

How God uses walking and talking to proclaim His Gospel

January 25, 2009 - Acts 17:16-34

There's something about walking. It's good for your heart. Good for your lungs. Good for your perspective. And slow enough that you can actually notice things.

But we live in a driving culture. Most of us came to church today in cars. Most of us go to school or work in a car or truck or bus. We may walk only when we have time or missed the bus or have to get the dog out. But there's something about walking.

I try to get out and walk by the Sturgeon River by some at least once a week. It's quite interesting to walk along the paths. A few months ago I discovered the make shift memorial to Mitch Tanner, the 16 year old Paul Kane High School student tragically killed in a forklift accident at a local store. His classmates and friends took over the underside of the St. Albert trail bridge crossing the river. There were murals, messages, flowers and pictures. The city has painted over some of it now. But it's preserved another part by providing a permanent plastic cover over some inscriptions. You never see that when you're driving over the bridge. But walking gives a different perspective.

Another time I walked past some bushes and noticed a strange smell coming from a group of people huddled beside the river. It was an odor I often smelled when working as usher at concerts in the Saddledome in Calgary. By walking I smelled firsthand the reality of young people using drugs in broad daylight in a public place in our town. I never would have smelled that if I just drove by. (And just in case some of you wonder if I lingered a little longer for any possible benefits, I kept walking!)

When walking, I've seen the twinkle in the eyes of young people in love who barely notice anything else but each other. I've seen some with disability travel the trail enjoying the scenery and companionship of their friend. I've seen plaques on trail benches commemorating a grandfather who meant so much to his family or a woman who contributed to a local charity. I've seen the war memorial and St. Albert's dead listed for others to reflect on. There's so much you see when you walk.

St. Albert becomes more than a place with roads to our house and stores for our consumer needs. The community and the people

become much more obvious. When we see people's expressions of sorrow and joy, we get a glimpse into their lives and their needs.

God has called us to be salt and light in our world. That includes our little worlds and spheres of influence. It includes this city of St. Albert. It includes the whole world. But could something as simple as walking help us fulfill that call?

Well today, we're going to look at what God did when a man went for a walk. We're going to see how God used that walk to stir up this man to take action. God changed lives forever through what that man discovered on his walk. The truth the Bible calls us to ponder today is this: **God proclaims His Gospel to others through His people when they walk and talk.**

We have been studying prayer. Prayer is vital activity for any Christian. But we must guard against worshipping prayer.

We seek to go deeper in prayer so we can go deeper with God. The deeper we go with God, the more we discover His heart for people; His call to us to be His salt and light in our world. So we have looked out this New Year at the call to be salt and light. We looked at the parable of the Good Samaritan. We looked last week at

intercessory prayer. We saw how God helps us and others in hostile times through the prayers of others.

Today we want to look at how God proclaims His Gospel through His people's walking and talking. The prayer part happens throughout. We're going to see how God can use these very ordinary activities in our lives to bring the gospel to others.

So we're first going to look at this incident to try to grasp what was going on. Then we'll consider God's activity throughout this account. Finally, we'll discover ways we can participate in God's salt and light mission.

Acts 17:16-34

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." ²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

²⁹"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. ³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

³²When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." ³³At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

What happened?

Paul is in Athens. He didn't plan to be there. He had proclaimed the Gospel further north in Thessalonica. Many accepted Christ but some of the Jewish community stirred up such great opposition that Paul was forced to leave the city. So he goes further down the road to a place called Berea. More listen to the Gospel proclaimed by Paul. But when the same mob in Thessalonica hears that Paul is preaching in Berea, they set out to disrupt his work. So

again, Paul is forced to flee for his own safety, this time to Athens.

His companions remain in Berea to strengthen the new believers.

Athens was the leading city in Greece on the Aegean Sea. It reached its zenith in the 5th century BC under Pericles. They built the Parthenon and other magnificent structures. Athen's residents included classical poets like Euripides and Aristophanes. The Romans conquered it in 146 BC. Yet it remained an intellectual and cultural center. Statues of Greek gods and goddesses dominated Athens. They were in the Parthenon and other temples on the Acropolis, or city hill. Statues were also found in the public, commercial and temple buildings in the lower city.

Paul takes a walk around the city. He sees so many idols that he becomes greatly disturbed. His spirit becomes provoked within him. He realizes these Athenians worship all sorts of false gods and idols. Paul cannot keep silent.

So verse 17 tells us he first reasoned in the synagogue. This was usual practice for him. He would visit the local Jewish community to proclaim that the Promised One they looked for from the Old Testament had arrived in Jesus. But he also went to the marketplace.

Perhaps it was similar to the market we have in St. Albert through the summer. Merchants displayed their wares. Shoppers came to barter. People met each other. Notice, he went there every day. It was not like Paul said, Tuesday is testimony day and I have the rest of the week off. He went daily.

One day some philosophers hear Paul's preaching. The author of Acts identifies them as Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Epicurus lived from 342-270 BC. He taught that the purpose of life was pleasure and freedom from pain, passions and fears. Epicureans thought it unnecessary to seek after God and had no fear of his judgment. They believed that the gods did not exist or they were so far removed from the world that they exercised no influence on their affairs. So recreation and personal peace were their highest values.

I would argue that many people around us are Epicurean when it comes to our God. Many Albertans live as if they believe God either doesn't exist or is irrelevant to life. So the highest values become entertainment and peace or freedom from disturbing stuff.

Then there were the Stoics. In our time, the word stoic has come to mean somebody who is unemotional and shows patience in

adversity. But the Stoic philosophy came from a guy named Zeno who lived from 340-265. Zeno taught beside a colonnade or "stoa." His followers were then labeled stoics. He stressed living in harmony with nature, depending on reason and other self-sufficient powers. They had a pantheistic view of God; Pan means All – Pantheists believe everything is God. The divine is attainable by anyone. Stoics believed God is like an impersonal force you needed to connect with.

We might conclude that we certainly don't have anyone like that in St. Albert. A week ago I sat in Starbucks down by Chapters Book Store. I could hardly concentrate on my reading; a man was loudly explaining to his friend all the profound things happening in his life. What were these profound things? Well, when he and his class got together to meditate, they experienced this connection with the divine. Somehow there was a triangular relationship between the divine, another person and himself. So he left enlightened. This went on and on until I finally had to leave after praying against everything he said. That stoic-like thinking was expressed just a few blocks away from here.

People like Epicurean Albertans who live like God is dead and Stoics like that guy in Chapters heard Paul preaching. He proclaimed the good news about Jesus and the resurrection of the dead according to verse 18. They did not view him favorably at first. “He is a babbler. He seems to be arguing foreign gods.” Some commentators think they thought Paul was talking about the god Jesus and the goddess resurrection. Whatever they heard, the text tells us they took him to a meeting of the Areopagus.

“Are” is short for the Greek God of war “Aries.” “Pagus” is Greek for “hill.” Areopagus is Aries Hill. Since the Romans adopted the Greek gods when they conquered Greece, they changed Aries name to Mars. So some of you may have heard of Paul’s Mar’s Hill talk. This meeting place on Aries Hill was some sort of council of the city. This was not a trial. His preaching was on trial in something like a university lecture with questions and answer. Those on the Areopagus board accept Paul into their meeting. They ask him to explain his teachings.

Luke, the author of Acts reveals to us that the Athenians loved to debate new ideas. But it also seems they weren’t interested in truth.

They just liked debating. Paul lays out what he’s seen. They are very religious. They even have an idol to an unknown God.

But Paul then makes God known. He describes what God is like; His sovereignty; His self-existence; His authority over all. He describes God as Lord over creation and that all men need to seek him. Then he gets to the most important point. If they thought God was an idol of silver or gold, they were truly blind. In fact that was ignorant thinking of the past. God even overlooked that. But now He commands everyone to repent of not giving Him glory all the time. Why – He has set a day to judge the earth; this day will certainly come, in fact God has appointed Jesus to judge – God confirmed the day of judgment would happen by raising Jesus from the dead. When they hear about the resurrection, the people react. Some sneer. Some inquire. Some become believers. God has used Paul’s walking, praying and talking to accomplish His ultimate purposes. He has spread His salt and light into a meeting place filled with people hardened to the Gospel. By the end of this account, even a member of the council becomes a Christian.

So what was God doing through all of this?

Well we first have to recognize a couple of prior decisions God made to get His Gospel message out.

First, God decided that the truth about Himself and the Gospel must come through preachers.

Romans 10:14-15 - ¹⁴*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?* ¹⁵*And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

“They” are people who don’t know Christ. They can’t call on one they have not believed in. They can’t believe in one whom they have not heard. They cannot hear unless someone preaches. God ordained that the Gospel be proclaimed through the lips of His people.

You might think you found an escape clause right. It says “preach.” “The responsibility for proclaiming the gospel lies with the professional preacher. So Tom needs to do this and I’m free.” Well, on the one hand this is true. I have a responsibility to proclaim and explain the Gospel every time I formally preach. So you are partially doing your job if you bring someone to a worship service where the

Gospel will be preached. But preachers are not the only ones who preach. We limit the scope if we think it only happens Sunday morning in churches. But lots of “preaching” goes on outside church walls. Jesus “preached” the Gospel to Nicodemus one on one at night. Paul “preached” the Gospel to his prison guards. Preaching means to herald the good news. All God’s followers are called to this ministry. God ordained preaching as a means to get out the Gospel.

Second, we must keep in mind the purpose of the book of Acts. God sent the Holy Spirit to empower His people to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. In Acts 1 Jesus speaks to his apostles just before He ascends to heaven. They ask him “are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel?” Jesus answers “It is not for you to know times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” So God would send the Holy Spirit to empower His apostles and others to be witnesses to the end of the earth. This account shows how this mission was accomplished in Athens. The Holy Spirit would

come upon them and give them power. This leads us into God's activity in this passage.

God's Spirit provoked Paul's spirit when he walked around Athens. God's Spirit stirred Paul's spirit when he observed all the idols. Paul's distress ignites the events of this passage. When did this happen? Paul himself reveals this in verse 23. "As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I found an altar with an inscription: To an unknown God." So Paul walks and inspects with spiritual eyes. He doesn't walk around Athens as a tourist. He walks around as a spiritual observer. I think the overwhelming number of statues and idols broke Paul's heart. I think the Holy Spirit gave Paul a heart of compassion for the Athenians.

Then God opened a door for Paul to speak at the Areopagus. Now I don't know about you, but I have yet to be invited to a St. Albert City Council meeting because someone heard me talk about Jesus and the resurrection in a coffee shop. It seems this was a more informal town hall style meeting. Yet it still is quite incredible to me that Paul soon addresses this council with the Gospel. God can open doors and provide opportunities that we cannot even imagine.

But perhaps one of the greatest works of God in this account comes as Paul delivers his speech to the council. God empowered Paul to say what needed to be said in that intimidating environment. The New Testament reveals that Paul did not see himself as an effective speaker. He says in 1st Corinthians that he did not come with "wise and persuasive words." We also know that he was not very impressive in appearance. He was often ill and suffered from the multiple beatings he endured for Christ. In 2 Corinthians 10:10 Paul quotes his opponents criticism of him: "His letters are weighty and forceful but in person he is unimpressive and his speech amounts to nothing."

But this speech is incredible. Paul approaches them as a hostile audience. He doesn't begin by confronting them. Instead he complements them for their religiosity. He points out something he's noticed about them in their altar to an unknown God. Then he jumps off to proclaim the true God as known. He builds the case for God as creator. He emphasizes God's mercy in overlooking past ignorance of idol worship. But then he doesn't shy away from the punch at the end. Verse 30 – "In the past God overlooked such ignorance but now He

commands all people everywhere to repent.” Notice he doesn’t say God invites people everywhere. He commands!

To these philosophers who think God is irrelevant or think God is some impersonal force, Paul proclaims repentance. And he doesn’t leave it there. He explains why they need to repent in verse 31. But it’s not for a touchy feely reason like “you’ll be freed from guilty feelings.” He talks about judgment day! Oh no Paul, you’ve just turned them off! Yet it gets worse as verse 31 ends. “He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” Jesus will be the judge. The fact of Jesus’ resurrection points to the reality of judgment day. I believe only God could empower an unimpressive speaker with an unimpressive appearance to proclaim these words.

Then God engages in His final work in this passage. God saves some through Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel. Yes some sneered. Others wanted to hear more another time. But some believed including a member of the council. Through walking, thinking, praying, talking and making himself available, Paul became salt and light in Athens. God used those ordinary activities to change the eternal destinies of some of the people there that day.

God continues to do the same thing today. How can we prepare for and enter into God’s work around us?

1) We must Know God and continually go deeper with Him. Paul’s speech oozes God. Paul’s knowledge of God is obvious and extensive. I could find 14 characteristics or activities of God that Paul includes in his speech. Time spent immersing ourselves in God will serve us well when talking opportunities arise.

- He made the world. (24)
- He made everything in it. (24)
- He is Lord of heaven and earth. (24)
- He does not live in temples built by hands. (24)
- He is not served by human hands as if he needed anything. (25)
- He gives all men life and breath and everything else. (25)
- He made every nation starting from one man, so they should inhabit the earth. (26)
- He determined times set for them and exact places for them to live. (26).

- He did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out to him and find him. (27)
- He is not far from each one of us. (27)
- He overlooked ignorance about his essence – what he is like. (30)
- He has set a day to judge the world with justice. (31).
- He has appointed the man to judge. (31) Christ.
- He proved that there will be a judgment by raising Christ from the dead. (31).

2) Know the gospel – don't assume it. One of the biggest failings of many in church today is they assume the Gospel. We can fall into sales pitching the church or Christianity rather than proclaiming the fundamentals of the Gospel. Instead of “how to” it’s “here’s who.” Study what Paul proclaims here about the Gospel and then be ready to talk about it when the opportunities come.

3) Walk – live – interact – look around with spiritual eyes.

One way we can intentionally do this is through something called prayer walking. It happens when a Christian or group of Christians come together to pray while walking around their community. Before

Paul was provoked to speak up about Christ, he looked around with spiritual eyes. He was greatly distressed at the need and had to speak. The same is true concerning our desire to impact our communities.

One pastor writes; *Not long ago, God spoke to my heart and gave me a very simple yet powerful word: ‘You do not have the right to evangelize your community until you have effectively prayed for your community.’ After seeking God as to how this was to be accomplished, we began to “Take Prayer to the Streets.” . . . As many prayed, God touched their hearts with the spiritual condition of our community. They began to feel the pain and the hurt of the community.”*

The author quoting this pastor goes on. “How does God’s Spirit get ingrown church’s to grow outward, to reach beyond their doors and into their streets and neighborhoods? By helping them to see firsthand the plight of their communities. By putting feet to their prayers. By moving them to pray for very specific homes and places of business and families.”

Now why can’t we pray for our communities from the warmth and comfort of our homes or churches? We can. But listen to this from a businessman. *“I was a bit skeptical, thinking that surely I*

could pray any of the same prayers from home. But I was amazed to find myself looking into the faces of kids and praying for them in ways I know I would never have done in the routines of my household and business at home. Especially when I realized that some of these kids hadn't been prayed for by a Christian ever, and may not get prayed for again for years.

Think of where you might do a prayer walk – a business; school; condo complex; hockey clubhouse; gymnastics club; the library; city hall; youth center; Youville Home; your street; your exercise class; your team; your unit on the base; the skateboard park; splash park; Servus Place; Fountain Park. Imagine what God might do in our hearts towards others if we walked around and prayed for them?

4) Then, as God brings the opportunities, Talk. We too need to share about God, and the Gospel and people's greatest need in dependence on the Holy Spirit. That opportunity might come in a chat room, change room, bath room, coffee shop or kitchen table. But after you've walked the walk, be ready to talk the talk.

5) Leave the results to Him. Some might sneer. Some might want to hear more. Some might believe. But that's up to God. Once we've prayed, walked and talked, He must do the work.

I need to make sure I do the talk now. Some of you in this room don't know Christ and think you don't need Him. But God made everything including us. But we rebel against God by not giving Him glory all the time. Instead we reduce Him to idols or think He's irrelevant. This is a great sin. In the past, God overlooked such ignorance. But now He commands everyone to Repent; to turn away from the sin of living as if God doesn't exist and turn to the risen Christ as Savior. Because a judgment is coming. And God already has appointed the judge by raising Him from the dead. He is Jesus. Will you repent, put your trust in Him today and begin the journey of living as His salt and light in your world?

Christian Friends, if you think it is impossible for God to reach that loved one or co worker or child, remember God reached out and saved some of the most hardened intellectuals in Athens through a man who couldn't speak well. God can overcome the obstacles your loved one faces in coming to Him.

If we Christians will trust Him, God will help us overcome obstacles that keep us from bringing His Gospel to people around us. God can use you wherever you're at to bring His Gospel; through your walking, prayers and talking. Let's pray.