

*He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. <sup>2</sup> The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. <sup>3</sup> Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. <sup>4</sup> As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. <sup>5</sup> So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers. (Acts 16:1-5)*

### **God Keeps his Ministry Going**

When I was in high school, our congregation got a new pastor, right out of the seminary. Now, that was the second time in a row that we had gone to the seminary for a graduate, but this time, I remember that my mom reacted quite differently. She said, “He’s so young!” And she kept saying it. Now, I doubt that people say that about me any more when I come to a congregation, but my mom’s experience – and my experience here at Peace, too – illustrates a reality about the ministry that will be true until the Lord returns. Old pastors get older and eventually a younger man has to take their place. And even though our Lord promised that he is coming quickly, God also said that to him, a thousand years are like a day. The church may be doing this for a while. So God makes provisions for the ministry to continue. After all, it’s his ministry. This morning, we see a step in that process, a step that’s reflected again and again down through two thousand years of church history. Many things in our experience are different from what happened when St. Paul visited Lystra, but one thing is the same: God is working. **God keeps his ministry going.**

#### **I.**

But how does he do that? Usually, when we think of God working, we think of him doing something noticeable. We think of him doing miracles. Or in this case, we think of him tapping someone on the shoulder and saying, “I’m sending you!” Many people in the church today are looking for some kind of direct indication or call from God into the ministry. But even in the Bible, God reserved that kind of direct intervention for special cases. He always worked, but you couldn’t always see him. **God keeps his ministry going, but he works through ordinary means.**

That’s what we see this morning. St. Paul was on his second great missionary trip. He was traveling through what we today call Turkey. He was re-visiting some cities where he had planted congregations on his first journey – Lystra, Derbe and Iconium. In Lystra, a young man named Timothy came to his attention. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, tells us that the brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of Timothy and Paul wanted to take him along on the rest of his missionary journey.

That’s how Timothy became a missionary. Now, there are some references to spiritual gifts being given when he was ordained, but Jesus did not appear to Timothy in a dramatic vision and call him, like he did for St. Paul. And there’s no indication anywhere in the text that Timothy felt an “inner call” to preach. Quite the contrary: Paul recognized his gifts for ministry and he did some checking around and found that the congregations that knew him best had a very high opinion of this young man. And so Paul invited him to come along and learn to be a pastor and missionary and help in the preaching and teaching that they would do. Then they apparently had a service in which they commissioned him to serve.

But make no mistake about it: God was working. Everywhere Paul went, he appointed men to serve as pastors and teachers of the congregations he founded. And at one gathering of those men, he told them that the Lord had made them ministers. God works through ordinary means to accomplish his purposes. He almost always works that way. When you’re sick, you go to the doctor and he gives you medicine or even does surgery and you get better. But who made you better? God did – he worked through the doctor and the medicine. When you’re hungry, you go to the grocery store and spend the money that you’ve earned at your job and you buy food. But who provided for you? God worked through your job and through the economy that keeps that store open and provided the food you need to keep body and soul together. And in the same way, when churches use human means to select men for ministry, God is working. The calls that we issue are calls from God.

Generation after generation, God ensures that his ministry continues. Timothy would spend decades serving as a pastor and missionary. When Paul died, Timothy continued to proclaim the gospel that he learned

at the feet of St. Paul. It's clear from the instructions that Paul wrote to him in 1 and 2 Timothy that Timothy himself was deeply involved in preparing the next generation of men who proclaimed the gospel. From his day to ours, God has preserved the ministry. Men – and women when it's in keeping with God's Word – are trained and called to preach and teach the gospel. Now, it hasn't always happened the same way. Today, we build seminaries and colleges and organize synods to do that work. But the work itself is the Lord's.

He does that work for you and through you. Three years ago, at just about this time, your voters issued a divine call for me to come and serve as your pastor. Since that day, a lot has happened here at Peace. Some people have left. Others have come. Some people have been pleased with the ministry as I've conducted it and others have been disappointed or down right angry. Whether you've been happy with my ministry 100% of the time or not, you must recognize that God chose to send sinners to do his work, and I am certainly a sinner. Without a doubt, in many cases when people have been unhappy, it's been my sinful failure to live up to God's call that is responsible.

But all that highlights the miracle God does. He takes sinners like me, like our principal and our teachers, and he calls us to proclaim the gospel. And he works through that gospel in spite of our failings and limitations. For two thousand years, the New Testament ministry has existed in hundreds of countries, in more different situations than we can imagine – the only constants have been the sinfulness of the preachers and the hearers and the total power of the word of God. That ministry has only failed when people and preachers forgot where the power was.

God created and still preserves the ministry, because you need to hear that Jesus is your Savior. You need to hear that you are sinners who deserve nothing but death and hell, but that God sent his Son to die and rise to take that sin away. God sends out sinful, weak pastors and teachers who would never be able to convince you of that on their own. God sends men with an impossible, unbelievable, ridiculous message: you can't be good. You deserve to die and go to hell forever. But Jesus took your place. He was good. He was perfect and you get credit for his life. He died in your place and God punished him for your hard and sinful heart. Then he rose and declared that your sin is paid for and you will live with him in heaven.

From a human point of view that message is pure nonsense. No one would ever believe it because I say it with conviction. You believe it because the message itself is the power of God. The sinners that God sent out to proclaim that message can't add anything to it, but we can do a wonderful job of offending people and interfering with the work God has sent us to do. Our sinful failings underline that it's all a miracle of God. You don't believe because of me or because of our teachers. You believe because the Holy Spirit comes to you in the gospel and he seizes your heart and plants faith there.

## II.

God loves you. So he stands behind the ministry that he has created and he works through that ministry. But he doesn't just take anybody and make them a pastor or a teacher. He carefully prepares the men and women who will serve him. **God keeps his ministry going. He prepares the men his church needs.**

In the epistle lesson for today, we learn a little about Timothy's life before he was a missionary. Timothy's father was a Greek and an unbeliever. But he married a Jewish girl named Eunice. That Jewish girl's mother, Lois, was a believer. Lois taught her daughter the gospel and Eunice made sure that her son Timothy knew the true God, even though his father did not believe. How many times doesn't that still happen in our churches today? Now, there were some differences. Since Paul says that Timothy knew the scriptures from infancy – before Paul himself came to Lystra – Lois and Eunice were most likely Old Testament believers. They believed the promise of a coming Savior. But somewhere along the line these two ladies heard the good news that God had kept his promises and Jesus had come. And they and Timothy joined the congregation in Lystra.

Before he ever began to preach, God gave Timothy faith. And Timothy led a life of faith. That's very important, because a Christian life is one of the basic requirements for the ministry. Years later, when Timothy was preparing and appointing men to serve in the ministry in Ephesus, St. Paul would point out that the candidates needed to have good reputations and he would give him a long list of requirements that all come down to one basic idea: they must live their faith. God prepares men and women to serve by making them believers with active Christian lives before they ever receive a call.

But that's not enough. All ministers need to be trained to serve. There was no seminary for Timothy to attend. St. Paul was his seminary. Timothy listened while Paul preached and taught. You can be sure that in

between cities, they studied and discussed the Scriptures together. Paul continued to instruct him right up until the end of his own life. 2 Timothy was written not long before Paul died and contains his final instructions for leading the Christian church. God still works through the ministers of one generation to train pastors and teachers of the next generation to take on the awesome responsibility of proclaiming his Word.

Why does all that matter? Luke says, **“So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.”** When the gospel is preached, faith is strengthened and often, churches grow in numbers. Every congregation needs to grow in faith. Why? Because we’re sinners who live in a sinful world. And it’s so easy for us to slip into worldly thinking. That always leads us away from God.

Every day of our lives, the unbeliever that we were born with tries to confuse our understanding of the gospel. He believes that he’s basically a good person. And when he does sin, he thinks it’s not such a big deal. He thinks that God will forgive him if he tries to be a better person. Think about that statement for just a moment. Does God forgive us if we try to be better people? That makes sense in the world in which we live. If your children are disrespectful and they get in trouble over it, they may try extra hard for a day or two to be respectful to you so that you stop being mad at them. And when you see their effort, you may very well decide to let it go. So, you forgave them because you saw them make a real effort to change. But that’s not how God works. God does not forgive us because we’re trying to be better. That would mean that we earn forgiveness. We simply can’t earn our forgiveness because to do that, we would have to be perfect. God forgives us because Jesus died and paid for our sins and we trust in what he has done.

It is sin and weakness that falls back into thinking that God forgives us when we try harder. Left to ourselves, our faith would collapse and we would sink into thinking just like the rest of the world does because sinners cannot do any better than that. But God is greater than the sin in our hearts. He sent his Son, Jesus, to die and rise and take all our sin away. Jesus alone had a perfect faith and Jesus paid for all that’s wrong with our faith. And every time we hear that, God shores up our faith. God gives us new strength to stand under all the efforts of our own sinful flesh to confuse the issue. And to make sure we hear that gospel, God established the holy ministry. Now, it looks different in different times and in different places. But the heart is always the same: proclaiming Christ crucified and risen for us. From the time that Paul began to train Timothy right down to today, God has made sure that the gospel ministry continued.

And when church bodies become unfaithful and their seminaries corrupt, God always provides new schools, new efforts, new ways to bring his men and women into the ministry. And he always will. God promises us that the gospel will be preached until the Lord returns. God promises us that there will always be faithful preachers and teachers of the gospel to serve his people. So God will continue to strengthen the faith of his people until our Lord returns. That’s his promise to you and to me. Trust in it. Trust that God will never stop reaching out to you to keep you on the path to eternal life. Trust in Jesus. Amen.