

“Paul & the Uproar in Ephesus”
Acts 19:21 - 20:1
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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If you have been following the geography of Acts these past several weeks, we’ve seen Paul and his co-workers move throughout the region of Macedonia, what would today be the northwest part of Greece. And if you have been paying close attention, wherever Paul goes there always seems to be some kind of disruption, a conflict resulting from an encounter with the gospel. Remember in Philippi, after freeing a slave girl from exploitation by her owners who were profiting from her fortune telling abilities, Paul and Silas landed in prison (16.16-24). And in Thessalonica, when they preach about a Messiah who must suffer and then be resurrected, a mob chases Paul and Silas out of the city (17.1-9). In order to find safety from the ruffians who follow them, Paul is taken away to Athens and then makes a visit to Corinth. In all of these places Paul helps to give birth to churches, and many of the books in the New Testament are actually Paul’s letters to these various communities. In the summer of 2008 I was able to take a pilgrimage to Greece to meet members of my dad’s family, and I had the fortune to visit a few of these ancient cities with my family. I’d love to share more about that experience with you all sometime soon!

Today we come to Paul’s visit to the ancient city of Ephesus, an important coastal city located in the region known today as Turkey. During my trip to Greece, we took a short cruise that enabled us to come on shore and walk through the ruins of Ephesus. Though my visit was short - just for a few hours - Paul’s visit to Ephesus was significant. We are told that he spent two years here, and that during this time all the residents there were able to hear the word of the Lord (19.10). We also know more about his time there through his letter to the Ephesians.

But it would be foolish of us to think that things went smoothly and peacefully in Ephesus, right? Given what we have seen happen in other places, when the early Christians - known as followers of the Way - when they show up, disruptions happen! And this is certainly what we see in this morning’s passage from chapter 19. Let us listen now to God’s word again from the book of Acts: (Acts 19:21 - 20:1)

Now after these things had been accomplished, Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said, “After I have gone there, I must also see Rome.” So he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia.

About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, “Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her.”

When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s travel companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater. Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd gave instructions to Alexander, whom the Jews had pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” But when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, “Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven? Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. If there is anything further you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.” When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples; and after encouraging them and saying farewell, he left for Macedonia.”

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

As you may have picked up by now, Luke is a great story teller. He has the skill to present dramatic events like the one in today’s passage in creative ways. For example, did you notice that the main character in today’s passage is not Paul or Silas or one of the other apostles? In fact, Paul doesn’t even speak at all! The one who takes center stage is a little known character, a silversmith by the name of Demetrius. He, along with many other artisans in the city of Ephesus, depend on the worship of the goddess Artemis. Her temple was in the city, and worship of this goddess had taken place here for the past 1,000 years. Artemis was the goddess of the hunt, of childbirth, as well as being a healer of women. Also known in the Roman world as the goddess Diana, “Artemis...enjoyed very high regard from people outside of Ephesus” too (Skinner, [Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel](#), p. 144). A statue of Artemis, thought to have fallen straight from the heavens (19.35), resided in her temple, and this was no ordinary temple! It was a piece of architecture so magnificent that it ranked as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world! And so what silversmiths like Demetrius would rely on was the business generated by visitors who would buy replicas of Artemis and the temple, small silver pieces that he and others would make and sell.

But here’s the problem: Demetrius is smart enough to realize that as Christianity becomes more accepted by the people in Ephesus and surrounding areas, this becomes a threat to his business and his way of life. Imagine if a new religion came to town and somehow threatened the quartz economy in Mitchell County, or the tourist economy in Buncombe County - this would be a game changer. This is the same type of dynamic happening in our passage today. You see, though Paul does not speak in today’s passage, we already know what he thinks about idols. If we go back just a few

chapters to Paul's famous sermon to the Athenians, the one we looked at last week, we see that Paul had called out the Greeks for their worship of idols, their worship of so-called unknown gods. "The God who made the world and everything in it... [this God] does not live in shrines made by humans, nor is [God] served by human hands, as though he needed anything..." Calling out the ancient practice of polytheism, the worship of many gods represented by wooden and stone statues, Paul makes the claim that the God of Jesus Christ is the One who "gives to all mortals life and breath and all things" (17.24-25). As a good Jew Paul knows that the first of the ten commandments is the call to worship and serve God alone, the call to reject any other commitment that distracts us from our primary loyalty to God.

Indeed, though Paul doesn't say a word in our passage about the dangers of idolatry and the temptation of wealth, Demetrius is onto the gospel message. As Bible scholar Matt Skinner has pointed out, Demetrius understands that "the gospel has repercussions for how people spend their money" (Skinner, p. 145) and that the gospel is "a threat to his pocketbook" (p. 147). And though what Demetrius does is really despicable - rousing up an angry mob on the verge of violence - what we also know is that he correctly understands the problem at hand. If enough Ephesians become followers of the Way, the way of Jesus Christ, then not only will his bank account suffer but so will the proud reputation of the city (Skinner, p. 145). Demetrius knows this is serious business!

After his fiery speech, the uproar that happens is quite chaotic. The city is filled with confusion, and most of the mob really doesn't know what is going on. Two of Paul's travel companions are dragged to the theater, but out of concern for his safety, Paul is kept away. On my trip to Ephesus several years ago I visited the ruins of this theater, an outdoor venue that seated over 20,000 people. We don't know how many people gathered there that day, but we do know that when a Jewish man named Alexander was pushed forward to speak, he was shouted down by the crowd which chanted for hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" In such a chaotic scene like this, we might expect a hero like Peter or Paul to emerge, to give a great speech and put the crowd in their place. But this is not what happens. Instead, a nameless town clerk quiets the crowd and speaks some common sense to them. He says, "The whole world knows about the great Artemis and her statue that has come from heaven! So we need to stay calm - now is not the time to do anything rash. As for these two companions of Paul that have been hauled here, they have committed no crime! And if Demetrius and the other artisans have a legitimate charge against anyone, the courts are open for them to bring it! We need to stay calm, otherwise we might be charged by the Roman authorities of rioting." The clerk's speech is successful and the crowd lowers its voice and then everyone walks away (19.35-41). And in the first verse of chapter 20 we are told that after Paul encourages his disciples, he says farewell to them and then he returns back to Macedonia (Skinner, p.146).

Though the dramatic scene described in this passage took place 2,000 years ago, the issues raised are indeed still real for us today. The gospel continues to challenge our values and it turns upside down many of the ways that the world is ordered. As we come close to the end of our study of the book of Acts, I hope you have seen that Luke has not recorded these stories as a history book of the early church. No, one of the main themes of the book is that the same Spirit that was alive and working in Jesus' life - this same Spirit was alive in the early church, working in amazing ways! Though the Spirit first was poured out on the disciples in Jerusalem, it never was intended to stay there - from Judea it moved out to Samaria and then further to places in Macedonia, Asia and even Rome. And this same Spirit that inspired the prophets and the apostles is the very same one that is at work in the world today! In Acts we have seen how sometimes the Spirit gets ahead of us in the church, and our job is to be courageous and to catch up with the Spirit despite our hesitations, despite the voices that tell

us to play it safe. And since God's Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, we can be bold in going out into the world. It's not always our job to bring the Spirit to others, but often we are the ones who are surprised to meet God in unexpected places - to meet God in those we label as "other" - to meet God in those we even label as our enemies.

In our affirmation of faith today, one of the things we are going to affirm is the power of the Holy Spirit to give us such courage. Yes, it takes courage to live in the world today full of idols vying for our attention. For example:

- the idol of self-sufficiency, the illusion that on our own we can make it.
- the idol of consumerism, the illusion that if we just buy enough stuff or stockpile enough resources, then we will be happy and secure.

I believe it's important to notice that the affirmation calls us to unmask these and other idolatries first in the Church and then in our culture! I think the order here is intentional, a reminder to us Christians that sin is not just "out there" somewhere in the world, but that we, too, are prone to sin, prone to resist the gospel's call to let go and to let God - to let go of our need to be in control, to let go of the need to protect ourselves, to let go of the world's economy based on scarcity and instead embrace God's economy of abundance. One of the most radical things that happens in the book of Acts is right at the beginning - remember, when the church is formed on the day of Pentecost we are told that there was not a needy person among them, that they had all things in common and those who had property sold it and things were distributed to meet the needs of all. Such radical hospitality continues to be one of the marks of the Spirit, one of the ways we as people of faith can share the boundary-breaking love of God.

I don't know what idols you may be holding onto, or what fears may be holding you captive this day - maybe you can identify with Demetrius' fear of losing economic security, or maybe you are clinging to tradition, the fear of change of the way things has always been done. Or maybe you are holding on to fear of the unknown, and instead of trusting in God you are trusting more in yourself. Whatever your struggle may be, the word of God we have been studying in Acts is good news! God's Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, and it is the Spirit that gives us courage and sets us free to be God's hands and feet, God's heart and voice in a world in need of good news. As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this morning, with Christians from around the globe, we can rejoice that we are never alone. Yes, we can rejoice that with believers in every time and place, nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. To God be the glory, now and forever, Amen.

Affirmation from the *Brief Statement of Faith* (PCUSA, 1991)

In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.