DO NOT BE AFRAID; KEEP ON SPEAKING

Acts 18:1-28

Key Verse:18:9,10 “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”

The coronavirus is still rapidly spreading and taking many lives around the world. In order to slow the spread we have to pray and keep social distance according to the order of the state. In this global turmoil I was tempted to write a message related to the virus, but I decided to continue the study of the book of Acts according to the Scriptures. 1Peter 1:24-25 says, “*All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever*.” I pray that the God of Israel (*El Elohe Israel*), the Almighty God, may stop spread of the virus and heal many suffering and dying people around the world. Amen!

In today’s passage Paul’s second missionary journey ends and his third journey begins. During these consecutive and strenuous mission trips Paul must have been exhausted and despaired because of opposition and persecution. Today we learn how the Lord Jesus comforted Paul and encouraged him, and how Paul responded to God’s comfort and his mission.

First, in Corinth (1-17) Paul’s ministry in Athens was not easy. His message about Jesus and his resurrection received two different responses; positive and negative.(17:31-32) So, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a wonderful Jewish couple Aquila and Priscilla, who came from Rome. At that time the Roman Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome because of the revolt related to the Jews. Priscilla and Aquila were business men, tentmakers like Paul. Above all they were believers and God-fearing people. So they must have shared the word of God with Paul while they worked together. Every Sabbath Paul reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. (18:4) As you know, one of the most difficult things for men to achieve is to persuade others with the word of God, whether they are neighbors or co-workers or friends or relatives or family members, or even their children. Paul had to work six days for a living. On the Sabbath he reasoned with the Jews. It was a challenge for Paul to live as a self-supporting preacher like our missionaries. It was a lone spiritual battle for Paul.

Look at verse 5. “***When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.***” Paul left Silas and Timothy at Berea avoiding persecution (17:14), and he was waiting for them when he was in Athens. (17:16) Silas and Timothy brought Paul an encouraging report from Thessalonica and gift money from Philippi that was probably from Lydia. (1 The 3:6, 2 Cor 11:9, Php 4:14-15) Through their report Paul heard how the believers in Thessalonica were doing well despite his short visit. The gift money from Philippi eased Paul from financial burden. The reunion with Silas and Timothy became great encouragement to Paul, who devoted himself exclusively to preaching and testifying. According to KJV, Paul was pressed in the spirit, (*synecho pneuma*) testifying that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul held his two fists firm, testifying that Jesus was the Messiah. Dr. Melissa was concerned about her two Bible students in China. When she found that they were doing well and studying the Bible diligently, she was very encouraged in the same way Paul was encouraged by Silas and Timothy and their report.

What was the Jews’ response to Paul’s testimony? They opposed Paul and became abusive. Like the Jews in other cities they maligned the Way and harmed Paul. But Paul didn’t give up. He shook out his clothes in protest and warned them saying, “***Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles***.” (6) Even though Paul was rejected, he was not dejected. He was bold and confident of what he was doing. He felt sorry that they rejected the message of salvation. Paul left the synagogue and started door-to-door ministry. Then God sent Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, and Crispus, a synagogue leader, whose entire household became believers. And many of the Corinthians heard Paul’s message and were baptized. (8)

Look at verse 9. “***One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city***.” The Lord Jesus appeared to Paul in a vision to encourage him. Even though Paul was a fearless spiritual fighter and bold preacher, he was also a man. He must have been discouraged by the Jews’ hostile opposition and their unceasing persecutions. We learn Paul’s affection for his own people, the Jews, in Romans 9,10. He said that he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart. He even said that he could wish that he himself was cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his people, the people of Israel. (Ro 9:2,3) But the Jews, his own people, persecuted Paul the most in the worst manner. Paul might have doubted God’s covenant with his people while he was constantly rejected by them. Doubt and fear come when people we love and expect most from reject us.

How did Jesus encourage Paul? The Lord said, “*Do not be afraid, keep on speaking. Do not be silent. For I am with you, no one is going to attack you and harm you*, *because I have many people in this city.”* These words remind us of God’s visit to Elijah the prophet, while he was fearful and discouraged by the evil queen Jazebel, who had tried to kill him.(1Ki 19:10-18) As soon as Elijah defeated 450 Baal prophets on Mount Carmel, he was chased by Jazebel. He fled to Mt. Horeb, but soon he despaired for his life and complained to God saying, “*I have had enough, Lord. Take my life…I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too*.” (1Ki 19:4,10) But, the Lord appeared to Elijah and encouraged him saying, “*Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.*” (1Ki 19:18) God said to Elijah that he was not alone. God was with him. Our God is a God who encourages and comforts. He never leaves us alone fearful and discouraged. Later Paul recalled the God of comfort and encouragement and wrote a letter to the believers in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 he said, “*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounding through Christ*.” The Lord Jesus knew how Paul suffered for the sake of Christ in each city he visited. Jesus knew Paul’s broken heart, sorrow, and anguish for his unbelieving people. Jesus knew Paul’s physical pain, loneliness, and burden of heart. Like a loving mother Jesus visited Paul and encouraged him saying that he is with him. “Paul, you are not alone. I am with you…” Our God is the God of all comforts. He knows our weaknesses and short-comings. He knows our loneliness and brokenness. He is well aware of our present sufferings and agony. We don’t know when this deadly virus will stop. People become anxious and fearful for their safety and uncertain future. But we know that we are not alone. The Lord Jesus is with us and will deliver us. Paul said, “*On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us*.” (2 Cor 1:10) He will deliver us from our present sufferings as he did Paul. Amen!

Look at verse 11. “***So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.***” Paul obeyed the Lord and stayed in Corinth and devoted himself to teaching the word. Verses 12-17 prove the Lord’s promise to Paul that he had many of his people in that city. The Jews in Corinth united against Paul by bringing him before a proconsul named Gallio. They falsely accused Paul as a political criminal, but Gallio dismissed the case. We believe that God provided Gallio to frustrate the Jews’ evil scheme and to deliver Paul’s life. God has reserved many hidden people who served the Lord and protected his chosen people in each generation. Among them Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos were good examples.

Second, Priscilla, Aquila and Apollos (18-28) Paul stayed in Corinth for some time. Then he left for Jerusalem. On the way he dropped off Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus. After promising his return to Ephesus, Paul continued to travel to Jerusalem. But his main intent was to come back to Antioch as soon as possible. Paul’s second missionary journey ended with his return to Antioch in Syria. Paul must have been greatly welcomed by the saints in the Antioch church. But for him he had no time to relax or take easy. After spending some time in Antioch, he set out on his third missionary journey, traveling from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia. His third mission journey started. Wherever he visited, he strengthened all the disciples. (23)

Look at verses 24-26a. “***Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue.***..” Alexandria, the city where Apollos came from, was the largest commercial city in N. Africa. The city produced many great bishops and theologians such as Clement and Origen. Apollos was a great Bible teacher and an expert of the Old Testament. He taught about Jesus diligently and passionately. But he lacked something important. He knew only the baptism of John, not the baptism of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. God wanted to make Apollos perfect in the Scripture, so he sent Priscilla and Aquila to him to meet his need. When Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. (26) Here the verbs ‘accurately’ and ‘adequately’ are the same word *akribos* in Greek, which also means ‘diligently’ or ‘carefully.’ God sent Priscilla and Aquila to Apollos so that he might learn about Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Apollos was greatly encouraged by their teachings. So he went to Achaia and became a great help to those who by grace had believed. According to verse 28, Apollos vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving through the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

What is the meaning and significance of Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos’ appearing in the middle of Paul’s missionary journey? First, God comforted Paul by sending good co-workers. When Paul was alone in Corinth, the reunion of Silas and Timothy became great encouragement to Paul. Still, because Paul was struggling against the devilish Jews, God sent precious co-workers such as Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos. Apollos especially became a great defender and apologists for the gospel. As we know, God encourages us by sending good co-workers when we are in need. I was very encouraged when several missionary families came to St. Louis from Korea. I thanked God. Then God sent other families one by one, two by two to join us. In John’s gospel Jesus comforted his fearful disciples by sending their coworker, the Holy Spirit. (Jn 14:18) Jesus called the Holy Spirit ‘Another Comforter’ (*paraclete*). Second, God teaches us that the gospel of Jesus Christ continues to flow into the river of human history despite opposition and persecution. Even though Paul’s message was rejected and opposed by many Jews and gentiles, God spread the gospel to the whole of Europe from mouth to mouth and day after day through his people. People live and die, and nations rise and fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever. God’s words will never end until the last of his words should be fulfilled.

Today the whole world faces a big challenge because of the coronavirus. We don’t know how long this virus will stay on this earth and how many people will be killed by it. But one thing we know is that our God is the Almighty God and all things are under his control. Our life belongs to the God who gives us life, breath, and everything else. We believe that Jesus is the Savior and that he will deliver us from this situation. He will not leave us alone. Jesus said in John 14:1, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me*.” (Jn 14:1) Amen!