

**When Landmarks Move**

Acts 15:1-5, 13-21

In the early days of the church, after Christ's resurrection and return to the Father, his former disciples became leaders of the most dynamic sect of the Jewish faith of their time. And that *is* what they were: a reform movement of Judaism. All the original disciples were Jews, their scripture was the Hebrew Bible, their home base was Jerusalem, and they worshiped daily in the Jewish temple. Obviously, some of the Jewish religious leaders disapproved of them – given that they had had Jesus crucified – but it's worth noting that not all those leaders had agreed with that murder. We sometimes act as if every member of the priestly Council, and every Pharisee hated Jesus, but that was not the case. Indeed, some of those Pharisees even joined the early church. Jesus' followers were setting out to reform the Jewish faith, and some of the Pharisees accepted that Jesus was the Messiah and wanted to be part of that reform.

One Pharisee who joined the church was Saul of Tarsus. He started out violently persecuting the disciples, but after a visionary encounter with the risen Christ, he did an about-face and became an equally fervent defender of the new church. He even went off on evangelistic journeys, where he went into synagogues and tried to convince Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and more. He didn't have much success in the synagogues, but then a strange thing happened. Non-Jews began to listen to this odd, but brilliant, Jewish teacher and to ask if they, too, could follow this Jesus. Saul, who about this time changed his name to the *Roman* name Paul, said, "The Jesus I follow loves everyone. Welcome aboard." Paul ended up starting churches that were primarily made up of Greek-speaking Gentiles. Meanwhile, back in Judea, one of the leaders of the church there, Peter, had a vision from God that revealed to him, too, that Gentiles should be welcomed into the church. This Jewish reform movement was about to branch out in a surprising new direction.

That's great, right? But also complicated. For at least 500 years, Jews had defined themselves by the ways they were different from the Gentiles. They worshiped one God, not many. They did not worship dumb idols. They circumcised their males. They had very specific dietary rules about which animals they could eat and how those animals were to be prepared. They obeyed the Sabbath. They had strict rules for sexual morality that the Greco-Roman world,

shall we say, did *not* recognize. So, it's great that God has opened the church to Gentiles. Um, how is that going to work, now?

We read Acts chapter 15, verses 1-5.

*15 Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' 2And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. 3So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. 4When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'*

“Good afternoon, all of you. We welcome all our guests from Antioch and Cappadocia and Asia. My name is Shlomo ben Eleazar. For those who speak and read the scriptures in Greek, you would be more familiar with the Greek form of my name, Solomon. While I do not pretend to the original Solomon's wisdom, I am a teacher of the law here in Jerusalem. Like Brother Saul, or Paul as he styles himself now, I am a Pharisee and was a student of the great Gamaliel. Though I must say that I believe my own teaching has remained closer than Saul's to that of our master.

“Let me begin by saying that I am wholly in favor of including Gentiles within our community of faith. The vision of Cephas – that is, Peter – has established without doubt that God has opened the gates of salvation to them. Indeed, our scriptures have always taught that our God was the God of the whole world and all peoples. Those of you from other nations, you are welcome to the embrace of the God who created all in love.

“But I am concerned with what I am hearing from some of those who have spoken today. What does it profit anyone if we welcome newcomers to our faith, but destroy that faith in the process? In a world of unbridled lust and licentiousness, one of our greatest distinctives is that we serve a God who has higher standards for our his people. Shall we then lower those standards? People have been drawn to the faith of Israel because they see that our priorities are not those of the world around us, that we are guided by laws given to us from God himself. Shall we welcome new believers by adapting our laws to the ways of the world they have fled?

“I understand that some of you have said that we would only be granting exemptions to *some* of the laws – circumcision, perhaps – but to those who would say that, let me ask this: If

God is the giver of the law of Moses, how do we dare to pick and choose which of those laws we shall keep? How can we decide which laws are valid and which ones have become obsolete? Does God change with the winds of fashion? Our scripture was given to us through Moses by God himself. No other nation can say such a thing. But make no mistake, as soon as we begin picking out which parts of scripture we shall follow and which we shall ignore, we have rejected all the law. Scripture is like a Passover meal; it has its delights and it has its bitter herbs. It is not given to us to pick at our food at Passover; nor may we pick at our scriptures. Did not the Messiah himself say, ‘Till heaven and earth pass away, not a stroke shall pass from the law?’”

“Perhaps some of you would say that these relaxed rules would apply only to Gentile converts, while we of the nation of Israel would still be bound to the whole law. Disabuse your mind of such foolishness. There is no way to maintain such a disparity in a community of love, a fellowship of equals. Would you have one set of rules for one of your children and a different, and much easier, set for another? How would that work toward the harmony of a home?

“No, the only way that we can truly welcome Gentiles into this community of faith is to welcome them, but to require of them all the same divinely-given instructions to which we ourselves are bound. Yes, I understand that it will be difficult, but why is that a factor in the decision? Has God ever promised that following him would be easy?

“I am no prophet, but I am also no fool. Let me tell you what will happen if you decide to relax even one of the laws of Moses. You may make this fellowship more attractive to Gentiles, but you will sever its connection to the faith of our fathers. There will be no more rabbis like me in your number, for why would one who has given his life to understanding and observing the law of God willingly join a group that treats that law as optional? The first Shlomo himself, the wisest of all men, taught us, ‘Do not move the ancient landmarks.’ Our laws are our ancient landmarks. If you move them to suit your own convenience, you only bring disaster on our faith. Thank you.”

We read Acts chapter 15, verses 13-21.

*<sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup>This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,*

*<sup>16</sup> “After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;*

*from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,  
17 so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—  
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.  
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things 18 known from long ago.”*

*19 Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. 21 For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.’*

If I did my job in my little speech as Shlomo ben Eleazar – that is, if I accomplished my goal – you saw his point. You may have even agreed with it. This was not some anti-foreigner bigot, a Gentile-phobe; this was a man who saw proposed changes to a faith he loved and believed that those changes would do harm to that faith, that allowing *anyone* to enter the church under lower standards would end up making the church unrecognizable, no longer a reform movement within Judaism but almost, you know, a different religion entirely. And of course, he was quite right. After all the speeches, James settled on a sort of compromise position, requiring a few things of the Gentile converts, but not everything. But, given that Shlomo’s position was that any compromise at all was a loss, then the conservatives lost. Within a generation, most of the Jewish believers had left the early church, which evolved into a new religion entirely, called “Christianity.” Again, Shlomo was right.

And yet while he was right, he was also wrong. Had that conservative faction prevailed, we would almost certainly not be here. Had the church continued as a Jewish reform movement bound to the Mosaic law, it would have followed a completely different path and might have ended up giving up on Gentiles entirely as a bad investment. The Gentiles would surely have been the ones who left and, probably giving up the Hebrew Bible, like the Gnostics did. Our faith would not exist. The faith that we have today was to some extent decided at that conference, and the faith that we have today changed the world. Shlomo was right to say that this proposal would be like moving ancient landmarks, but he was wrong in thinking that was always bad.

Here’s what I think: I think sometimes God moves the landmarks. Sometimes the radical change that seems to transform the faith we love into something unfamiliar comes from God. Not always, mind you. A lot of proposed change is garbage. Every generation has a new fashion that they try to import into the church, claiming that it’s the future, and usually it’s a fad. To our great credit, the church usually ignores it or tolerates it for a while, and it goes away. Other times the

new fashion is more pernicious and evil, like Christian Nationalism, and must be resisted. But sometimes what feels like a threatening new fashion is actually God calling us back to something we had lost sight of. I have some examples, but I don't have time today. So, in our sermons next month, we're going to be looking at some challenges that have moved the church's ancient landmarks, and we'll look at some of the challenges facing us today. In the first century Jerusalem conference, some were afraid that the proposed changes would destroy the faith. Instead, a course was set that would transform the world. God does that sometimes, thanks be to God.

Final word: I keep saying this, but I'll say it again. This Bible of ours is not what so many people want it to be. People would like it to be a manual of clear and easy-to-follow instructions, very much as IKEA instructions are not. But what we have instead is mostly stories of people a lot like us, muddling through confusing times in their search for God. Like we do. To my mind, that makes the Bible *more* useful than an instruction book, because, face it, we never read the instructions anyway. This week, muddle through with hope. God is with you. Amen.

Benediction: Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!