

If God is a God of love...

Acts 13:13-41

Israel was in exile. Exile: it is such a lonely word. It's not a word that is a part of our everyday vocabulary but when spoken it is heavy with despair. It whispers abandonment, estrangement, rejection, forsakenness, disowned, ditched, given up on. Hope is thin in exile. The exile was a direct result of years, centuries, generations of sinful behavior: idolatry, blatant disregard for the ways of God. Israel's wandering heart was a problem that never went away. It was a cycle which repeated itself over and over again: coming into a close relationship with God, acknowledging that God was the Lord and they belonged to him, a brief period of enjoying the fruit of this close relationship and then a shift, a turning to other gods. It didn't always start out as a deliberate rebellion and rejection of God, but those other gods, those other customs and ways were so attractive, and their promises so tasty that Israel was lured away, far down the path of unfaithfulness until they had completely forgotten about God and His deep love for them. And when they did, they did not return right away. They remained disobedient until disaster struck and they were desperate for help. And no other God could save them. And then the cry went up to God and He heard and answered. And the cycle began again. All throughout the Old Testament we read the story. It can be a frustrating experience from our perspective. Hindsight is 20/20. As we read the stories and see the cycle, it seems so obvious to us. But Israel was blind to it, to history repeating itself. So the cycle of sin and disobedience continued for hundreds of years. And as you have heard us say before, the system was broken. Israel had failed to keep the covenant with God, though God had done more than keep His end of it. Though God kept the covenant, the relationship was broken. The sacrificial system was broken. The system set up as a means for people to repent and be forgiven for their sins became just another empty religious symbol void of any real meaning. The Kingdom was broken: The kingdom of Israel – the promised land – where God was King with a capital K until the people demanded a King with skin on, a King they could see – the Kingdom was divided into north and south and the Kingship was – well, tainted would be putting it mildly. The covenant was broken, the sacrificial system was broken the kingdom was broken. You know, they say that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. And some might look at God's relationship with Israel and consider it crazy. He had given them clear instructions for Holy Living, He had promised His blessing, He had forgiven them over and over. And he had explained to them what would happen to them: to their identity, to their relationship with the promised land and to their relationship with the God who loved them if they did not remain faithful to Him. God told the people of Israel in the formative years of their relationship, while they were still young and struggling to find themselves, before they had even reached the promised land, He told them about the exile, in the book of Deuteronomy. He warned them of what would happen if they chose to serve other gods; by choosing to serve other gods, they would

choose exile – to be removed from the land, to lose their identity – Israel – and to be abandoned by God. But they grew deaf to the warning. And in the end, by their sin, they chose the exile. In 722 BC the northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria. And, 135 years later, in 587 BC, the southern kingdom and the city of Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon. The king, the political leaders, the priests, the most important members of Israelite society were captured and literally carted off to Babylon. Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar makes this helpful observation: 'When Judah invaded Babylon, three things occurred: The Davidic dynasty of kings, the dynasty of King David was nullified and the king was taken away in shame. The city of Jerusalem, the locus of God's promise to Israel was burned to the ground and the temple – the place of The Lord's assured presence was demolished. Brueggemann continues: All that seemed guaranteed by God's faithfulness, all that gave symbolic certitude and coherence, all that was linked to significance, identity and security was gone. Israel was no longer. The people were taken as the spoils of war to Babylon. In Babylon they spoke a different language. They had their own customs and traditions and gods. They did not care about Israel's special status. So Israel was carted off to Babylon– as far away from God as they could ever be. The people are devastated. And what is God doing? God is grieving. Grieving the brokenness. Coming to terms with the end of the covenant. But it is not the end of Israel. God has not abandoned them. Even as exile marks the end of the covenant with God, God is making plans. He will make a new covenant. In the exile, hope is thin. But there is still hope.

We've been reading through portions of the book of Acts now since September with a brief pause for advent and Christmas. We are reading The Acts of the Apostles in conjunction with our theme, Disciples making disciples, because in the book of Acts we see the Apostles, the disciples of Jesus, growing the church by telling and retelling the story of God's love and mercy towards His people. In fact, it seems like every week we are reading another account of one of the disciples or two of them together giving another sermon to a gathered crowd. That's how the early church grew. As Kirk mentioned last week, it was ironic that the powers which meant to crush the Christian uprising through the diaspora – literally, scattering as in scattering seeds or spora, the scattering of the first Christians to other lands, did not result in the end of the movement as was hoped but instead to its rapid growth throughout Africa and the Mediterranean and into the rest of Europe. Those first disciples were not scared into silence: if anything they were strengthened and empowered and were actively engaged in making disciples and you and I are a part of their legacy. We are here today because of them. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they changed lives one life at a time and in so doing, they changed the course of history. And we want to be a church like that, faithful to God's call to go into the world and make disciples. So, what you might ask are we doing talking about the covenant, the exodus, the sacrificial system and the exile of Israel? What does any of this have to do with making disciples?

I think many of us shrink back from even the thought of making disciples because for us it conjurs up ideas of people handing out pamphlets with the steps to salvation, or street preachers yelling at the passers by warning them that they are all going to Hell. Maybe, this week, making disciples reminds you of great evangelists like

Billy Graham who was a gifted preacher and who had the rare privilege of proclaiming God's free gift of forgiveness for sins for those who would trust in Him. Maybe we shrink back from the call to make disciples because none of those feels like us. I couldn't do that – that's not me. But the truth is that most disciple making happens in relationships. Over time. A friend or family member or someone at work or at the arena or at the gym notices that there is something different about you. I don't mean different in that you stick out like a sore thumb or that you are a prude or that you are judging them – those are the best ways not to make disciples! I mean different in that there is just something about you that they can't quite put their finger on and they want to know more. There's some about you that is attractive. That's one way and many of us rely on that way of making disciples. If Kirk or I asked you how your disciple making is going lately, you might respond by saying, Oh great – I'm just waiting for the Holy Spirit to hurry up and get to work. I'm all ready for the day when someone finally asks me what makes me so mysterious. But no one's asked me yet. Do you hear it? It's a bit of a cop out on our parts. Yes, making disciples does happen that way occasionally but don't sit back and wait for it. Another way we can do the work of making disciples is by simply talking to others about what God is doing in our lives. I don't mean prepare a big sermon ahead of time. It's just about not being embarrassed or ashamed to let God into our conversations. For example, a few weeks ago now, one of Maria's neighbors asked a simple question: where do you guys go on Sunday mornings? To many of us, who have grown up in the church, that question might seem kind of silly and the answer completely obvious! Duh! Where does he think you are going on Sunday mornings? But this is not the 1950's and we have been living in a post Christian culture for several generations now. So his question is completely honest. It would have been easiest for Maria to say "Oh, we're just getting together with some friends." That's still true. But if we are thinking about living our lives as disciple makers, then this is a moment when we can allow God to be present in the conversation. "Oh, we're part of a church that gets together on Sunday mornings." It's that simple. Opening the door to let God out, to let God loose from the cages we put Him in. Maybe that one little sentence opens the door to another God conversation some day. Because disciples are grown, one conversation at a time. Billy Graham knew that. He was a great orator and his sincerity in preaching about salvation was powerful and effective. But there was more than just that one moment. And Billy Graham knew it. God would use him to help millions hear the good news crystalized in John 3:16 – if God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. But there's more to the Christian life than that one moment of conversion. And so Billy Graham set up teams to work with local churches before and after the crusades to do the work of raising these baby Christians who were "born again" at the crusades, growing them into mature disciples. Dave Fost, a former elder here, was one of those Billy Graham associates who worked with local churches to make disciples. Because making disciples happens in relationships. One conversation at a time. Like Alison, who recently shared that she has been feeling much more confident and comfortable lately talking at work about coming to church, being a part of the GROW group. That's where it starts. Letting God into our conversations. This is where it begins but it is just the beginning. Making disciples takes time. It doesn't all

happen in a flash. Making disciples is an investment of time. It starts slow but when people know that you can be trusted, and they see God at work in your life, the questions come and they press deeper. They might ask why you go to church? They might want to know what difference God makes in your life. Why are you so grateful? Where does your hope come from? Why do you pray? It starts with simply talking about your own relationship with God – not preaching, not a sales pitch. But in time, those seekers are going to need to know about more than just you and your experience. They are going to want to know more about God. Who is God? Who is Jesus? What is sin? Why did Jesus die? If God is a God of love where is He now in our times of greatest need? Those are big questions. They are the kind of questions that are answered again and again in the preaching in the book of Acts: There the apostles tell the story, the same story over and over again. They don't just tell that one line – John 3:16 but they tell the story of Israel's disobedience of our disobedience, of the broken relationship, and of the restoration of that relationship between God and humanity through the life and death of Jesus Christ. In the lesson we read from this morning it says that "Paul stood up, paused and took a deep breath and said" and it's as though he took a deep breath and when he opened his mouth what he exhaled was the gospel = and not the short version. He told the story of the God and His people. And that is why we are talking about covenants, about sin, about sacrifice, and about exile. So we can learn the story ourselves Because we too are disciples, still learning. Some speak of becoming a Christian as if they have arrived at a destination. But the Christian life is a journey. Come, follow me, Jesus said. He did not say "Welcome! You made it!" Come, follow me. We are disciples, following, learning as we go. And as we follow, we invite others to join us on the journey. Disciples making disciples.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 334 as paraphrased.