

Sunday, July 1, 2018  
Acts 22:22-23:11 and Philippians 3:1-11

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### **Paul the Pharisee, the Roman Citizen, the Apostle**

As most of you know, Tom and I returned a week ago Friday from a “bucket-list” trip called “Explore the World of Paul”. It was a 16-day tour that, as some of us referred to it, “followed Paul’s footsteps.” (photo of the feet) My intention is to go through these photos quickly and give you very brief explanations now but show them again and give time for further comment and questions in the Faith and Issues class during Sunday school.

We began in the ancient town of Ephesus in the south-western corner of modern-day Turkey (photo of the terrace houses) Here, the houses were terraced, built into the sides of hills. The ruins of this terrace house may have been where one of the Ephesian house church groups met for worship. We went to Heirapolis (photo of the amphitheater/library) where we saw one of countless evidences of Graeco-Roman building prowess, along with their appreciation of art and literature. This is the huge amphitheater, seating thousands. You can see the sculptures within the columns at the back of the stage. On either side of the stage was a library that rivaled the great collection in Alexandria, Egypt.

On to Thessaloniki, Greece, and to Philippi (photo of the church from a distance) where we saw the church built to remember the traditional site of Lydia’s baptism. Inside the church is an amazing mosaic on the floor (photo), a map made of tiny pieces of colorful stone, showing Paul’s travels. Also, a fresco of Paul (photo) as well as other beautiful frescos, telling the Biblical stories on the walls and the ceiling (photo). Behind the church is lovely creek where a cruciform baptistry has been built (photo). From this relatively modern church, we went to the excavation site of the ancient city of Philippi where we saw Paul’s stone prison cell (photo), the cruciform baptistry (photo) in the ancient synagogue and we walked along the famous Egnatian Way (photo) the Roman highway that made it more possible for Paul to travel so far. This was one of the places where we could be fairly certain that we were walking where Paul had walked.

We traveled on to Beroea where we were surprised to come upon a special, outdoor service celebrating the Feast of Peter and Paul (photo) at the shrine, recalling Paul’s visit to Beroea and we visited the old, Jewish quarter in Beroea where we saw the Synagogue (photo), rebuilt recently – just 300 years ago.

We saw ruins of the enormous Temple of Apollo (photo) at the ancient site of the oracle of Delphi. And then on to Athens where, of course, we climbed Mars Hill (photo) as well as the Acropolis to see the Parthenon, along with several hundred of our closest friends (two photos).

We had to pinch ourselves to realize we were in ancient Corinth (photo of the sign). Here, along with the beautiful sculptures that have been un-earthed, (photo) these are of Emperor Augustus and his grandson, Gaius Ceasar, we walked the main thoroughfare (photo) and stood on the bema (photo of just the bema), the raised platform, found on the main street of ancient cities, from which public speeches and announcements were made. (photo of us on the bema) This is the

bema from which Paul preached to the Corinthians. We left Greece on an overnight ferry boat (photo of sunset) and the next morning we were in Italy.

Our first day in Italy was spent almost entirely at the intact remains of the city of Pompeii, the Roman city buried in volcanic ash in the year 79. As far as we know, Paul never travelled to Pompeii, but because the city was basically buried and cast it presents a tragic and remarkable view of 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman life. We have a whole series of pictures from Pompeii which we will gladly show to any and all who are interested in viewing them.

We saw the harbor town where Paul landed under Roman guard (photo). We saw the amphitheater in the same town, with its “strikingly well preserved underground rooms” where the gladiators, the wild animals and the Christians awaited their deaths (photo).

Finally, we made it to Rome where our visit, naturally, began with the Colosseum (photo) and the famous “pines of Rome” (photo). Over and over we saw reminders of the meaning of “pax Romana”, the Roman notion of peace, created by war and conquest. The arch of Titus (photo) commemorates the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year 70. There were ruins everywhere, demonstrating ancient Rome’s peace through power. (3 photos). “It was sobering to reflect on the stark contrast to Paul’s understanding of peace as we find it so brilliantly expressed in his letter to the Romans, in chapter 5 where God is a lover of enemies one who seeks reconciliation with his enemies, not their demise or destruction.”

And, of course, we went to the Capitoline and Vatican museums, “overwhelming and crowded, but breathtakingly beautiful all the same. (photo of Nero’s bust, sculpture w/ tapestry) It is impossible not to be awestruck by Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel” in which photos are not allowed.

On our last day, still in Rome, we went to the church of Saint Prisca (photo) where we were reminded of the powerful and important women Paul counted as co-workers. Prisca, short for Priscilla, Lydia, Chloe, Phoebe... all women named in Paul’s letters as benefactors, co-workers, fellow followers of The Way of Jesus.

By far and away “the most moving sight for our group was when we received special permission from the Roman city officials to go underground to a home at the level of the first century.” It’s located on an unassuming, regular-looking street. (photo of narrow street) There’s a small plaque on the wall, identifying it as the house of Paul (photo of plaque). Behind a small, metal door is a steep, stone stairway (photo of Toms going down). Three levels down is a dark, damp, two-room space (photo of room with pots) that was only discovered “accidentally” in 1982 as they were building the apartments next to and above this place. The archaeologists and scholars believe this is the place where Paul lived for about the last 3 years of his life when he was in Rome, under house arrest. Here, “perhaps more than anyplace else, we sensed a connection to Paul and the believers of the first century. We sang “I have decided to follow Jesus” and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving for the courageous witness of our forebears.” (photo of group) Then we ascended the steep, stone steps (photo going up) and re-emerged into the sunlight and the 21<sup>st</sup> century (photo of street entrance).

Now, let's listen to the scripture texts for this morning from Acts and Philippians.

The first century of the Common Era was a time of crisis throughout the Roman empire – particularly if you were Jewish. And Paul, as we have just heard was definitely Jewish. He was, in fact, a Pharisee among Pharisees, the son of a Pharisee. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day and a zealous follower of the law – the Torah. He was also born a Roman citizen. AND. He was a converted, convicted, consummate, courageous, follower of The Way... The Way of Jesus. Who, by the way, was also definitely Jewish. But not a high-class, fine pedigreed Jew like Paul. Jesus, of course, was a poor Jewish carpenter, of the tribe of Judah.

Paul was an apostle of Jesus – one called out and sent to carry the gospel – the good news – into the world. One whose life had been dramatically and unalterably changed by the good news, by the living Christ! One might say that Paul was predisposed to believing in the resurrection; he was a Pharisee and the Pharisees acknowledged resurrection from the dead, angels and spirits.

Paul was a rhetorical genius. We find him, in this section of Acts, defending himself both against the Roman powers as well as against the Jewish powers – and he was actually a card-carrying member of both! He brilliantly turned the argument inward on both institutions, pitting the centurion against the tribune and the Pharisees against the Sadducees. Most scholars think his snarly remark to the high priest was simply well-placed sarcasm.

Paul offers his own story – his own life experiences as support for his strange and provocative vocational calling. He speaks to his Jewish audience in Hebrew. He speaks to the Roman officials in their universal language, Greek. He crafts each argument to the ears of his hearers but there is no appeal for repentance, no offer of salvation; he is defending his own experience of God. He is not trying to prove the truth of the gospel. He is not trying to convert or convince – he is telling them where his hope comes from.

But to both audiences he is speaking to people whose beliefs are tied to their narrow understanding of nationalism and traditional sensibilities. He is speaking into the face of incredible tension and unrest. The Romans and Greeks had their long-established system of gods and goddesses with the accompanying rituals and rules. The Jewish population had their understanding of salvation through the one God, Yahweh, but they were equally burdened and divided about their own parochial, rigid observances of The Law.

Paul's preaching about his experience of the crucified, resurrected and living Jesus ruffled all the feathers! In the midst of brutal Roman occupation and blind Jewish acculturation, Paul was preaching radical inclusion, hospitality, love of enemies, suffering servanthood, resurrection from the dead into eternal life with Yahweh God. In a world where the emperor was proclaimed "Savior" and "Lord", Paul was brash and fearless as he proclaimed Jesus, the crucified Galilean Savior and Lord. He was relentless in heeding the call to preach the good news that had changed his own life. He travelled more than 10,000 miles. He died a martyr's death.

In the weeks to come, Tom and I will be preaching about specific topics or events in the life of the Apostle Paul. We're looking forward to sharing some of what we learned with you and we

hope and trust that you'll bring your own questions and challenges about Paul to the conversations. The hymn of response is, perhaps, a new one – number 111 in the SS.