

Acts 20:7-12
“Death by Sermon (And Other Church-y Things)”
Series: Bizarre Bible
August 15, 2010
First UMC-Jefferson City
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Media Event

(Please display graphic file, “Bizarre Bible”)



Today we are continuing our series on some of the most unusual passages in Scripture. It's a series we've titled "Bizarre Bible," and the idea behind it is that every week...for five weeks...we will take a look at parts of the Bible that many consider to be the most funny, or the most shocking, or simply the most bizarre.

Last week, you may recall, we looked at a passage from the book of Numbers in which a donkey talks, and this week...as we just heard...we're spending some moments in the book of Acts, where we find the story of a sermon that was so long that a person actually died from it. Literally. It is a case of "death by sermon."

The story takes place in the city of Troas, which was on the coast of what is now Turkey. The Apostle Paul is in town to meet with the Christians there—to preach and teach and break bread with them. We know very little about his visit outside of what is recorded in our Scripture reading today.

But what we do know is pretty interesting. For several different reasons, the passage we heard today is really important to a lot of Bible scholars. To begin with, did you notice how the author uses the word “we” to tell the story? “We met to break bread,” the author says, and talks about the room where “we were meeting.” Well, telling a story from the first person like that is extremely rare in the Bible. There are only a handful of verses that are told from the first person perspective. And today’s reading is one of them, which is really cool. Because it means—presumably—that the person doing the writing was actually there. And this is an eye-witness account.

The second thing that makes this passage interesting to Bible scholars is *when* it happens. Do you remember how the author said that this worship service where Paul was preaching took place on the first day of the week...which means a Sunday? Well that may not sound too unusual today, but back then it was really a new idea. So much so, in fact, that a lot of people believe that this is the very first recorded instance of Christians worshipping God on Sunday. Before then, worship had always happened on Friday evening, on the traditional Jewish day of worship, but here...just about 30 or 40 years after Jesus...we can see that the early Christians are already starting to worship on Sundays.

Now, all of that may be well and good and interesting, but for our purposes this morning, what really makes today’s reading intriguing is the hero of the story...a guy named Eutychus.

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Now, we do not much about Eutychus. We do know that he was considered a young person...maybe even a youth...and that his name means “Lucky,” or “Fortunate.” Which, you know, is kind of ironic considering...

So on the night of our Scripture reading, Eutychus is sitting on the windowsill of the third floor room where this worship service is being held. Maybe he’s there to hear the guest preacher; maybe he’s there because his parents made him come. Nobody really knows for sure. All we know is that Paul’s sermon is going really, really long, and poor Eutychus is having a hard time staying awake.

Until finally...around midnight...and I want to emphasize the time there...Paul is still preaching at midnight! Around midnight, dear Eutychus...Mr. Lucky...finally succumbs. His eyes close, his head nods, he goes asleep for an instant, and before he knows it he falls backwards out of the window, plummeting three stories to his death.

Well, a crowd gathers around Eutychus and Paul runs out to see what has happened. Paul picks Eutychus up, says...essentially...”Ah, don’t worry: he’s

good!”...and then goes back inside again. And sure enough, we are told, Eutyclus turns out to be just fine.

But what is perhaps most amazing of all is that Paul *keeps* preaching until sunrise...even after Eutyclus seemingly falls to his death. I mean, that takes chutzpah. Imagine what Paul must have said: “Listen, everybody, I know my sermon has already gone a little long...and, you know, technically someone has ‘died of boredom’ from it...but, if it’s OK with you, I’d like to go just a little longer: just another 6 or 7 hours. Are we good? OK.”

Now, at this point in my sermons—after we talk about the Bible reading—I usually like to ask something like, “so, have you ever felt like...the main character in the story?” But as a preacher, I have to tell you I’m kind of afraid to ask you if you’ve felt like Eutyclus. So instead, let me just skip that part, and say instead that if the story of Eutyclus teaches us anything, surely it is that making God out to be uninteresting can get ourselves into a lot of trouble.

Because making God out to be uninteresting delivers a very specific message to whomever is listening, and the message it delivers is that God is really not very relevant to your life, or your concerns, or your world.

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(Please display the following text on the screen.) Relevant

You know, this word—“Relevant”—is a term that gets thrown around a lot in the Church these days, and it’s the focus of a lot of debates and arguments.

“Relevant” essentially means “important to the matter at hand,” right? To say that something is relevant means that it is important to what is going on at the moment.

It doesn’t seem like it would be that controversial a term in the church, but in fact it has been.

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(Please display graphic file, “God as Product”)



Because the concern that people sometimes have is that trying to make God “relevant” kind of cheapens God, and turns God into a product up on a shelf that we Christians are just trying to sell—that God has to be sold to us.

That’s actually a concern I had for the longest time myself: that for the sake of making God seem relevant and important and interesting to Eutychus and others like him, we were just turning God into something hip or cool, and somehow making God less holy as a result.

I used to think that, but then, after a very long time, a friend pointed out to me that the God we get to know in the Bible really is not concerned primarily with being hip or holy. No, the God we get to know in the Bible is concerned first and foremost with loving us, and wanting us to love God back.

And while being holy and being relevant may not necessarily go together, being loving and being relevant go together perfectly.

Media Event

(Please display graphic file, "God as Love")



After all, what do we Christians believe is one of the most important signs that God loves us? It says it right there in John 3: “For God so loved the world that he gave his...”

Only Son, right. God gave Jesus. In other words, God became one of us out of love for us. And my friends, if that is not the ultimate act of wanting to become relevant to us, then I don’t know what would be.

You see, God does not *have* to become relevant to our lives. God is not a product on a shelf that has to be sold. No, God is something far better: God is a God who, out of love for us, *wants* to be important to us. God *wants* to be relevant to us. That’s what the message of Jesus is all about: because God loves us, God became one of us.

That message is at the very heart of our faith, and it is what makes the Good News so good: God chooses to share our lives, and be involved in our lives, out of sheer love for us.

And yet, that message also creates a great challenge for us too. Because the fact that God passionately wants to be relevant and important in all of our lives—even though God doesn’t have to be—means that that is the kind of God we as Christians are called to show to others. And my friends, showing a God

who wants to be relevant and important to others take a lot of work. It is not always an easy task, because it requires change.

Which brings us back to where we began...

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...with Paul preaching a sermon three stories above the street, and Eutychus here—falling out of the window, and into our Scripture.

Because, you see, whether we realize it or not, we all are preachers. All of us who are trying to follow Jesus, we are all like Paul. We may not be aware of it—but we are always teaching those around us something about God, and showing those around us something of who God is. And by our words and our actions, we offer lessons to those around us as to whether God really is interested in their lives, or not.

Or to put it another way, the world is still filled with people like Eutychus, just waiting there at the window sill, wanting to find out if this God we Christians keep talking about really has anything to do with them. And sooner or later they will reach a point where they will either decide that this God is real after all, or they'll just eventually tune out the sounds of all of our sermons.

And my friends, the God of the Bible has made it abundantly clear that this is a God who wants to be real to all of the Eutychuses—or Eutychi—of the world. Because even though God has nothing to prove to any of us, God loves us. And

love wants to be relevant. And love wants to be important. And love wants to be involved, and interested.

It's like some advice a wise preacher once told me about being a parent. This preacher said that one of the most important things a person can do as a parent to show love to their child is simply to take an interest in what the child is interested in. Even if it is of absolutely no interest to you as a parent, out of love for your child, you take an interest in it too. And so, if your child loves video games—and is allowed to play video games—you as a parent sit down and you play video games with them. That doesn't mean that you still don't have a responsibility as the parent to limit what kind of games—or how long they play them—but still, you sit down and you play with them. Ultimately it does not matter whether you as the parent like video games or not. What matters is that the you love your child, and love takes an interest, and love wants to be involved.

And that's the kind of God meet in the Bible, and that's the kind of God we meet in Jesus Christ: a God who, out of love, chooses to sit down and be interested in our lives, and be involved. And we as Christians, and we as the Church, have a choice to make whether that is the kind of God that we shall show to the world or not.

And let's be honest: it is not always an easy choice to make. Sometimes it's much easier to hold onto the traditions that are familiar to us and say that everything else is mistaken. Sometimes it's much easier to point to our own generation, in our place in time, and say that we got it right, and that the newer generation has it wrong. Sometimes it's much easier to stick to the language and

the institutions and the customs that we know, because learning new language and new institutions and new customs would take too much work.

There's no denying that it is much easier to stick with an idea of God as one who takes no real interest in our ever-changing world, but my friends, that is not the God of Jesus Christ. No, the God of Jesus Christ loves people passionately enough to take an interest in their lives today, and to be involved in their lives today. The God of Jesus Christ loves people passionately enough to become one of us.

And so, 2000 years ago, when Jesus came and he hung out with the fishermen, he talked about fishing. And 2000 years ago, when Jesus came and spent time with the religious teachers, he talked about religion. And 2000 years ago, when Jesus came and spent time with the housewives, he talked about keeping a home. And all of it pointed to God. And all of it taught lessons about God. And all of it was about God.

And still today God visits this world filled with all of the descendents of Eutychus, just sitting at the window, deciding whether to come in or not, waiting...watching...to see if this God is real. They are the video-game-playing teenagers and the children who have never watched TV. They are the very rich and the very poor. They are the teenage moms, and the single person who feels all alone in a new community. They are the addicts, and the people with problems that they are too embarrassed to tell anybody about. They are the

people who feel like they belong, and the others who feel like they do not fit the mold.

Eutychus and all of his friends, just waiting there by the window, trying to decide if all of this talk of a loving God is really real for them, or if it's just another long-winded sermon.

Eutychus and all of his friends are still waiting, wondering if God cares for them enough to be interested in them, and to call them, and to have a purpose for them.

And the God who loved us enough to become one of us calls us to put flesh on bone on the grace of God again today, and to seek out Eutychus and his friends of our own age, and to show them a God who will do whatever it takes to live life together with them.

Thanks be to God, Amen.