When Bad Things Happen to Good News

I recently preached a sermon on the 14th chapter of Acts. In this passage we read of Paul and Barnabas preaching the “good news,” followed by being run out of town and a near-death stoning (we don’t see that that much anymore in our part of Virginia, thank goodness). And I wondered, if the news about Jesus is so good, why do so many bad things happen when it is proclaimed? If you were about to deliver good news to me, I would expect it to be, well, good. Not something for which I would want to kill you. Sure, we have our stock theological platitudes as to why this happens, but seriously, if the news is really that good, and if it’s coming from God for crying out loud, why all the bad reaction? I just don’t get it.

In the middle of this ancient story in the town of Lystra, Paul heals a man born lame—a good thing it seems to me. Immediately the people who witnessed it thought Paul and Barnabas were the gods Hermes and Zeus, respectively, and decided to bring animals to sacrifice in their honor. And no wonder. The legend of Lystra held that once Zeus and Hermes, disguised as beggars, had come down and visited its residents. No one helped them except an old married couple. After leaving the couple’s home, the gods revealed themselves and destroyed the rest of the town. All were killed except the old couple. When Paul healed the crippled man, the townspeople of Lystra were not about to make the same mistake twice. That is because they believed they served gods who were to be feared and placated, not loved and trusted. And to deal with their fear, they constructed belief systems and religious practices—like sacrificing bulls—to help them cope with the “reality” that with god, you just aren’t safe.

But Paul was having none of it. He protested, telling the people that the real God was one to be loved, not feared. Not long after this, other people arrived on the scene who didn’t much like the way Barnabas and Paul were offering people a way out of their fear. They stirred up people, convincing them that these two preachers were not to be trusted. That’s when all the stones started flying. What’s up with that? Why the bad reaction to the good news?

As it turns out, we aren’t that much different from the ancients. We create all sorts of strategies to cope with our fears. Fears that surround the worship of the gods we have constructed, mostly in our own minds. Work. Status. Identity. Sex. Consumerism. Theology. Family. Appearance. You name them, we have our own versions of Zeus and Hermes. Things in which at first glance it seems we have placed our trust but in reality we actually fear. Fear that they will fail or disappoint us, or more likely that they will exploit and destroy us should we not work hard enough for their pleasure. So we labor valiantly to maintain all of them, sacrificing to them daily. For, in our fear, if we do not serve them, they will punish us. And punish us they do.

But what if God turns out to be one who is far more interested in relating than being feared? If he is that serious, it is likely that he will just keep coming, intent on dismantling the latticework of our fear. In fact, when Jesus brings the light—he himself—he fully expects it to shine in the darkest places, for surely that is where the light is needed most.

But as Lesslie Newbigin has said, wherever light shines, it necessarily casts shadows. And those shadows represent the dark parts of me—the parts of me that are afraid—in which I am saying “No!” to Jesus. For me, persecuting Jesus doesn’t begin with what others do to me on the outside of my skin, but rather what I do with him on the inside of my skin. For my fear carries strong memory. Memory that reminds me that at some point in the far reaches of my story (or perhaps not so far), to be known, to be vulnerable, to allow light to come into a dark place is not safe. Some relationship, be that in my family or church or friends or school, reminds me that the closeness of intimacy—light—can be fraught with danger. So when Jesus gets too close—when the good news comes—it’s not too hard for me to pick up stones, just to keep him honest. And now I think I’m beginning to get it.

Across what part of your life is fear casting its shadow? The good news is that Jesus—willing to risk being stoned—even crucified—isn’t afraid of your fear. Chances are, if you’re willing to put down your rock, healing is less than a stone’s throw away.