Could we be so bold as to place ourselves in this story?

Now in the church at Statesboro there were followers of the Way. People from all over - Bulloch County, Nigeria, North Carolina, and Connecticut. People with varied skills - teachers, attorneys, engineers, parents. Not one of us had the same story of how we got here.

We were worshipping the Lord - worshipping in myriad ways. Some came to be filled with peace, releasing the heavy weight of worry. Some came to be filled with challenge, asking questions and turning Scripture around in their heads. Some came to be filled with friendship, looked in the eye for what might be the only time all week such warmth was known.

While we were worshipping the Lord, the Holy Spirit came and set each of us apart for the work to which the Spirit called us. To go and sit beside someone who grieves. To go and stand up for the child left behind. To go and help their neighbor. To go and tend the land that God has graciously given. To go and be.

And so - the community prayed and sent their beloved friends off. Sent them to the places that need it most and the places yet imagined, places difficult and familiar and strange. The places in our own homes and the places not confined by four walls. Off - out - not here but from here.

Can we be so bold as to remember that we, ourselves, are like those in the early church? And, like them, the Spirit saw it fit to draw all of us together in worship and scatter us back out into the world.

What I love about this scene from Acts was that before Paul and Barnabas could do what they were sent to do, they were in community and community in worship. This is a commissioning text, a text that embodies the promise Jesus gave to his disciples as his parting words - Go and make disciples,
baptizing them, and lo - I am with you always until the end of the age. And this beautifully diverse troop knew that if they were to do as Jesus commanded then they must - first and foremost - worship. Worship is the central place where love can be known.

I imagine Paul and Barnabas felt this love as they moved into the mission field of Lystra. The weight of their friends’ commissioning left invisible handprints upon their backs, a dual reminder pushing them forward - go and you are not alone. It was this love that enabled Paul and Barnabas to employ the three-foot rule - paying attention to and tending those who surrounded them. It was this love that helped Paul look intently at the man needing to be healed and from this attention paid, use the power of the Holy Spirit to heal him. It was this love that made Barnabas and Paul not turn away from the crowds that brought sacrifices but instead call them to new life - “Turn to the living God!” They could’ve walked away, ignored the man or the growing crowds. But they stayed where their feet were and where the Spirit had brought them, trusting they would know what came next.

The main character in this story is not Paul or Barnabas but the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts is one story after the other of how the Spirit moved and stirred things up for those earliest followers of the Way, transforming human after community after culture. The Spirit is at the center of Acts and so - at the center of how church came to be church - of how Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection made its way from a few to the countless we know today. The bodies and words mattered but the Spirit is who is at work here. In each scene, the Holy Spirit is pushing people forward to react and move in the Way of Jesus.

This story - and indeed all these commissioning stories - aren’t about how set apart the apostles are and how special they are. Paul and Barnabas knew that, too, yelling back to the crowd - “We are mortals, just like you!” They understand that when the Spirit says “Set apart for me Paul and Barnabas,” that means: The Spirit needs these two for this particular task. It isn’t that Paul and Barnabas were the most faithful. They were the ones who were needed for then and that and those people. Set apart and yet - all of those gathered were set apart. The time and place will come, that three-feet rule will be made known by the Spirit soon and sure enough.
So, too, are we needed and set apart. We’re simply needed and set apart for different tasks and different calls. But the Spirit needs us all.

I’ve just come back from Austin, Texas where I was reminded how good and gracious the Spirit is in calling people to serve the Risen Lord. It was there I met with my preaching cohort, a group the Spirit drew together from all parts of the denomination and country. Pastors who serve a historical church in Manhattan and a half church/half free health clinic in Harrisburg, PA. A pastor who leads worship at night with jazz musicians in Minneapolis and a pastor who looks out her church windows at the mountains of North Carolina. We are risk-takers and rule-followers, liturgy lovers and free-flowing wordsmiths. We’re all wildly different and yet, bound by our love of Jesus and his church.

Every year, I leave knowing this: service in the name of Jesus Christ is not meant to be a lonely call but one buoyed and accompanied by the Spirit and the Spirit known in relationship. We cannot serve the Risen Lord alone. Thank God the Spirit makes that impossible.

Every year, I leave having been reminded of this: service in the name of Jesus Christ is not meant just for pastors. It is the work of the people and of all people. In fact, if pastors just did it, it would be so dull and heady and singular and the church would die. Ministry can take on so many forms and thank God, the Spirit makes that possible.

Our text is a commissioning text and so, too, is our worship a commissioning every week. We come and pray, worship in relationship with one another and the Triune God and then are sent out into the world to listen to the Spirit’s call to love and serve the people around us.

At the end of our time together, my preaching group receives a blessing, a commissioning back into our congregations and contexts. At the end of our sermon, I find the same fitting for us.

For those of you headed from the peace of this place to the chaos of home, you are not alone in this holy mission.
For those of you who hold the pain of so many -
    those in your three-foot radius, those who come across your path,
    those who forever have your heart -
    you are not alone in this holy mission.

For those of you who feel the dirt between your fingers and the rays of sun upon your skin,
    you are not alone in this holy mission.

For those of you who find yourself in places ordinary and mundane,
    look out for what can be sacred and Spirit-filled and know,
    you are not alone in this mission.

For those of you who speak truth when it is unwelcome and difficult,
    you are not alone in this mission.

For those of you who listen to the aching of your body
    and know the draining duration of healing,
    you are not alone in this mission.

For all of us, resplendent with possibility,
    we are not alone in this mission.

The Spirit is willing; willing and present and hope-filled and always there with that invisible
handprints upon our backs, a dual reminder pushing us forward - go and we are not alone. Thanks be.
Amen.