

Signs and Wonders

April 21, 2021 Scott Gunn

Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. —Acts 8:4-5

At the end of chapter 7 of Acts, Stephen is killed, the first Christian martyr. And then chapter 8 tells us of great persecution of the church. Because Jerusalem is no longer safe, the followers of Jesus scatter from their familiar, comfortable places into the countryside and the wilderness. Even Samaria (!) seems better than Jerusalem to them.

And yet, in that adversity, the Gospel takes root in new ways. The disciples are led to preach the Gospel to new people, in new ways, in new places. Disruption leads to flourishing. The later flourishing doesn't diminish the suffering and the pain of disruption, I'm sure.

I can't help but think about today's church in all this. Certainly the global pandemic has disrupted the church, pushing us out of familiar places and comfortable habits. But it's not just that. Greater awareness of social injustice has pushed the church to examine its place in structures and systems that defend racism, sexism, and other forms of fear and degradation. Add to all this the reality that we are undeniably in a post-Christendom era, and we are being pushed out of our metaphorical Jerusalems into metaphorical Samarias.

It's not an easy time to go to church, and it's certainly not an easy time to be a church leader. We might briefly long for the "good old days," but we're also forced to admit those days weren't all that good. We might like to bury our heads in the sand and continue with our comfortable ways of doing things, but this just won't do. There's a world outside our stained-glass windows yearning for love, for meaning, and for a word of hope.

I wonder what new practices or ideas we might be called to take on. Might we need to rethink our relationship to our beloved buildings? Perhaps we need to think again about how the church does its business. Will we be ready to preach unapologetically the Gospel of Christ Jesus that always challenges us to seek transformation and never urges support of the status quo?

The people in Philip's time were awed by signs and wonders. Do we expect miracles in our churches? Do we look for signs and wonders? Are we ready to testify to the extraordinary things God is doing in our midst?

I don't expect the signs and wonders of 2021 will look like the signs and wonders of ancient Samaria and Judea, but I do hope we can see them. The sacraments are wonders. Lives transformed are signs. Let's talk about signs and wonders a bit more, shall we?