

TITLE: “The Flight & the Fight of the Kingdom”

A couple of weeks ago at St. George School we were reading the book of Esther in Morning Prayer. There was something in the reading that struck me, something I had not really paid attention to in my previous readings of the book. If you know the story, the evil Haman hatched a plot to kill all of the Jews in the Persian empire. When Mordecai the Jew discovered the plot, he told it to queen Esther, who was concealing her Jewish identity from her husband, the king. Mordecai told Esther that she must do something to save her people. He sent her a letter and asked her to go to the king and tell him what Haman was planning to do and to reveal to him that Haman's plot would put the queen's own life in jeopardy. This frightened Esther. She wrote back to Mordecai that no one was permitted to enter the king's court uninvited. According to the law, when an uninvited guest appeared in the court, the king was permitted to either welcome them or have them beheaded. Understandably Esther did not want to go there.

What Mordecai says to Esther in response is what got my attention this time. He does not write to her to express desperation for the plight of his people. In fact, he does not seem afraid at all. Rather, he warns Esther saying, “if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish.” Mordecai is confident that God will deliver his people, either by the hand of Esther or by some other means, because God has given

his word to his people, and that word cannot be broken, but endures forever. Esther is persuaded. She does not remain silent. She goes to the king and he receives her, and in a short while she delivers all of God's people from destruction.

This conviction, that the servants of the true God must never be silent is what we learn today on the Feast of St. Barnabas. The Apostles of Christ will go out into all the world, often compelled by persecutors to flee, but they will never be afraid to speak the truth, because they know that if they do not, God will bring deliverance to the world by some other means, and if they perish. God does not stand in need of us, but we of him. In the book of Acts, we see the Holy Spirit poured out upon the Church so that the Church is enabled to do the works of God, but that doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit needs the Church or God's Apostles or his people for him to work. The Holy Spirit is God's Spirit, and as Christ has taught us, the Spirit of the living God is like the wind. It blows where it wills and when it wills and no man knows from where it comes or where it's going.

When Barnabas was a child, his parents had likely fled from persecution. The Greeks had sacked Jerusalem and many of its Jewish citizens fled throughout the Greek-speaking world, along the coasts of the Mediterranean sea and its islands. Barnabas hailed from one of these islands, from Cyprus, in particular. He was from the tribe of Levi, which means, his father was of the priestly order, and would have made regular trips to Jerusalem to fulfill his duties in the Temple. We might say that

Barnabas lived, as many Jews of that time did, within a sort of tension between flight and fight. When persecution broke out, they would flee the holy city, but when duty called, when all was safe, they would return, like Joseph waiting for the death of Herod before returning to Nazareth. We're not told when Barnabas became an Apostle, but he was very likely present on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Church.

We find Barnabas early on in the story of Acts. He's first mentioned in the fourth chapter. Here St. Luke records the amazing unity and charity among the first church there in Jerusalem. He says that "[there was not] anyone among them who lacked [anything]; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. 36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, 37 having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." Can you imagine doing what Barnabas and the other Christians did? Selling all that you own and giving it to the Church? I don't have to tell you that we Americans live in a land of plenty. Some of us have assets as large as the annual income of whole countries in impoverished parts of the world. And yet, are we not also, often, the least likely to part with our possessions? Barnabas

was called “Joses” by his parents, but after that day that he gave everything away, he became Barnabas, “the Son of Encouragement.”

In our epistle lesson, we jump to chapter 11 of Acts, right into the middle of a story. It says, “TIDINGS of these things came unto the ears of the Church which was in Jerusalem.” Tidings of what things? Tidings that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit. Up until this point, the Holy Spirit had been given only to the Jews. But, after God commanded Peter by the Holy Spirit, to go and dine in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius, and after Peter told him about Jesus and encouraged him to repent and believe, Peter saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Cornelius’s household. This was unusual. For the Holy Spirit usually came down after a Jewish person was baptized with water, but this time he descended upon Gentiles before they had even received baptism, thereby indicating that God had chosen to do a new thing, and it was Peter’s job to either comply or move out of the way. This was amazing news in the ears of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. God was now bringing the Gentiles into his fold through baptism.

Just before Peter went to the house of Cornelius, he had met Paul. It was Barnabas who introduced the two of them. St. Luke records that the Apostles were afraid to talk to him, because he had persecuted the Church, because it was Paul who was responsible for the murder of St. Stephen. But Barnabas was not afraid. He went to Paul and heard of his faith, and how boldly he preached the truth about Christ.

Barnabas helped make Paul an apostle, and he would later become his companion, accompanying Paul on many of his missionary journeys as the Apostle to the Gentiles. At one point, the Greek citizens of one town thought that Barnabas was the Greek god Zeus, because they observed Paul healing a man, and they assumed that since Paul was speaking, then he must be Hermes, the messenger, and Barnabas must be Zeus. The people attempted to offer sacrifices to them, and they eventually had to flee the city.

But, to get back to our lesson, when tidings or ‘news’ came to Jerusalem that the Holy Spirit had been given to the Gentiles, it says, “and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad; and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.” The ministry of St. Barnabas was an amazing success, because he was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. This was the beginning of the Church at Antioch, and Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to establish the Church there. The Church at Antioch had already begun under the ministry of certain men from Cyprus and Cyrene after the persecutions of Saul (turned Paul) had scattered the followers of Christ across the Roman world. But, it was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians, and this was due to the ministry of St. Barnabas. So, you might say, it is because of St. Barnabas more than

any other Apostle that we bear the name Christian. And after a certain manner, it is to St. Barnabas that we owe our Christening.

But, we must pay attention to one important detail in this story. There's a certain paradox here. For the Church at Antioch would not have begun, and we would not bear the name "Christian" if it were not for the persecution and the death of St. Stephen. St. Luke records that, "At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." God's people would not have been scattered and the Church at Antioch would not have begun, were St. Stephen not martyred. And we see that the Holy Spirit of God goes where he wills. The Holy Spirit chose to work through the persecution of St. Stephen, to bring about a greater blessing in Antioch. "Strike the Shepherd and the sheep will scatter." And yet, our Good Shepherd goes out to find his flock, even leaving the 99 to seek after the one lost sheep. Though persecution is a terrible reality, Christ warned us that this would happen. The servant is not above his master, and if they persecuted and killed the master, then what will they do to the servant?

So, what lesson do we take from the life of St. Barnabas, from this paradox in which the Church is sometimes fleeing persecution, sometimes bearing the pain of persecution itself? Legend says that St. Barnabas later returned to Cyprus to preach the Gospel of Christ to his own countrymen. There, he was stoned to death in the

same manner as St. Stephen. As Christians, when do we heed the call to flee, and when do we plant our feet in the ground and become obedient unto death? We might be tempted to think that fleeing from persecution is a cowardly act, like a soldier running for his life rather than risking it for the sake of his country. But, this is not always true. In the 10th chapter of St. Matthew, Christ told his disciples that they will sometimes need to flee from a city. He says, “when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of Man be come.” What does Christ mean by this? Wasn’t the cowardly act of Jonah punished for fleeing? Are we supposed to save our own skin and care nothing for the salvation of others? No. Notice what Christ does not say here. He does not say that his disciples should keep silent. In fact, he goes on to say, “What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops.”

Jesus tells them to flee under persecution, but he does not give them to flee from God as Jonah did. In fact, he tells them that they are to flee to every city in Israel, and that they will not be alone, but as the Israelites, who fled the persecution of Pharaoh, they will be lifted up on the wings of an eagle, they will pass through the waters on dry ground, and when the morning light dawns upon them, they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with all the hosts of heaven to receive them, the angels of God surrounding them, ministering strength and power unto

them, so that, as we say in our litany, “we shall be hurt by no persecutions”, because God will deliver his people, and if we remain silent, the stones themselves will cry out, for God’s justice will be felt on the earth, and we will see it with our eyes.

Many of us have been forced to ask ourselves this question: will I stay or will I flee? Will I stand my ground and be punished? Will I risk losing my job, my friends, my family, because I refused to flee from the persecutors of this world? Remember beloved, that St. Barnabas gave up everything, sold everything, and laid the money at the feet of the Apostles. If you must flee, the only permissible reason for doing so, is that you might bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ somewhere else. You cannot flee to save your own skin. For your body has been bought with a price. Christ our God to earth has descended, has died and given everything in the treasure house of heaven so save a wretched sinner like you. You have been purchased, body and soul, by the blood of Christ. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me.” If you must flee persecution, then do it so that you might save the souls of those whom God has given you. Flee from the lies of this evil world. Flee from the schools that would twist the minds of your children. Flee like the family of Lot from the lusts and the pleasures of Sodom. Flee, and don’t look back when you do. Shake the dust off of your feet, as Jesus says, and flee to the hills. Because judgment is coming upon the wicked city. Flee, but do not remain silent. When they forbid you to speak in the street, flee to the rooftops and preach the truth with boldness. When they silence you



in the city, flee to the country and build another city, another community, and preach the truth there, in season and out of season.

Beloved, we live in a post-Christian world, where just going door to door to talk about Jesus is often inviting persecution upon ourselves. And though we must never be silent, the task before us now looks more like re-building than remodeling our community. In this time of darkness, we must ask ourselves, what are we doing to build our community? What is St. Paul's doing to build up a new community, to be "a place of hope for Rockbridge County" as our mission statement says. In this time of new beginnings, in which we are called to build something new, after the example of the founders of this parish who fled, so they might rebuild, let us be sure that whatever we build is built upon the firm foundation of the Apostles, with Jesus Christ as our Cornerstone. let us look to the life of St. Barnabas and never be ashamed to be called "Christians." Commit your souls and bodies to the Lord, so that whether he gather us in his harvest of souls, or scatter us across the hills like seeds, we will be planted wherever we go, and the Kingdom of Heaven will grow like a vine in the desert, pouring out blessings upon blessings in this barren land, as we ourselves are poured out for one another. Let us commit to do this, beloved, while there is still time, and God himself will bless us. In the name ...