

**“Many People In Lancaster”**  
**Acts 18:9-11**  
**October 21, 2012**  
**Last Sermon at First Presbyterian Church**

**9 One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; 10 for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.” 11 He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.**

**On February 8, 2009, I stepped into the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church in Lancaster, SC. for the very first time. Since that day, I have preached 167 sermons here at First Presbyterian Church. Not only does that mean that I have written that many sermons, but it also means that I prepared that many bulletins. I have selected over 500 hymns for singing. I have selected or written 167 prayers of confession and determined 167 calls to worship.**

**I have even preached a series of sermons on the Fruit of the Spirit. I still have people speak to me about those messages.**

**During that time, I have moved back and forth across the front of the sanctuary. I wish I knew how far I walked back and forth across the sanctuary. I should have worn a pedometer.**

**If you were here on that first Sunday, you recognize the text today. It is the same one that I used then. My tradition is to use that text for both my first and last sermons.**

**Let me reminds you of the reason that I used this text then and now. In September, 1976, I was preparing to leave Clinton, SC for seminary. It was an exciting time, but it was also a scary time.**

**Before leaving on Sunday afternoon, I went to church at First Presbyterian Church in Clinton; SC. Jack Oates who is now retired was the pastor then. He selected today’s text**

as the basis for his sermon. As I heard those words from Acts, I realized that God was speaking to me through them.

I very much needed those words. There isn't place that I as a believer can go that the Holy Spirit hasn't already been. There is also no place that God doesn't have people.

Since then, I have used this same text both on my first Sunday and on my last. I use it on my first Sunday because I know that God has many people in that place to which I have gone. I use it last because it allows me to reflect on my ministry among and with you.

Some exciting things have happened during our time together. We have hosted Family Promise as a ministry. The Child Development Program has taught two, three, and four year olds while providing a safe place for them and their families. The Men's Prayer breakfast has served lots of eggs and sausage. They have also included many people in their prayers.

The Youth program had a chance to attend the Montreat Youth Conference for three years. This not only was an exciting time, but it challenged our youth to live a life more connected to God.

In 2010, we celebrated 175 years of the ministry of First Presbyterian Church. That celebration meant a great deal as we looked back on how God blessed the ministry of this church in three different locations.

We have also had sad times. We have celebrated the lives and memories of many folks. Most recently, we said goodbye to a well-loved pastor emeritus. Those hard times have also touched my and Susan's family. During our time here, both of us lost our mothers. I also had a tough time with my eye issues including surgery for a detached retina.

**In each and every situation, we have together been God's people. All that we have done has been to the glory of the God we all love and serve.**

**It has been my experience that God has had many people in this place even as he did in Corinth. Just as I needed that in 1976, so Paul needed it in his time. Things hadn't gone well for Paul in Athens. Perhaps it was Paul's approach. Maybe the people weren't as open as they could have been. Regardless of the reason, Paul left Athens without the kind of missionary success that he had so many other places. I can imagine that he was discouraged. He had to wonder if he had lost his fervor.**

**One of my favorite phrases is "Please be patient with me. God is not finished with me yet." Even though, Paul had successful ministry before Athens and he would have successful ministry afterwards. He was having a tough time.**

**The Athenians did not seem open to him and to the Gospel. Paul chose to leave Athens and make his way to Corinth. Corinth was in many ways the opposite of Athens. It was a bustling and wealthy city. It served as the Roman capital of the area. Many of its people were, therefore, Roman citizens. The city boasted a large population of Jews. Many of those Jews had been forced to leave Rome and they settled in Corinth.**

**Paul left Athens, but what would he find in Corinth. He obviously was worried and he was also frightened. We certainly understand those two emotions don't we? We wonder about not only our future, but we wonder about the future of the church locally and denominational.**

**All of need a vision like the one that had. Notice what happened in the vision. God had chosen Paul as the missionary to the Gentiles. His life and ministry encouraged the**

spread of the Gospel to people like you and me. Without that work, none of us would be here today.

What did God tell Paul in the vision? God said, **“Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent...”**

Even though I didn't know Paul, I suspect he was a person who spoke his mind. I don't see him as being shy and retiring. Yet the circumstances made Paul different. He had been become fearful and that fear quieted him.

God said exactly what Paul needed to hear. The message has some familiar words. Remember Gabriel when he spoke to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. He said don't be afraid. That phrase is definitely part of all divine messages.

God wanted Paul to continue his work as a missionary. Not only did God tell Paul not to be afraid, but he also told Paul to keep on preaching. We need to hear those words today. First Presbyterian will have a new pastor someday. That person will lead you into the future.

I am concerned about when I will preach again. With the exceptions of vacations and illness, I have been preaching for thirty-two years. I have to admit that I wonder about the next time that I will preach.

Like Paul, God wants us to not be silent. God, however, had another important message for Paul. The text says, **“For I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.”**

It is amazing when you think about it. The Holy Spirit is everywhere, but God's people are everywhere as well.

**Lancaster is a city filled with God's people. I want to thank you for the countless ways that you have shown me and my family that you are God's people.**

**Our paths are separating, but you will always hold a special place in my heart. May God bless you as you move into the future. Please pray for us as well.**

**I want to close with a poem Susan introduced to me. It was part of the letter that I sent you a few weeks ago, but I love it even though it relates to graduation. "As the tassel is moved so is a lifetime. The paths are chosen. Only the journey remains. Godspeed."**

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