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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
5 January 2025

Sermon on Acts 13:46-49

Worship Theme:

EPIPHANY MOMENTS: GOD'S GIFT TO ALL PEOPLE

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. When the Savior was born, he was first revealed to Israelites: the shepherds, Simeon, Anna. But today, the Lord miraculously guides foreigners across countless miles, so the Savior could be revealed to them as well. How did the magi respond? "They were overjoyed" (Matthew 2:10). The Festival of Epiphany is sometimes known as "The Gentiles' Christmas." We Gentiles (non-Jews) rejoice in the good news that this Jewish baby is not just a gift for the Jews. He is a gift for all people—the Savior of the world.

Sermon Theme: "Welcome In!"

Have you noticed we're suddenly hearing this phrase all the time? "**Welcome in!**" I've heard it in stores, coffee shops, barber shops, and all kinds of places recently. "Welcome in – what can we get started for you today?" Welcome in – please have a seat and we'll be with you in just a moment!" Welcome in – thanks for choosing us today. How can we help you?" It's always been common and nice to welcome people when they arrive somewhere, but the hope of the person greeting you with "**Welcome in!**" is that you will feel content, desired, and like you belong exactly where you are.

So the question we want to ask today is this: Does the God of the Bible present a "**Welcome in!**" message to everyone? Acts chapter 13 is a fascinating portion of Scripture to use as we wrestle with that question. Paul and Barnabas are in Pisidian Antioch, a city located in the south-western part of modern Turkey. They attend worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day, and the leaders ask if they have anything they would like to share with the assembly, as a sort of guest preacher or presenter. So Paul begins to recount Old Testament history such as the Exodus from Egypt, God's protection during the wilderness wandering, defeating the nations of the Canaan, entering into the Promised Land, the time of the judges, Samuel the prophet, King Saul, King David, Abraham, and John the Baptist before finally telling the people about how everything in the past has pointed to and been accomplished in Jesus. Paul quotes Psalm 2, Psalm 16, Isaiah 55, and even Habakkuk 1 as he urges the people to learn about Jesus and to believe that he really is the long-awaited Promised Messiah whom God sent to save them from sin.

In a way that we don't necessarily see all that often in the New Testament, the Jews were happy to hear this news! Everything was going very well, they invited Paul and Barnabas to speak about Jesus again the following Sabbath, and many even followed them out that day to keep listening to what they had to say. When the next Sabbath Day came, an amazing thing happened: *almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.* (Acts 13:44) It sounds like the stuff

dreams are made of – can you even imagine the whole city (ANY city!) coming to church just because they all want to hear the Word of the Lord?! What a miracle! What a happy and amazing opportunity to **Welcome in** so many people like that!

But sadly, that's not what happened. *When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.* (Acts 13:45) As soon as they realized that his message was drawing so many people, their attitude changed in two significant ways: (1) they no longer wanted it for themselves, and (2) they didn't want it for anyone else either. This message was going to change Judaism, everything that was familiar and comfortable to them. And they couldn't stomach the thought of losing so many followers (or potential followers) to these out-of-town preachers and their turn-the-world-upside-down message. So they did a complete 180 and turned against the very people they had celebrated and eagerly listened to only a week earlier. While Judaism wasn't technically a closed religion (it did allow for converts, after all), they didn't want a God who was truly for everyone. They wanted a Savior who lived the words of the angel in Matthew 1: *he will save his people from their sins*, because HIS people was supposed to mean THEM, not everyone! You were **welcome in** only if you were the right kind of person!

And if Jesus wasn't going to be that kind of Savior, they didn't want him anymore either. We see that in the sad response of Paul and Barnabas: *"We had to speak the word of God to you first. But you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life."* God had not stopped loving the Jews, his chosen nation through whom the Promised Savior entered the world. But the Jews didn't want a God who would **welcome in** just anybody; they wanted to maintain their elevated status. So they rejected the very message they had prepared for and clung to and safe-guarded for so long; yet in doing so, they also rejected the Savior and the forgiveness and eternal life he came to bring.

Paul and Barnabas appropriately grieved over the Jews' reaction (after all, rejection of God is never something to celebrate!), but they also knew that God's mission would not stop and his Word needed to be proclaimed and shared. So *we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."* The message of Paul and Barnabas was not that God no longer wanted the Jews to believe in him – far from it! The real message was that God wanted far MORE than just the Jews: he wanted all. That's why when he personally came into this world, born as a baby in Bethlehem, he came to be the Savior for every human being who has lived, is living, or will live. God **welcomes in** every single person as someone he loves, someone he has already died for, and someone he wants to spend eternity with in heaven.

You and I get to live on both sides of this wonderful and amazing truth. As we celebrate Epiphany today, we rejoice that God sent Jesus the Savior as a "gift to all people." We rejoice first and foremost that this means we're included! It means we Gentiles (just like the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch) can be *glad and honor the Word of the Lord!* We can look forward to every time we get to gather together

around that Word, whether that's here at St. John's, in our homes, or wherever else we may be; we eagerly gather around the Word! And that's not just a new year's resolution – it's a privilege we have as part of the new life God has given us by faith. We honor the Word of the Lord and prioritize it in every part of our lives.

What about other people though? The ones who aren't here yet – do we just as gladly **welcome in** everyone else too? We're members in a Christian Church, a religious group and family of faith, one which claims to **welcome in** anybody who comes through our doors. Do our words and actions match that claim? Are we always looking for opportunities to tell another person about the Jesus who loves them so much that he died for them? Or are we afraid that if we tell them, they might ask us a question we don't know the answer to or, worse yet, actually come to our church? When we look at all the people around us in our neighborhoods and community, do we joyfully picture what it might look like if they were seated right next to us on a Sunday morning or Monday evening?

Sadly, we often fall into the same sin as the Pisidian Antioch Jews and we see church as more of an exclusive country club that's open only to "the right kind" of people. We want them to look like us, act like us, think like us. And if somehow they don't – if they somehow somehow stretch us or challenge us or maybe are completely different from us in every way – we sinfully think that they don't fit here or that maybe there's another place they can go instead.

But that's not the message of Epiphany and that's not what the God of the Bible says. God forgive us for the times we think contrary to how he thinks! Just look at the examples in our other Scripture readings today. The Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10 had heard about King Solomon's relationship to the LORD and came to test him with hard questions. Because of the answers Solomon gave, the Queen not only left in awe and amazement with all her questions answered, but she cried out, "*Praise be to the LORD your God!*" (1 Kings 10:9) Or the Magi of Matthew 2 – they came from a place so far away it seemed impossible that any of them should know about the Lord or the promise he made to send a Savior, never mind be actively looking for him and recognize the signs that he had come! God led them with a star to the place where Jesus was, and *when they saw the star, they were overjoyed! On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.* (Matthew 2:10-11) What unlikely, unexpected, different people from the people they came to see! Yet they were not turned away, but rather **welcomed in** by the Lord.

As we begin another new year and celebrate this season of Epiphany, let the entire truth of God's Word be our guiding light so that, as it did in days of old, *the word of the Lord spreads through the whole region* and world! We rejoice that God has graciously given his Word to us, revealing Jesus as the Savior from sin. And we rejoice that this good news of forgiveness, peace, and eternal life is for you, for me, and for all. God himself says so! So **Welcome in!** Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.