

“Freed from Prison”

Acts 12:1-17

Persecution of Christians is nothing new, although we are unused to it here in America, where the Church enjoyed a privileged position in our culture for most of our brief history. But not so around the world! From the very beginning, governments and religious rulers have threatened God’s people. In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah was beaten, thrown in prison, tossed down a well, and ultimately kidnapped. According to legend, Isaiah was sawn in half. John the Baptist was beheaded. And just days after Pentecost, when God poured out his Holy Spirit on Jesus’ disciples, the apostles were arrested, beaten, and questioned for preaching the name of Jesus in the Temple. Jesus said that this shouldn’t surprise us. He warns:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...” (John 15:18-20a, ESV).

Why does the world hate Christians? Because the world hates Jesus! We are his disciples, and we will not fare any better than Jesus Himself did. He was arrested, mocked, flogged, beaten, and ultimately died on a cross. They will do that and worse to those who follow him.

We see that in today’s lesson, the story of Peter’s release from prison. King Herod, the grandson of the King Herod who killed the children of Bethlehem and the nephew of the King Herod who beheaded John the Baptist and before whom Jesus appeared on Good Friday, decided to persecute the church. He kills James,

brother of John, the other disciple whose martyrdom appears in the Bible. Then, seeing that pleased the great crowd gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, he had Peter arrested, as well.

This wasn’t the first time Peter was arrested. He’d been arrested twice before, recorded in Acts chapters 4 and 5. The first time, Peter along with John was released because of their popularity after healing a lame man at the temple. The second time, they were released by an angel and returned to proclaiming the message of Jesus in the temple courts, the very thing they were arrested for doing. When brought before the religious council yet again, Peter boldly proclaimed, “We must obey God rather than men.” They were beaten but released, and the apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus.

This time, Herod learned from other’s mistakes. He has four squads of soldiers to guard Peter, and is bound with chains between two guards. And so this prison experience was different from the other two for Peter. This time, he was alone except for the guards, and the deliverance did not come right away. The other two times, he was able to witness, but this time, no special witnessing opportunities appeared. Peter’s previous arrests had taken place after great victories, but this one followed the death of James, his dear friend and colleague. It was a new situation altogether.

Yet despite that, Peter is calm. If you were chained to two Roman soldiers and facing the possibility of being executed the next day, would you sleep very soundly? Probably not, but Peter did. In fact, Peter was so sound asleep

that the angel had to strike him on the side to wake him up!

What gave Peter such confidence and peace in the midst of this trial? We often think that the great miracle of Pentecost was that the apostles were able to be understood in different languages by the power of the Holy Spirit. But the real miracle was that these men who had been hiding for fear of being arrested and killed like Jesus had been were now boldly sharing the message of Jesus, and what his death and resurrection meant.

That boldness and confidence is what had gotten Peter arrested in the first place, and it was what gave Peter peace as he awaited what the next day would bring.

The Holy Spirit was still with Peter. More than that, even though he seemed alone, he wasn't. The church, his fellow believers, were with him. Not physically, but spiritually. The church didn't try to stage a jailbreak. They didn't go to the authorities and plead their case. They didn't protest outside of the jail demanding Peter's release. They did what only the church can do. They prayed.

The power of the church is the power of prayer. And God is a God of liberation. The Passover festival they were celebrating was to celebrate the freedom of God's people from slavery in Egypt, after all. And their prayers were answered. Peter was set free by an angel, and led out of the prison. It was so unbelievable that Peter thought it was a dream or a vision. But it wasn't. It really happened.

Peter wasn't the only one who didn't believe what had happened. When Peter went to the house where the believers were gathered to pray, Rhoda, the slave girl who answers the door, is so excited that she runs away to go tell

everyone without opening the gate so Peter can come in! And without Peter there by her, everyone else doesn't believe her. It took Peter's continuous knocking to finally get more people to come to the gate, and then they finally see Peter. They can see that God had freed Peter, and they were overjoyed.

Of course, that isn't the only time people disbelieved what should be good news. When the women returned from the empty tomb with the news that Jesus was raised from the dead, no one believed them. It wasn't what they expected. Peter and John had to go check for themselves, and it still took Jesus Himself appearing to them before they would believe what the women had told them.

On November 21, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter from Tegel Prison, where he was imprisoned for his part in a plot against Hitler. "A prison cell like this is a good analogy for Advent," he said. "One waits, hopes, does this or that—ultimately negligible things—the door is locked and can only be opened from the outside."

The comparison between Advent and a prison cell may seem strange. It evokes powerlessness, perhaps even hopelessness. However, it is this particular type of waiting that we as Christians are called to do. Peter could do nothing to free himself from prison. The door could only be opened from the outside. But God did so, and freed Peter.

We still live in a world where we could be imprisoned for our beliefs. Our sister church, St Paul, had their evening Vacation Bible School earlier this week. They raised money for a Lutheran school in Pakistan. They can meet for worship, but there are strict penalties for evangelism and conversion. Other countries can be even less open than that, and Christians face

imprisonment, discrimination, and even death for their faith.

Yet from that persecution can come great faith. In waves of persecution during the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, Chinese believers were fined, imprisoned, and tortured. Yet despite this government oppression, a spiritual revival broke out that could well be the largest in the history of the church. As many as fifty million believers gave their allegiance to an invisible kingdom even as the visible kingdom made them suffer for it. The gulags and prisons in Russia were full of believers during the time of the USSR, and became the homes of thriving underground churches. For seventy years prisons had been the repository of truth, the one place where you could safely speak the name of God.

We may not face imprisonment for our faith, but we have still been set free. Free from the power of sin. It's a freedom we couldn't achieve on our own. But as Jesus announced to the crowd at Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captive." That's Good News for us. That's Good News we can share.

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