

God Works Through... Ramblers
God Works Through... Series #1
July 1, 2018
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Acts 4: 32-37](#)
[Acts 11: 19-26](#)
[Acts 15: 32-41](#)

When you think of ramblers, what immediately comes to mind? For me, it's the huge number of songs about ramblin' men, including the famous "I'm a ramblin' wreck from Georgia Tech and a [heck] of a engineer..." It also seems to be associated with drinking songs these days. Well, the rambler we're going to talk about today is none of those things, but instead a man who left his island home and found a new calling as a sharer of the Good News of Jesus Christ. A rambling evangelist.

His name was Ioses, a Greek form of Joseph, and he was a Levite who came from Cyprus, the Isle of Copper. Cyprus was a major seaport in those days – trading ships from all over the Mediterranean would stop at its ports to restock on supplies and trade news and goods with the other captains. Now, though we don't know much about Ioses before he first appears in Acts 4, there are [some traditions](#) that say that he was a Pharisaic disciple in Jerusalem who became a part of the larger 70 apostles mentioned at the beginning of Acts. In any case, he was an early follower of Jesus, and earned the nickname *Bar Nechma*, or "Son of Encouragement [or Consolation]" in Aramaic. In Greek, this name becomes Barnabas, and throughout the rest of Acts and Paul's letters, that's how he's named.

Now, Barnabas is known as "The Encourager" – and his first act is to sell his land and present the money to the disciples, presumably to be used in supporting the early church. That he owned land suggests that he was rather well-off, and presumably had lived in Jerusalem long enough to purchase the land in the first place, despite being from Cyprus. His example of selling his land stands in contrast to the story that immediately follows, of Ananais and Sapphira, who sell their land, and offer only half of the proceeds to the fledgling

church, while asking for recognition. Barnabas, in contrast, sells it, donates the proceeds, and thereafter takes a humble backseat to the Twelve. You could say that he rambles off into the background for a little while.

But Barnabas' story comes back into focus a few chapters – and years – later. After the martyrdom of Stephen, many apostles left Jerusalem and spread through the Roman world, reaching Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. Though these early evangelists left their home because they feared for their lives, they spread the good news in the synagogues wherever they ended up. To give you an idea of the timeframe here, their converts in Cyprus made their way to Antioch, and saw that the Jews there were already being taught about Jesus – so they decided to take a radical step and start preaching to Gentiles directly. At this point in the story, Peter had already accepted the gentile Cornelius as a Christian convert, but Cornelius sought him out. Now, for the first time, followers of Jesus' Way were seeking out Gentiles as well as Jews.

When those in Jerusalem heard what was happening up in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to figure out what was up and make sure everything was ok. From this, we can figure out that Barnabas was well-respected, and that the Jerusalem church was pretty savvy – sending their Cypriot apostle to see what other Cypriots had been up to. Also, Barnabas had impressed the Jerusalem church by his support of Paul after his conversion, who was approved to preach and teach based primarily on Barnabas' support. So, Barnabas travels up to Antioch, and finds that these new gentile converts are sincere in their baptismal vows, and that God's grace covered even them.

Now, Antioch has a bit of a reputation in the ancient world. It was a center of gambling and cultic prostitution, of worldiness and trade – and was the third biggest city after Rome and Alexandria. Think of it like 1920s Chicago and 1960s Las Vegas mixed together. This is where Gentiles were first preached to, first considered as worthy as Jews to be sought out for mission and teaching. And it's also where this mix of Jews and Gentiles who all followed the Way of Christ got their name – *Christiani*. Though it was intended as a derisive dismissal – “little messiahs” – it followed that the newly-Christened Christians took the name and claimed it as an encouragement. Perhaps Barnabas himself

realized the potential in the name – “have you lived up to being a little Christ today?”

In any case, Antioch was too big of a city for Barnabas to teach everyone by himself. But he remembered Paul, and traveled to Tarsus to get him personally. Together, then, the two of them spent a year preaching and teaching to Jews and Gentiles alike, while the church supported them and their ministry. After that year, they returned to Jerusalem with money raised for the feeding of the poor of Jerusalem, which was in the midst of a famine. When they returned to Antioch, they brought with them John Mark, a very young man whose mother’s house seemed to be the center of the Christian church in Jerusalem. It is this John Mark that is the traditional author of the Gospel of Mark – but that’s far into the future.

At this point, Barnabas and Paul are commissioned by the church in Antioch to go and spread the good news around the ancient world. It’s fascinating that the laying-on-of-hands takes place in Antioch and not in the Jerusalem church, presumably still the center of the Christian church at this time. In any case, they drag John Mark along with them, and head back to Barnabas’ home island of Cyprus.

I don’t know whether Barnabas had been homesick, or wanted to see how things had changed at home in all the years that he had been away, but after landing in Salamis and meeting with the followers of Jesus there, the three rambling evangelists worked their way to the capital city of Paphos, where the Roman Governor had his palace. Paphos was famous for being a major center of worship of the goddess Venus. For Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark to head there suggests just how seriously they took God’s protection. They could almost be assured of persecution from both the pagan religious leaders and Roman governmental authority – but they believed so strongly in the Way of Jesus that they still headed into the most difficult part of the island. There, they confronted a Jewish sorcerer in the presence of the Roman governor, and when the sorcerer was miraculously struck blind for a season by Paul’s condemnation, governor Sergius Paulus chose to follow Jesus, becoming the first ruler to convert to Christianity.

This is when Luke stops referring to Paul as Saul, and starts referring to him as Paul – and also when John Mark leaves Barnabas and Paul to head back to Jerusalem for a while. Barnabas and Paul go on to Pamphylia, Perga, Antioch Disidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe – all towns and cities within the Roman province of Galatia. Some of the towns listened to their message, while others chased them out, but Barnabas and Paul continued, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ – that God’s grace and love had overcome sin and death, and that forgiveness was available to everyone who followed Jesus’ way. It’s to these communities that Paul’s letter to the Galatians will be written, sometime later in this journey. It’s important to note that they went back to these towns several times, and appointed elders to lead the local churches, even in the towns where they had originally been chased out. Eventually, they call the journey complete, and return to minister in Antioch for a time.

You see, the rambling evangelists believe in God’s saving power. Barnabas is humble enough to let Paul take the lead, and even seems to be shepherding him in the travels. Through them, Antioch, Cyprus, and Galatia become bastions of Christianity, filled with people led by the Holy Spirit and doing their best to live into the name “little messiah” that the pagans gave them.

Sadly, they were not to last as a missionary team. In our last mention of Barnabas in Acts, we learn that Paul and Barnabas wanted to return to the churches they had started. Barnabas wanted to bring John Mark along again, but Paul felt like John Mark had abandoned them before heading into Galatia, and was set against it. Over this disagreement, they went their separate ways, with Paul and Silas heading into Syria and Galatia, while Barnabas and John Mark headed back to Cyprus. Paul and Silas become the focus of the rest of Acts, while Barnabas and John Mark disappear.

Yet, though Luke follows Paul more closely, it’s clear that he liked Barnabas, and raised him up as an example. He described Barnabas as a “good man, full of the Holy Spirit and Faith” in chapter 11 – and had previously described Joseph of Arimathea and Tabitha as good people. It is clear that through Barnabas, the early church spread far and wide. As Robin Gallaher Branch [writes](#), “Perhaps the character traits of Barnabas – his goodness, faith,

big heartedness, courage, generosity, humbleness, self-sacrifice, open-mindedness, boldness, and the fact that the was full of the Holy Spirit – were also stamped on other believers. If so, Luke’s praise marking this early church leader also applies to the early church.”

May it be so with you, too, as a “little messiah.” May you follow in the Way of Jesus, offering encouragement to the downhearted, and good news to the outsider. May you be filled with the Holy Spirit, going boldly where God leads you. And may God’s protective love surround you, keep you healthy enough and humble enough to fulfill God’s call in your life. Amen.