

Island Magic?
Acts 13:1-12
Sermon by Jan Edmiston
July 15, 2007
Fairlington Presbyterian Church

Note: It's summertime and in keeping with summer sensibilities, the sermons I'll preach in July and August have an island theme. Today, our lesson is about the first missionary journey of Paul. Although the Israelites were definitely land people – never known to take to the sea – Paul was a Jewish man with a more adventurous spirit.

Paul and his traveling partner Barnabas had just been commissioned by the Church in Antioch to be missionaries – to go forth and tell people in distant lands about Jesus -- and they soon set sail from what is now Syria to the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea.

It's a good time to talk about magic. Last week the fifth Harry Potter movie opened and this week the seventh and last Harry Potter book will go on sale, refueling talk about wands and witches and magic spells.

But this isn't a sermon about the dangers of a children's series about wizards. (Remember those news stories about certain Christian groups worrying that Harry Potter might lure children into the occult?)

This sermon will not be about that, although it's not a bad idea to hone our own skills in defense-against-the-dark-arts. But that's for another sermon.

Today I want us to recognize that we have something in common with First Century seekers of the Truth. It's tempting to expect magic in our spiritual lives. But following Jesus is not about magic.

Even in the First Century Church, there were characters in spiritual circles called “magicians.” The island of Cyprus had an especially rich tradition of magical, mythical tales. The Greek goddess Aphrodite¹ was said to have been born right here in Paphos – where Paul and Barnabas and John were preaching. It was believed that she came out of the sea foam to rule as the goddess of desire.

Paphos was a hotbed of magical entertainment – sort of a Las Vegas for the First Century. And a man named “Bar Jesus” was - perhaps - the Lance Burton or David Copperfield of his day.

This man named “Bar Jesus” (which means “son of Joshua” in Aramaic²) was Jewish. He was also called Elymas (which means “wise man” in Arabic³) but the writer of this story calls him, simply, a “Jewish false prophet.”

¹ Aphrodite was also known as “Venus” (Roman name) and Astarte (Syro-Palestinian name) which can be found in the Hebrew scripture – Judges 2:13, Judges 10:6, 1 Samuel 7:3-4, 1 Kings 11:5 among others.

² “bar” is “son of” in Aramaic; “ben” is “son of” in Hebrew (as in “Ben Gurion”)

False prophet or not – he had the ear of at least one powerful leader: a man named Sergius Paulus - the proconsul of the island of Cyprus.

The proconsul was the governor of a province of the Roman Empire. For example, Pontius Pilate was the proconsul or governor of Judea in the early First Century.⁴ Sergius Paulus was the proconsul of the island of Cyprus, and it seems that he was searching in his spiritual life for something different, something deeper.

He was an intelligent man, we are told, and apparently Bar-Jesus or Elymas had piqued his curiosity about God. Maybe he was impressed by whatever magic Bar Jesus could perform.

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A First Century “magician” or *magos* in Greek could be an astronomer, a mathematician, a fortune teller, a healer, or your run of the mill charlatan. Anyone who could do amazing things might be called a “magician” in the first century.

The wise men who visited baby Jesus were also called “*magi*” which is simply the plural of “*magos*.”⁵

In fact, some people called Jesus a magician. They compared him to another First Century miracle-worker named Apollonius⁶ who, it is written, once raised the daughter of a Roman proconsular from the dead.⁷

We get the sense, though, that this Jewish prophet named “Bar Jesus” was not a mathematician or astronomer. It appears that he was more of a pretender, more interested in confusing the truth than revealing it. He twisted the straight paths of God and deceived people along the way. It looks like Bar Jesus or Elymas was more interested in making inroads with powerful people – people like the governor of Cyprus.

Let it be known that Jesus was – and is – about a different kind of power. Jesus was – and is – about truth and light and clarifying things. Jesus was – and is – about creating order, about making things the way God intended them to be.

³ Some scholars believe that this was a late insert into this passage since Arabic was not spoken in the first century at this time.

⁴ Pilate was governor of Judea from 26-37CE.

⁶ See: http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/a/apollonius_of_tyana.html

⁷ It seems that J.K. Rowling may have read about Apollonius in her classical studies. Among the historical characters related to Apollonius include an emperor named “Severus.”

This is not to say that there isn't confusion and struggling before we can reach the truth. But Jesus has always been more interested in light and life. Bar Jesus was about crazy-making and darkness.

And it was as if God gave Bar Jesus exactly what he was promoting: if it was darkness he practiced, then he would indeed find darkness. Bar Jesus was struck blind – for a little while – and was forced to depend on others to lead him.

Haven't we all seen examples in life when someone – in his or her efforts to distort the truth and turn people away from good – find their own lives distorted?

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Magic is alive and well in spiritual circles today. Just recently, we had weekend visitors to our home who lost their keys during the course of the weekend. As we looked around for the keys, one of our guests kept repeating:

Little flower show your power.
Little flower show your power.

(This woman is a Presbyterian elder.) “What are you doing?” I asked. And she explained that St. Theresa, a Carmelite nun, was known as “the little flower”⁸ and she could help us find things if we recite that verse.

“Does that work?” I asked. “Yes,” she said, “It's like magic!”

We who pray for parking spaces and minor miracles, we who make deals with God as if The Almighty is some kind of Fairy Godmother – we too treat the LORD like some kind of magician.

Yes, we have read the stories of Jesus walking on water, of healing the blind and lame, of turning water into wine. But Jesus did not perform tricks – especially for the purpose of bringing attention to himself.

Jesus performed acts of healing and wholeness to point to the greatness of God.

But there are even greater miracles around us than walking on water or feeding a crowd of people with only two fish and five loaves of bread.⁹ They tend to be miracles that come with time and attention to a relationship with God.

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⁸ See: <http://www.littleflower.org/learn/littleflower.asp>

⁹ This miracle is found in all four gospels: Matthew 14:13–21, Mark 6:31–44, Luke 9:10–17 and John 6:5–15

There is the miracle of transformation from bitterness to contentment, from hurt to healthy, from anger to forgiveness.

How is it that a person who loses a loved one in Iraq or Afghanistan can ever go on to lead a full life? How does a widow continue after losing her husband, or a parent after losing a baby?

How does someone forgive betrayal?

These are the miracles of God that come – not from magic wands or cute incantations – but from a daily walk with the Holy. Only God can do these things.

Paul always started his preaching in the local synagogue hoping to reach his Jewish brothers and sisters first with the amazing news that through Jesus Christ life can be different. And Paul knew as well as anyone what the power of God could do.

He had been a zealous terrorist against Christians, one of the Jewish leaders who could be counted on to round up the followers of Jesus and take them from their homes in chains.¹⁰

But something happened that changed Paul. He moved from being a fear-mongering terrorist into a fearless disciple of Jesus. It happened with a little time and the participation of others who had also been touched by God through Christ.¹¹

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This is what Sergius had been looking for. Fancy tricks can be enthralling and impressive. But magic doesn't change lives.

Life is changed when we see life in a different way and we realize that God is with us. Something bigger than a magic trick is all around us.

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What is it that has changed us?

My fear is that most of us would say, "I've never really experienced a dramatic life change. I've always been a positive person. I've never really been bitter or angry or cynical about life. I've never been stuck in the depths of depression or found myself languishing in the throes of sadness.

If that is who we are, if that's what our lives have been all about – then I have to ask, "Why are you here today?"

¹⁰ See Acts 7:57 – 8:1, 8:3, 22:4-5

¹¹ Ananias (Acts 10:1-16) healed his blindness at God's prompting.

If life is pretty great and you don't need a Savior, what are you doing here?

The God we worship came to this earth as a human being in order to straighten crooked paths and bring light to the blind, to clear the mist.

Even Bar Jesus – we are told – would only be blind “for a while.” I believe even he – the great deceiver – would have the chance to be healed by the Living God.

And even we – if we are living deceptive lives, if we are deceiving others – even we have the chance to be healed by the Living God. This is astonishing news. It's news that made Sergius Paulus come to believe, in the town of Paphos on the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea.

As we enjoy our summer activities – hopefully at some point by the sea – may we remember our baptism. May be we remember that by water and the Word, we are set free and included in God's family. And while we might wander, God sends people to lead us by the hand until we are ready to see the light again.

This is not magic. This is the miracle of resurrection in this life and in the life to come promised by Jesus. It's news that changes everything.

Let us pray:

Holy God, by grace you claim us to be your own. Claim us again now – those who are sad this morning, those who are frustrated, those who are wandering. Claim us and set us free from the darkness, we ask in the name of Jesus our Savior. Amen.

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in God's mighty power.
And if you remember nothing else, remember this:
That whatever heavy burdens you are carrying,
Whatever strains you are trying to overcome,
Whatever joys you are living,
Wherever you are going – God goes with you.
So go in peace, remembering your baptism.
Amen.