

FROM THRONED TO STONED – GOD GETS US THROUGH IT ALL

5th Sunday After Pentecost

June 15, 18, and 19, 2005 – Father’s Day

St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, Watertown WI

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Grace is yours and peace from God our Father because of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The Word of God which you and I are going to explore in our first sermonette this morning is printed on the inside cover of your worship bulletin. It’s written in Acts 14:8-20. I am going to read it as we go along.

You know, everyone in life experiences ups and downs, good times and bad times, highs and lows, joys and sorrows, happiness and disappointment, successes and failures. They come to all of us; no one is exempt. You know – you’ve been there; and for some of you, I’ve been by your side while you were going through them. No one knew better than the apostle Paul what role pain, suffering, trials and hardships play in the life of a believer.

The apostle Paul and Barnabas were on their first missionary journey, and it didn’t take long for them to discover that this was going to be no church picnic. They encountered opposition and trials of all kinds every step of the way. They had just left the city of Iconium where they had almost been stoned to death, and now they traveled out into the country to a town called Lystra, and as they did, they were entering into pagan country. Up till now there were large Jewish populations and synagogues in the places where they had gone, but there was no Jewish synagogue in Lystra. Our text picks up as they come into the city of Lystra. Paul was doing what God had called him to do. He was preaching the good news about Jesus.

It says In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

Now you’d wonder what would be the result among the people when you see a man, who had been crippled from birth, all of a sudden jump up and start to walk. When they witnessed this miracle, what we’re told happened was this: **When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.** Kind of a strange response, wouldn’t you say?

Well, there is a legend in the city of Lystra that years ago the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus visited the city of Lystra incognito, only they were rejected by all of the people except for one couple, an older couple by the name of Philemon and Baucis. And so Zeus and Hermes destroyed all of the people in that area except for Philemon and Baucis, put them in charge of his

stately temple; and when they died, he turned them into beautiful magnificent trees. Well, these people were not going to make that mistake again, and so when they saw what they thought was a miracle that only gods could do, they assumed that Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes, and they wanted to make sacrifices for them.

Here we find Paul at the point of almost being enthroned as a god. Now, Paul knew that he wasn't a god, so we're told **But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd, shouting: "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season, he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowds from sacrificing to them.**

He used this as an opportunity to teach these people about the real God, the true God, the living God, to direct them to Jesus Christ. And you wonder what happened next? Here they were almost enthroned. We're told that some Jews, the same Jews they escaped from in Antioch and Iconium, who had opposed them there and almost stoned them there, came and won the crowd over. **They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.** So, in a flash, in a moment, Paul went from enthroned to almost dying and getting stoned. And you wonder - Wow! But you know the reality is that suffering comes to everyone. Everyone experiences it in one form or another at some point in their life.

Some of you have experienced physical sufferings, hardship and pain. Others have experienced hardships in different ways – financial setbacks, job loss. Some of you have suffered personal loss in your life. Others go through hard times that are directed at them by other people, and have relationship issues. Jesus pointed out that if they did those things to Him, the Master, it should come as no surprise that we will receive the same things and to expect the same kind of treatment.

Paul found himself totally misunderstood, then opposed, and finally even personally attacked; and sometimes that happens to us as well. In the verse right after our reading takes place, the apostle Paul and Barnabas were telling other believers **"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."** But the wonderful truth is that we never go through those hardships alone, that God is with us.

Years later, Paul would write about these experiences to a young pastor by the name of Timothy. We sometimes wonder what good comes out of times like that. Well, one of the good things that happened out of Paul's visit to Lystra was that a young man by the name of Timothy, who was a believer, became an apprentice of Paul's and later became a pastor in the early Christian church. Paul wrote two very beautiful letters to this young man and had helped mentor him along the way. He said to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:11 & 12) that "you, Timothy, know all about my persecutions, sufferings, what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra and the persecutions I endured. **Yet, the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**" Now, ain't that a happy

thought! But it's true. You and I will find ourselves at times misunderstood when we try to live out our faith. When we try to live as godly people in an ungodly world, we will be misunderstood; we will find ourselves opposed and maybe even personally attacked. That's what Jesus said will happen. Yet, what did Paul say? He said, **“the Lord rescued me from all of them.”**

In 2 Timothy 4:18, one of the last words Paul ever wrote, he says, **“The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.”** Wow! You never go through them alone. God uses them to grow us. In fact the times in my life when I have personally grown the most were the times when I was going through my greatest difficulties and my greatest hardships. God was growing me through them so that he could use me to pass on to others the comfort and the help he himself had given to me.

What Paul and Barnabas did after they left Lystra is they went back to the cities where they had found opposition before, where they had founded congregations;. We're told they strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the faith. People who have been there and have gone through are people who can do the very same thing – strengthen and encourage others. God wants to use you and me to strengthen other people and encourage them to remain true to the faith, to go back to doing what God has called them to do, the same thing Paul did, to turning people away from worthless things to the living God. Why is it that people cling to worthless things, things they think are going to bring them happiness in life? When it comes down to it - when you are in your final moments of your life, all of those things matter not at all.

What can a man give in exchange for his soul?, we heard read in Mark 8:37. That's when we need the One who bore our infirmities and carried our sorrows. We need the One who bore our diseases and carried our griefs. That's when you and I need the One who was pierced for our transgressions, who was crushed for our iniquities, who was nailed to the cross, the One who suffered far more than you and I will have to suffer, who suffered our sin and our guilt, our death and our hell so that we would not have to suffer for them. He is the One who rescues us from every evil attack. He is the One who gets us through (the hardships of life) on our way to (heaven).

So what happened to Paul after he was dragged outside the city and left for dead? We're told that the disciples had gathered around him. That's what the community of church is all about. We gather around those who are hurting. We gather around those who are suffering to strengthen and encourage them. And we're told (I love this) that Paul got up! From throned to stoned, he gets up! And what does he do? He went right back into the city where they had stoned him. Oh, I love his attitude. And he got right back to doing what God had called him to do – sharing the good news with other people.

Whatever happens to us in our life, whatever you suffer, whatever you are going through, God will be there, and he will get you through it all so that he can use you to lead other people to Jesus and away from the worthless things of this life. Amen.

2nd Sermonette – For Fathers

Today is Father's Day, and I want to wish you a very happy Father's Day. We don't often speak about that subject, and I thought I'd address it for just a few minutes. A lot of people claim that fathers are basically absent in our society today, and they lay the blame for a lot of problems on absent fathers. Some say that fathers are totally irrelevant and don't make a difference at all; but I believe that fathers are absolutely essential in the family and for our churches and society, and I believe that's exactly what the Bible teaches.

In the book of Malachi, in one of the very last words of the Old Testament, we're told that God was going to send, before Christ came, his prophet Elijah – that would be John the Baptist. John the Baptist would come preaching a message of repentance, encouraging people to repent of their past mistakes, sins and failures, and turn to the Lord in faith for forgiveness. We're told that one of things he would do when he came was **He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.** (Malachi 4:6) Isn't it interesting that those are the very last words of the Old Testament; and God would be silent for over four-hundred years - turning the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.

You know, absent fathers, irrelevant fathers, fathers who are uninvolved in their children's lives - they are responsible for the curse that is striking our land today. That's pretty heavy, weighty, and scary stuff, isn't it? I personally believe that fathers hold the key to the success of the next generation – that we make the difference for those who will come after us. I believe this is one of the most important things we do with our life.

One of the things I get to do is visit the Dodge County Jail and preach up there. Last time I asked over thirty inmates how many of them had fathers who were involved in their life. Over ninety percent of them did not have a father who was personally involved in their life. I felt – Wow! This was a prophecy that came true. That's how important our work and our role as fathers is. I believe it's one of the most important things we ever do in life.

I know there are a lot of fathers out there, who are hearing this message, and they feel this load of guilt. They feel “you know, I don't know, I just don't feel like I'm up to that challenge. I don't feel like I can be this great father.” Well, I got news for you. Who does feel up to it? Who does feel adequate? I've failed so many times as a father – I can't even begin to count how many times. But I also believe what Paul says that it's not that our competency comes of ourselves, but our competency comes from God. God will equip us to do the very thing he calls us to do.

Then there are other fathers out there who are feeling a load of guilt, and they are saying to themselves, “You know I really failed miserably. I was so self-centered, so selfish, I was so uninvolved in my children's lives because I was all wrapped up in myself. I failed in previous relationships.” For some of you, you say that my children aren't living with me, how can I make a difference? How can I turn that around after I've failed? I have news for you also. Who hasn't failed? As we heard Pastor Werner tell those little children, he's not a perfect father. I knew that (!) because I know I'm not. No one is. But the beautiful thing is that for every father

who has sinned, for every father who has failed, we have a God who is a perfect father and forgives us for all we've done wrong or neglected.

I've known some men who had pasts where they have failed miserably, where they were off in alcohol-land and not involved. They were absent fathers, maybe physically present but emotionally absent and spiritually absent in their kids' lives, who have been convicted by the power of the Holy Spirit, who have found forgiveness in the cross of Christ, who learned to plead the blood over their past and turn to the cross and turn to Christ; and these are people who have gone back to their children. The beautiful thing is you don't have to be perfect. You don't have to be like you think somebody else is to be that perfect father. Be yourself, and be real. Be the best you that God has made you to be. And when you are real with your children, when you have a real relationship with God, they will love you and accept you as you are. They will respect you only when you are real, when they see you have a real relationship with God and you have a real relationship with them, where you come to them and you admit your past mistakes and your failures. You ask them to forgive you and tell them you are sorry.

That's a wonderful opportunity for us to teach our children about forgiveness and about being forgiving when we can go to them and say I've failed you in a lot of ways, but I found that God's grace covers over all of my sin and all of my guilt; and I can't undo the past. I can't make up for the things I've done wrong; I can't make up for the things I should have done and the ways I should have been there for you, but I'll tell you that I've drawn a line. With God's help and the power of the Holy Spirit, I'm going to be a different man from this day forward. I can bring men up here as examples in our congregation who have done just that, who have reconciled past broken relationships and who are now truly godly men and have good relationships with their children or their step-children, their wives, and are really trying to lead them and guide them with the power of the Gospel at work.

Every one of us knows the roles that men have to play. We're to be providers for our families - that's a given. We're also supposed to be protectors of our family, right? - to protect our wives and our children physically, to protect them emotionally and mentally as well. But I don't think we always feel adequate or up to protecting them spiritually. That always seems to be a challenge where we want to use the church or use the school to do what God really wants you and me, as fathers, to do.

I believe one of the most powerful ways we can do that is this: I'm going to show you copies of some paintings that I've come across that I think are very powerful. This is one that is of a godly mother. This is a woman who is on her knees praying for her daughter and praying for family. You see the shadow of the daughter in silhouette against the bedroom door. She is listening, and she is hearing her mother pray. We heard about that kind of spiritual woman on Mother's Day when Pastor Jensen preached on Proverbs 31.

But I also believe that men play a very, very powerful role. One of my favorite paintings is this: In fact I have it hanging in my house; it was given to me by one of the congregations I served. You see the father kneeling in front of the sleeping form of his son. He's praying over his son. As you look over the father and the son, through that window you see in the background an angel of light holding off an angel of darkness. This painting is entitled "Spiritual Warfare". I think

it's time for us to wake up and realize that what is at stake here and what's really, truly happening invisibly all around us, is that Satan has not stopped working. He is alive and well on planet earth, and he has targeted our children and our grandchildren, and he is going after their souls. And we need to be engaged in spiritual warfare against this enemy. If you notice very closely at the bottom of this painting, over the sleeping form of the son, you see the shadow of the cross. This man is pleading the cross of Jesus Christ over his children. That's a man engaged in spiritual warfare for his family.

The next step a man does is when he realizes he is the leader of his family and he is also the leader of his wife. I don't care how inadequate you feel about this, God will never call you to do something that he will not equip you to do. What a powerful, powerful force we miss when we fail to do this, when husband and wife come together and pray prayers of agreement over their marriage, home and family. The Bible talks about the power of two praying in agreement together, and they're praying over their marriage and for their children (Mt 18:19-20). When men and wives do that, then you will find their being able to stand up against whatever force attacks their marriage and attacks their family.

You see in this painting a man standing in front of his wife and in front of his child, a man who is armed with a sling. It kind of reminds you of David as you see the shadow of a giant-like Goliath coming at him. Sometimes when those giants come at us and come at our families, we want to run, but that title is called "Forever Faithful". I will stand between any force that comes at my family, at my wife, at my children. If you look very closely, over the husband and over his wife, you will see in that cloud the form of an angel; the Angel of the Lord, Jesus Christ himself stands behind you. As we heard before, as Paul said, the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack; and that's exactly what God does for a man and his wife and his family when we turn to God for strength.

Your family will follow your lead when they see you being led by God. Everything you and I need to become competent as leaders is right here. In fact, God promises that the Lord will continually guide you. God says to a man who wants to lead his family I will advise you and watch over you; I will guide along the best pathway for your life (Ps 32:8). And God will give you wisdom and direction that so that you can then lead and guide your family in the best pathways for their lives as well. They see you learning from God and his Word before you teach; and teaching is so important, isn't it? In fact, God set it up for men to be teaching their children the wonderful things, the legacy of faith, the heritage of Jesus Christ that we have. Somebody gave it to you. Somebody passed it on to you. Somebody put it in your hands and put it in your hearts; and now it is up to us to pass it on to the next generation.

In Psalm 78: 3-7 that is exactly what he says. He said our fathers have told us things they have heard and known, and they told us for this reason so that we will not hide them from our children. **We will tell the next generation. We will tell them the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, the power and the wonders he has done.** We're going to tell them what the cross of Jesus Christ has done and what it means in our lives that God declared statutes for Jacob, **and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his**

deeds but would keep his commands. That's the most important thing you and I do in life – pass on our faith in Christ firmly into the hands and the hearts of our children so they can pass it on to their children. You don't stop even when you're a grandfather. You have the opportunity to do that yourself into the hearts of your grandchildren.

You know the impact and influence a godly man has on his family? I am going to give you an example of a man in Acts 10:1-2. **In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.** Now this was a man's man. This was a tough guy. You didn't reach the level of being a centurion without being a hard nose, especially leading a hardnosed group of guys in the Italian Regiment of the Roman army. This was one big, tough, scary dude. And yet at the same time, he was also tender because we're told **He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.** The reason his family was devout and God-fearing was because he was the leader; he was devout and godly and God-fearing, and he set the example and was the model for his family. He gave generously, and he wasn't afraid to humble himself before the cross of Christ and to be a man of prayer for his family. What a powerful legacy he left for his children! What an example he set for them! That's the role we play as fathers today.

You know we say that we love our children, we want the best for them, and we're willing to do anything for them. But are we willing to change what's wrong in our lives today? Are we willing to humble ourselves and go before the cross of Christ and find grace, find forgiveness there for us, and then lead our family to that cross? Are we willing to pray? Are we willing to learn and read God's word? Are we willing to change for them? I tell you when you think of what's at stake for the next generation, we need to draw a line and say, "God, with your help, I'm going to be that kind of man for my wife and for my children."

Let me share with you the impact of the legacy you will leave in Psalm 112 - I'm going to close with this. He says **Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who finds great delight in his commands. His children will be mighty in the land;** - another translation says His children will be successful everywhere – **the generation of the upright will be blessed.** Why? Because of your example, because of your model, because you stepped to the plate and you did what God called you to do. You know, that's why I believe fathers hold the key to the success of the next generation; and God will give you whatever strength and power you need to be that kind of man. So fathers, your family follows your lead – lead them to Jesus. Amen.