). This was Antioch of Pisidia located in what is now western Turkey.

They taught the Jews there that God had brought a Savior to Israel – a Savior named Jesus. And they went on to explain that many did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah and so he was sentenced to death, and killed, but then he rose from the dead.

*And through this Jesus, your sins are forgiven.
You can be free from the things that enslave you.*

The sermon was such a hit that even more people came to hear Paul and Barnabas the next day in the synagogue. They wanted to hear more about Jesus and God’s word.

But the leaders – when they saw the big crowds – were jealous and they threw a fit! They ran Paul and Barnabas out of town, recruiting their most respectable women and men to lead the charge.

Note their concerns: according to this story, the synagogue leaders did not refute what Paul and Barnabas had to say. They did not debate them on theology. They were upset because they were jealous.

They had been given the Good News but they didn’t want it. And they didn’t want others to have it either. Paul pulls no punches when he delivers this whopping accusation:

Maybe those who rejected this life-changing news did not consider themselves worthy of eternal life. And even worse, they were sharing the Good News with those lowly Gentiles!

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Yesterday the writer Marilynne Robinson, the author of *Gilead* which won the Pulitzer Prize last year, spoke to a group of Presbyterians at the Third Annual Institute for Reformed Theology Convocation. If that sounds like a high and mighty event, I suppose it was. Presbyterians concerned about the decline of the mainline churches gathered – about 300 strong – to hear Ms. Robinson share her erudite reflections on our theology and tradition and why it is not resonating with the masses as it did in the 1950s.

Presbyterians used to fill the halls of Congress and the state legislatures. They were always the doctors and lawyers, the town mayors and the most respected leaders in any town. The only clergyperson to sign the Declaration of Independence was a Presbyterian – John Witherspoon.

Perhaps you could even call Presbyterians “the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city.” But this might be our problem.

Don't get me wrong: I love the Reformed Presbyterian Tradition. I believe that our theology and form of government are the most Biblical. But it's also true that our denomination is declining and perhaps this story in Acts tells us why.

Marilynn Robinson referred to Presbyterians yesterday as “terminally respectable” and everyone chuckled, probably agreeing with her. After all, we have indeed – historically at least – been the “women of high standing” and the “leading men of the city.”

But the problem comes when we cling to these things as our “markers of attention” rather than the timeless Word of God. There is nothing wrong with being successful. There is nothing wrong with having a stellar education or a high-powered job or beautiful possessions. But those things are not our most important characteristics. They are not the foundation of our identity. They are not our primary “markers of attention.” If they *are*, then we are in a sad spiritual state.

Jesus came to seek and save the lowly – whether they were the lowly Gentiles or the lowly homeless and hungry . . . or those who – in spite of all education and prosperity – recognize that they need someone to free them from what enslaves them, those of us who are lowly in spirit.

If we pride ourselves in being “respectable” and consider respectability to be the most important thing about us, our most essential “attention marker” then we are in the same position as those synagogue leaders who rejected Paul's message.

I grew up in a respectable church where everyone dressed well and acted appropriately and would probably die if anyone knew “what enslaved them.” No one dared mention personal worries, family addictions, “difficult children,” threatened marriages. We were afraid that we'd be rejected by “the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city.”

After seminary, I served as an intern for a summer at a church in Corning, New York. It was a wonderful, prosperous congregation whose members included several town officials including a former mayor. It was summer after all and many members were away most of the time, off at vacation homes on one of the lakes that dot upstate New York. The former mayor and his wife – pillars in both the church and in the community – were among those whom I barely saw. They were in worship my first two Sundays but then they disappeared for the rest of the summer. I assumed they were off at a lake house wiling away the summer months.

At the end of the summer, for my last Sunday, they returned, and the strange thing was that they didn't look like they'd spent the summer relaxing. They looked haggard and stressed. They were so pale that it was clear they had not seen much sunshine in all those weeks. The wife of the couple asked after worship that day if she and her husband might be able to visit with me before I left town later that week.

They showed up on the next to the last day of my internship. And that was no accident. I was soon to be leaving and there was no chance – or very little chance – that I would be back. They could tell me things that would not be passed on to others because I'd be gone.

What they shared with me broke my heart. They had spent the summer tending to their son who was dying of AIDS in Arizona. And two weeks before, he had died.

I was shocked. This couple was well-known in the congregation and in the community. How could we not have known that they were going through this tragedy?

We didn't know because they had told no one. No one knew their son was gay. No one knew he was sick. No one knew that they had buried their firstborn child two weeks before.

Here was a couple with everything: all the social connections, all the friends, all the wealth, all the things that anyone could want. But they had no one with whom they could share this greatest of losses. They were afraid that their church, maybe even their God would reject them. They feared that “the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city” might run them out of town.

This is not the church I was us to be. This is not the church God wants us to be. *Lo and behold*, God wants our “markers of attention” to be these things:

Idou.

God loves us,

God grants us grace,

God has the power to free us from whatever it is that enslaves us.

Sometimes we are enslaved by our respectability. But remember/ behold/ *idou* God wants us to hear the story of Jesus and Jesus' power to make our lives different. The most valuable thing about us is that we belong to God and God came to us and died for us and now reigns in power for us. Once we might have been “terminally respectable” – so respectable it could kill us. But today we are going to live.

Idou. Lo and behold! If we had a church in which we proclaimed within these walls and outside them that God's power could free us what whatever enslaves us, like the synagogue at Antioch, we would be overflowing with people clamoring to receive that word. This is the kind of church I want us to be.

And so what's next? Will we cling to our respectability first and foremost? Will we shun the lowly? Or will we *remember* who we are and what God has called us to be?

Let us pray: Keep us mindful, O LORD, of our true nature, our true calling, our true purpose. Help us always to remember and focus our attention on these things. Amen.

