

June 24, 2018

Church Planting

*What a Coincidence!*

Acts 23:12-24

**Opening words:** Today, I continue my sermon series, *Church Planting*. This is message number fifty-seven. You remember my task; I am preaching through the Book of Acts. Never forget it: Acts is the witness of the Holy Spirit and I am attempting to reconnect with the Holy Spirit, because we need a revival. Without the Holy Spirit, the church has no future, but with the Holy Spirit the future is bright.

We find ourselves once again in the twenty-third chapter of Acts. Things have not been going well for Paul. He is in Jerusalem, where God had been moving among the Jewish population. Reluctant to give up their old ways, the new Jewish-Christians turn on Paul because they believe he has dismissed the law. You remember the story. A great riot breaks out and Paul is arrested for his own security. Then, he is turned over to his own people and is interrogated by the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin. He divides the assembly by promoting the resurrection of Jesus. Once again, he is arrested for his own security. That brings us to today's story. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 23:12-24. I have called this message *What a Coincidence!*

**Acts 23:12-24** The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. <sup>13</sup> More than forty men were involved in this plot. <sup>14</sup> They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. <sup>15</sup> Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here."

<sup>16</sup> But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

<sup>17</sup> Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." <sup>18</sup> So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

<sup>19</sup> The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?"

<sup>20</sup> He said: "Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. <sup>21</sup> Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request."

<sup>22</sup> The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."

<sup>23</sup> Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. <sup>24</sup> Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix."

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Two of the greatest names in American history are Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. They served as the second and third Presidents of the United States, but they did so much more. For example, both men worked on the Declaration of Independence. At first, Jefferson and Adams were close friends, but differing political views ended their friendship for many years. Yet, in the end, they shared a common fate. Both died on the fiftieth anniversary of our nation's independence, July 4, 1826. Jefferson was at his home, Monticello, in Virginia. Adams was at his home, Peacefield, in Quincy, Massachusetts. I only have one thing to say: What a coincidence!

On April 15, 1865, John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln at Washington DC's Ford Theater. That is common knowledge. What is not so well known is that John Wilkes Booth's brother, Edwin, also a famous actor and supporter of the Union, saved Lincoln's son Robert several months earlier. It happened at the train station in Jersey City, New Jersey. Robert had fallen onto the train tracks as a train neared. Edwin pulled him to safety at just the last moment. The Booth brothers both saved and killed a Lincoln. I only have one thing to say: What a coincidence!

In the summer of 1861, Wilmer McLean and his family were living on a plantation near Manassas Junction, Virginia. On July 21, Union forces and Confederate forces clashed for the first time on McLean's front lawn. Historians call it the Battle of Bull Run. McLean tried to escape the war, so he moved his family 120 miles south to a place called Appomattox Court House, in 1863. The plan to escape the war failed. It was in his parlor in Appomattox Court House that Robert E. Lee and U.S. Grant met to discuss the terms of peace to end the Civil War. Wilmer McLean holds a special footnote in history. The Civil War began in his front yard and ended in his parlor. I only have one thing to say: What a coincidence!

Webster defines a coincidence as, *a remarkable concurrence of events without apparent causal connection*. Those of us of faith believe there is no such thing as a coincidence. Everything is God directed. That was how Albert Einstein felt. He once said, "*Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous.*" I have used that quote, or a version of that quote, several thousand times in my life. I may have quoted it to you. If you believe a coincidence is more than a coincidence, say, "**Amen!**" At the very heart of this morning's scripture lesson is a coincidence. Let us look at it together.

Once again, we find ourselves in the twenty-third chapter of Acts. And, once again, Paul finds himself in the barracks for his own protection. The whole world seems to be against him. The people are not just annoyed with Paul. They hated Paul. Some hated Paul so much they planned to kill him. According to the text, more than forty were

involved in the plot. The text tells us each one had taken an oath to demonstrate their commitment to rid themselves of Paul for good. The plan was straightforward and easy to understand. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, was to summon Paul for more questioning. Paul would be executed upon his arrival. Paul was all but dead. However, the killing never happened because of a little coincidence. One of the few outsiders to be informed of the plan happened to be Paul's sister's son. That makes the informant Paul's nephew. The boy doesn't just sit on the information, he goes to his Uncle Paul, who had the boy tell the jailor of the plan. The jailor tells his commander of the plan, who sent Paul to Governor Felix, in Caesarea. In the end, Paul lives another day. What are the chances that one of the few who knew of this plan to kill Paul, outside of the forty, happened to be Paul's own nephew? Without that little coincidence, Paul would have died, and the Gospel would never have been preached in Rome. I only have one thing to say: What a coincidence! I guess we should not be surprised. God has always used what we call coincidences, for his good. Let me give you just a few Biblical examples.

Do you remember the story of Queen Esther? She was married to the King of Persia, Xerxes. He was infatuated with her beauty, but he never inquired about her ancestry. Very few knew she was a Jew. It didn't seem like a big deal, until the day the king's assistant ordered all the Jews to be killed. Esther shows us her beauty is more than skin deep. Risking everything, she goes to the king and pleads for her own people. The queen just happened to be Jewish, so God's Chosen people could be saved. There is only one thing to say: What a coincidence!

Do you remember the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet? God told him to go to Nineveh. The truth be told, Jonah didn't care for the Ninevites, so he gets on a ship and sails for Tarshish. If you get your map out, then you will discover Nineveh was in the Middle East and Tarshish was in present-day Spain. Jonah forgot what you know, you can't run from God. God grabs Jonah's attention by sending a great storm. Jonah's ship is in distress and everyone on board fears for their lives. They draw lots to find the guilty party and the lot falls on Jonah. The prophet is thrown into the sea and is saved. Do you remember what saved Jonah? It wasn't a whale, it was a great fish. Over six hundred years later, Jesus was born, and a new faith was born thirty-three years later. That faith was Christianity, which was created to save the lost. The symbol of that saving faith just happened to be the same thing that saved Jonah, a fish. I only have one thing to say: What a coincidence!

Do you remember the story of the Ethiopian? (Acts 8) The story starts out innocently enough. Philip is traveling down the road to Gaza and comes upon an Ethiopian eunuch. He had just been to Jerusalem to worship, but he is still confused. You really can't blame him. He had a confusing life. He had a big-time job filled with both responsibility and money. He was highly respected, but no one would have traded places with him. There was only one problem. He had been sexually altered, which brings up issues I am not going to discuss. How much money would you have to make to be sexually altered?

When Philip sees this confused man, he runs up to his chariot. The Ethiopian is reading the sacred text. It just happened to be the suffering servant passage, Isaiah 53. Those are prophetic words. It's all about Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. He is reading the words, but he doesn't understand the words. Have you ever read the Bible, but you didn't understand what you were reading? Philip offered to help the Ethiopian understand. In the end, the Ethiopian is baptized, and his soul is saved. It is quite a story. Philip just happened to be at the right place at the right time. I only have one thing to say: What a coincidence!

The Bible is filled with coincidence stories. We love those stories of coincidence because God's fingerprints cover each one. We love those stories because they remind us that God is active. We love those stories because they remind us that God is in charge, directing both world history and our individual lives. However, this is the Good News for today: God still uses coincidences in our time. How many coincidences have influenced your life? I know it is true because it has happened to me.

It must have been in the Spring of 1986. My seminary days were nearing an end. I was looking for a job. Owing a large amount of money in student loans, it was important to get a job. The problem was, no one wanted me. My only option was serving a tiny church in the West Ohio Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church near Cincinnati. There is nothing wrong with West Ohio or the Cincinnati area, but it wasn't home. I wanted to come back to Northeast Ohio. With the clock ticking on my student loans, I decided to accept that church near Cincinnati. I was going to call the District Superintendent in that area later that day. I remember praying, "I just want to go home".

With that job on my mind, I jumped into my car to get to school. It was a cold damp spring day in Kentucky. I was running behind and forgot my text book. For a second, I thought about leaving my book behind, but then I had second thoughts. I jumped out of my car and ran inside. Just as I grabbed my book, the phone started to ring. I thought about not answering the phone, because I was running behind. But, I had second thoughts about that too. It may have been a church person in need. When I picked up the phone, it was Abraham Brandyberry. He was the District Superintendent of the old St. Clairsville District in East Ohio. I had met him several months earlier, when he had visited the seminary. He said, "Russ, I only have one appointment left to fill. I will be honest with you. They are three ugly little churches, and I thought about you. I need an answer right now, because someone else is interested. Are you interested?" With no time to think or pray, I said, "Yes!" I have never regretted that answer. I pastored those three "ugly" churches for several years. I have nothing negative to say about those three churches. The people of Morristown, Lloydsville and Bannock United Methodist Churches were good to me, at a time when I needed kindness. I only tell that story to set up this question:

How would my life have changed if I hadn't forgotten my book that day? If I had not forgotten my book, then I would have missed the phone call from Abraham Brandyberry. If I had missed that phone call, I would have moved to the Cincinnati area and served in the West Ohio Annual Conference. If I would have served in West Ohio, I never would have met my wife, Kathryn. If I had never met my wife, then my daughter, Anna, would have never been born. If I had served in West Ohio, I never would have been appointed to the Morristown Charge or the Hathaway United Methodist Church. If I had not forgotten my book that day, I never would have been appointed to this church and I never would have met you. If I have done anything positive for you personally or anything positive for this church, it is all because I forgot my book in the Spring of 1986. I only have one thing to say: What a coincidence! Now, you tell me.

Was forgetting my book on that day just a coincidence, or was it God? How many coincidences have changed your life? My challenge for you today is to tell your coincidence stories. It is part of your testimony, and a reminder that God is still active in our world. Do you remember the quote from Albert Einstein? He once said, "*Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous.*" And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**