

The book is titled “The Acts of the Apostles” and we know the stories of Peter and Paul and Barnabas, famous disciples of Jesus.

This sermon series is from the stories of what I call the acts of some little-known disciples.

First, Matthias, the disciple who replaced Judas; last week, the Philippian Jailer. And today, the last in the series is the story of Mnason, and that is how you spell his name, an early disciple.

(Read Acts 21:7-16)

The Living Bible calls him “an old disciple.” The New English Bible describes him as one “who has been a believer since the early days of [Christianity].”

William Barclay, the great New Testament scholar, calls him “an original disciple.”

The message is clear - Mnason is an old-timer; he’s been around for a long time - but the fact is for us, he’s a little-known disciple.

We do know some things about him: He lives near Jerusalem, but he came from Cyprus. Cyprus was the home of Barnabas, the great encourager of the New Testament missionaries and an early partner with Paul.

Perhaps Barnabas and Mnason were friends; maybe that’s how he had met Paul.

Undoubtedly, he was one of the early nucleus of believers, and here, nearly thirty years later, he’s still around and involved.

He provides hospitality for Paul and Luke. And you have to understand, Paul was a controversial figure.

The word was that he was going to be arrested when he got to Jerusalem - so it took a special person to have Paul as a house-guest.

There’s something to be said for those who have been around a long time - and, no, I’m not looking at anyone in particular right now!

But Mnason - an early disciple, one of the early believers, had kept the faith all these years, and I think there are a couple of lessons to be learned from this little-known disciple.

The first is simply this - Faith has to have a beginning. Faith has to have a beginning.

William Barclay clearly suggests that Mnason had been part of the church before Pentecost and in the upper room when Matthias was chosen as the disciple to replace Judas.

You wonder how he was drawn to Jesus. Did Mnason hear Jesus preach one day, and his words had the ring of truth that penetrated Mnason’s heart?

Perhaps Mnason saw Jesus touch a blind man who then leaped with joy at seeing the trees, the clouds, the people, this man who healed him.

Maybe Mnason had followed at a distance for many days - several weeks - and the weeks grew into months and then one day he realized there was growing, inner impulse to know Jesus better, to accept all that he offered, and he believed - he became an early disciple.

This brief reference to this little-known disciple reminds us that faith has to start somewhere. A commitment has to be made.

Your family and your upbringing may include religious examples and habits of faith, but one day you have to embrace it yourself.

It comes down to each one of us, at some point in our life, saying, “Yes, I believe!”

And then you enter your journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

How many times have I heard someone make this excuse: “My parents insisted that I go to church, and now I don’t want any part of it.”

And I want to say, and sometimes have, “When are you going to grow up? The essence of maturity, spiritual or otherwise, is taking responsibility for yourself!”

The step we are all invited to take is the beginning of the journey of faith, by saying, “Lord, I believe!”

The other thing we can learn from Mnason is that faith grows, faith lives on. Yes, faith has a beginning, but faith doesn’t end with us; just as it didn’t end with Mnason.

Life itself is characterized by growth - let me put it this way: if you’re not growing older, you’re not living!

So if our faith is to be a living faith, we must be open to the truth of God as we move through the idealism of youth, the muddle that is middle age, and through the sunset of old age.

Faith is ongoing - we never fully or completely arrive. We are always growing into our faith.

Listen again to what Paul wrote to the Philippians about his own faith: “...I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ...”

I wonder if that’s what Paul and Luke and Mnason talked about, prayed about that night in Mnason’s house.

The candles flickering as they talked long in the night - did they look back, to when Paul first believed, how Barnabas was there for Paul at the beginning of his faith; and now it’s come to this.

Decisions between difficult choices are always agonizing. How do you break the stalemate and move forward?

In the midst of difficult decisions, when the way forward is not easy, it’s always good to have someone to talk with, to pray with.

Could this be why Luke included this story and mentioned by name this little-known disciple?

In the hospitality of this early disciple, in this act of a little-known disciple, could Mnason have offered Paul an encouraging word that sent him off to Jerusalem with a renewed faith, a strengthened faith, a faith that would carry Paul as he pressed on and lived out his final days?

Like Paul and Mnason, we live and serve in the tension between what has been and what will be, decisions to be made between difficult choices, and this life in the meantime calls for discernment, perseverance, and courage.

Meantime also refers to the climate in which we live and breathe: It’s a mean time.

The tone of public debate and speech has become coarse and vulgar, and verbal violence is increasing.

Complex issues are reduced to Facebook memes or tweet-sized slogans aimed at the single goal of winning an argument.

Living the faith in this environment becomes a dangerous and controversial journey as we ask how we can serve God’s dreams for the church and the world.

What this story shows is how important it is to discuss hard things and difficult choices in settings that allow people to speak and listen with the simple but crucial goal of mutual understanding and support.

Mnason was finding a way to express his faith as a disciple of Jesus as he encouraged Paul to meet the challenges awaiting him.

I believe Mnason shows us the value of generosity, especially when expressing gratitude and demonstrating support for a troubled friend.

They prayed, trusting that God's Spirit was creatively at work and would bring life out of the chaos of the meantime and mean times.

There's a wonderful story of a young boy at a high school track meet. He came to the line for the 1600 meters race, long distance.

There was a possibility that one of the runners was going to break the state record in this race.

The gun sounded, they were off, and yes, the favorite did break the record!

The officials began to set up hurdles for the next race, but then someone noticed this boy still running, coming in to the finish line, gasping for breath as he struggled around the last turn.

When he fell across the finish line, someone asked, "Son, why didn't you just quit? You were so far behind."

"Well," he said, "the guy who runs the race was sick today, and the coach wanted a runner in every race, and I'm a shot-putter, but I volunteered."

"But you could have hurt yourself," the official told him, "You could have stopped."

Listen to his answer, "Mister, they didn't send me here to win or to quit; they sent me here to run the race and I ran it."

That's the spirit Christ is looking for in his disciples, and I think he found it in Mnason, an early disciple.

That's the spirit God requires in this church as you move into the future with a living faith.

The question each of us must ask ourselves today is: what kind of conversations are we having that focus on God's call to you and me?

What conversations are we having that lead us into the next steps of living our faith, inspiring us as disciples of Jesus Christ?

Like Mnason we, too, are called to a life of generous hospitality and courageous encouragement as we enter the story of the Acts of the Apostles.

Not the Systematic Theology of the Apostles, not the Book of Order of the Apostles, not the Policy Manual of the Apostles, not the "This is how we've always done it" Apostles.

No, simply "The Acts of the Apostles": spirit born, spirit driven, spirit led, going, doing, talking, showing, teaching, healing, helping, praying, sharing.

And what an adventure it is, to cast our lot with God's only Son as the church lives the gospel into the world.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.