

It's been a fun few weeks for our congregation's expectant mothers. We've got two new kids and four new parents! Adam and Ashton and their son, Declan as well as Aaron and Alyson and their Rowan. It's great timing for today's sermon, which is related to bearing children and how safe it is now compared to the first century.

Today childbirth is remarkably safer. In 2017 99.6% of livebirths in Canada survived their births. In other words, there was only a .4% chance a child wouldn't survive their birth in Canada. Maternal mortality rates, as of 2013, was 0.01%. Canadian mothers have a 99.99% of surviving childbirth. That's amazing... AND those numbers are rightly considered unacceptably low. But they desensitize us to the dangers of ancient childbirth.

In the ancient world... the first century Mediterranean world in which the book of Acts was written, childbirth was the number one killer of all humans. What a cruel irony. It was the most dangerous aspect of life, and the #1 killer of women. According to historian Sandra Glahn, to whom I'm indebted for today's sermon, the infant mortality rate in the ancient Mediterranean world was 50%... 5 – 0. 1 out of every 2 babies born died in childbirth. Maternal mortality rate was an equally staggering 20%. If we do the math, we quickly realize a cold equation... in order to simply maintain population levels, replacing two parents with two children requires more than 2 deliveries. Mothers had a 1 in 5 chance of surviving every pregnancy... and they might have to risk four of them to just maintain a healthy society.

Can you imagine!?

What would you do in the face of such powerlessness? You'd turn to the gods for help. The gods would be your only hope, what else could you do? You'd turn to one god in particular... the goddess in charge of childbirth... naturally. Her name was Artemis. Her temple rest in the 2nd most important city in the whole Roman Empire... Ephesus. Artemis and Ephesus were the center of the ancient religious world, so it's appropriate that she be at the center of today's passage.

Our passage this morning focuses on Artemis and the city of Ephesus. It's nearly impossible to focus on one and not the other in the ancient world. Which is important to remember because the Bible talks to or about Ephesus A LOT.

More verses are written to or about Ephesus than any other city in the Bible except for Jerusalem. It's the city at the center of three of Paul's letters: Ephesians, and 1st and 2nd Timothy. Ephesus is the first city mentioned in Revelation 1 and 2, and here in Acts 19 we get more time and insight into the Ephesian context than any other. In fact, Paul's time in Ephesus gets more attention in Acts than any segment of Paul's life... and there... at the center of the action is Artemis.

Artemis seems to have been worshipped in Ephesus in one form or another for at least 1000 years prior to Acts. She was still the central deity to the city for at least another 300 years after as well. Shrines to Artemis are found all throughout the ancient near east. In fact, her statues, idols, and image is found in more varied locations than any other ancient god, except for Zeus. Of course she's popular.

She's the reason you, and everyone you know survived childbirth. Artemis was immensely powerful, but also obviously extremely fickle and easily offended. How else can we explain 50% infant mortality and 20% maternal mortality other than Artemis being distracted or angry? Some of the most painful ancient writings we have are of grief-stricken husbands and fathers crying over the death of their loved ones and asking forgiveness and explanation from Artemis.

On top of that, Artemesian theology elevated the virginal, chaste, and undomesticated woman... like Artemis herself. This virginal, undomesticated female was both the pinnacle of creation and the origin of humanity. Her priestesses were recognizable by their dress and hairstyles. Rich, expensive purple gowns... long braided hair.

It shouldn't be surprising for Paul to say to Timothy in 1st Timothy 2 that Christian women in Ephesus shouldn't braid their hair or wear fine pearls, gold, or expensive clothes. He goes further to reinforce the origin story from Genesis, prohibit women from dominating men, and reassures Christian women that they will be kept "safe" (i.e. saved) through childbirth. The whole passage has Artemis in the background... and we'd be doing poor biblical study not to keep Artemis in mind when we read these kinds of passages to Ephesus. But the way, it's worth noting that if we take Paul at his word in 2 Timothy 4, then Luke, the same author of today's passage is actually the scribe who writes 1st and 2nd Timothy. In other words, Luke KNOWS Ephesus... and Luke knows Artemis.

For our passage today, it's important to remember just how influential and central Artemis was to the Ephesians and what Luke – the author of Acts, might hope we take from the story. People had a responsibility to contribute to their communities, but also keep Artemis happy. Perhaps you'd pay a tribute tax to her Temple in Ephesus, or make a pilgrimage and worship at her temple in Ephesus. Maybe you'd swear oaths or devote children... but the one thing you'd be sure to do is pay homage at her local shrine in your city. Maybe you can't move to Ephesus but you can bring an Artemis idol to your city.

Artemis was the center of the religious world, Ephesus was her capital, and silversmiths like Demetrius made a reasonable living making sure that the world was supplied with Artemis' idols and images. It's what made the world go-round and supplied the next generation.

So when Paul and the "monotheists" start growing in numbers, it doesn't just put Demetrius and his fellow silversmiths in economic jeopardy. It put Ephesus and the whole world in jeopardy. Paul and these Christ-followers are playing with the very foundations of the family structure and the safety of the planet. They may offend Artemis!

Worse yet, what if Artemis is so offended she abandons us, our kids, or all women? What if she abandons everyone? Artemis is fickle enough she could leave the temple, leave the city... leave the world... Paul's Christians are risking global catastrophe!

Great is Artemis of the Ephesians... it's not just a rousing of economically affected silversmiths, it's not hard to initiate a riot in Ephesus if Artemis is threatened. If Artemis is threatened all of Ephesus is too.

So that's a little bit of the background to this passage. Artemis is a much more powerful, influential, and feared deity than we realize making Ephesus a far more important city than we think. But why include the story in Acts?

At the end of the account, Paul hasn't really done anything... in fact, that's all Paul does is nothing. By the way, this is the longest single story in Acts and it doesn't include Paul hardly at all. It doesn't seem like the Spirit moves in any particularly notable way. The two Christians seem to escape unharmed, which is great, but aside from being whisked away by the crowd we don't get much sense of their danger.

The whole story seems much more focused on the confusion, upheaval, and disharmony in Ephesus caused by the Christians. It's weird. By the end of the story no one has converted, no one has been martyred, no one has

been particularly effective except for the city clerk who dismisses the crowd. Not a single demon is cast out, or disease healed... not a single magic book is burned... what happens?

It's the longest single account in Acts and it seems like it could be summed up in: The Christians riled up the Artemesians, it almost got bad and then it didn't, and then everyone went home. So why does Luke spend so much space on a story that features so prominently yet seemingly accomplishes so little.

But then again... maybe we think it accomplishes little because we forget what Artemis was all about. Luke is likely writing Acts at least a decade, probably two or three after Paul's life. Here in this story about the confrontation of Artemis in her own hometown, the center of her power, is a powerful counter-point to the Artemisian story. Apparently she's not what everyone thought.

Here's a competing religion, full of converts and non-adherents, threatening to turn people away from the Artemisian cult and destabilize her shrines and world-wide hegemony... and the fickle deity actually doesn't seem to care. It apparently didn't result in the eradication of the Christians and didn't kill their mothers and children in childbirth.

By including the story... even without Paul... perhaps especially WITHOUT Paul, the Ephesian Christians are able to stand up against the most powerful and influential deity in the ancient world and not suffer consequences. It's the opposite of what happened to the Seven sons of the Jewish high priest Sceva and their mismanagement of the demon they tried to entreat in the story just prior to ours. These imposters encountered a real spiritual power and get whipped. They're not beaten because they're not Paul... they get beaten because they're not legitimate.

In our passage this morning, two random Christians, Gaius and Aristarchus, get drug into the centre of the most important theological fight in the known world at the time – the insult of Artemis... and not only leave unscathed but the Great Artemis of the Ephesians doesn't show up, lift a finger, or act at all. Life seems to continue virtually unchanged... and it all happens without Paul. For an early Christian community seeking identity without Apostles like Paul and left only with their stories, this might actually be one of the most important.

Life actually seems to run rather normal without Artemis, and Christians are able to persevere even without Paul. It might also remind Christians and perhaps us too... of how different we really are from the surrounding culture.

I wonder if that might be the sermon we need to hear more often here in TUMC, in Toronto, in Canada... we live in a society that parallels so many of our values... AND even many of the ones it doesn't value it's at least embarrassed about. It's so easy for us to forget how distinct we are, where our citizenship actually resides, what and who are identity is based in. It's awfully easy for us to forget that we still have an alternative, and, hopefully inviting way of life which we center our lives around.

Artemis is largely forgotten. Her silversmiths have long ago disappeared. Where will we be seen as a disturbance next? What is the next false god we will be brought before, in the midst of commotion and upheaval as we steadfastly reveal how powerless and empty it is?

Acts 19 reminds us that our days of disturbing the falsehoods of life can happen, even in Ephesus... so may it be in Toronto.