

FOR PEACE SAKE!

Sermon, April 3, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 26:3-9; Acts 12:1-17

Our text from Acts today tells us how King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. This particular King Herod was Herod Agrippa; he was the grandson of Herod the Great, who had commanded the killing of the children of Bethlehem after the visit from the Magi shortly after Jesus' birth. This Herod was also the nephew of Herod Antipas; Pilate had sent Jesus to Herod Antipas shortly after His arrest. Like all the Herods before him, Herod Agrippa knew his power came from Rome; all the Herods were Jewish by blood, but were puppet kings of the occupying Romans. Rome would let him stay in power as long as he kept the peace, and as long as the Jewish leaders remained cooperative and somewhat content, a measure of "peace" would be maintained and Rome would let Herod keep his throne. Herod knew the Jewish leaders were in a tizzy about this fast growing Christian church, perceiving it to be a threat, so Herod wanted to do something to satisfy them. He arrested one of the foremost apostles: James, the brother of John (*the two sons of Zebedee*). Not only does he imprison James; he had James beheaded, making James the first disciple to be martyred. We read that this made Herod's "favorability poll" rise with the Jewish leaders ... so, Herod proceeded to seize another prominent apostle, Peter, and place him under arrest. Herod planned to put Peter on public trial after the Passover holiday ... all the Jewish leaders would still be in town, thus maximizing his audience, so this should really make his favorable poll numbers rise. We are told that four squads of four soldiers each took turns guarding Peter 24/7; this most likely was in four six hour shifts with each squad taking a turn (rather than all sixteen at once). So, Peter was in prison awaiting trial and also awaiting an almost inevitable (and immediate) execution ... unlike today, prisoners weren't kept on death row ten or twenty years after the verdict; in that day, they were usually executed within ten or twenty minutes of the verdict. We are told in Verse 5, "*Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*"

The night before the trial, Peter was sleeping, and sleeping soundly, between two soldiers and he is also bound by two chains. The other two sentries of this four man squad are posted outside his cell. Now, Peter has to know what happened to James. Peter he has to know Herod intends to do the same to him. And yet, when an angel of God appeared in the cell, even though the cell burst with bright and dazzling light, it seems the angel can't get the peacefully slumbering Peter to wake up! The angel has to literally STRIKE him on the side and say, "*Come on, Peter, wake up!*" And it almost makes the reader what to day, "*Peter, for Pete's sake! How can you sleep so soundly at a time like this? How can you sleep so peacefully?*" This doesn't seem to be one who is losing any sleep about the prospect of a brutal execution! He is not tossing and turning with worry. How can that be?

Well, I believe there are a few reasons. First, from our Old Testament reading, the theme verse of our previous hymn, "Peace, Perfect Peace", Isaiah 26:3 -- "*You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.*" Peter is at peace; he can sleep well and soundly because he has the calm inner demeanor and confidence of a steadfast man who fully trusts in God. No matter how dire outward circumstances might seem to be, he is at peace because he trusts in God, and the fact of the resurrection of Jesus just made that trust all the more certain. To quote myself from last week, ALL of the original apostles were beaten, stoned, thrown in prison and all but one eventually died a martyr's death without ever once renouncing their belief in the resurrection. They were confident, they were fearless, they weren't afraid of death anymore, because they SAW HIM. Knowing Jesus had risen from the grave literally took away their fear of death; it made them fearless ... so fearless, that Peter could sleep like a baby the night before his potential execution!

Second, I think Peter was at peace because he knew people were praying for him. There is great comfort in knowing the people are praying for you; many of us here can attest to the assurance and calm that comes from knowing we are in the prayers of people who care, and trusting that God hears those prayers. Never be shy about telling someone "*You are in my prayers.*" Of course, remember to follow through with praying those prayers! We read that when the angel finally got him awake, Peter stood up; as he did so his chains fell off, and the angel said, "*Now, get dressed and follow me.*" Peter complied and followed the angel past the guards through the prison gates, not knowing if this was really real or if he was still sleeping and having a dream or a vision. When he got outside, perhaps the crisp night air awakened him more fully; after the angel departed we read that "*Peter came to himself*" and realized that he really had been rescued! God had really sent an angel to deliver him! So, as soon as Peter fully realized what happened, the first thing he does is run over to the house where he knew people were praying for him. He gets to the front gate, and starts knocking. A servant girl by the name of Rhoda comes to the door; she is so overjoyed, astonished even, to hear Peter's voice, that she forgets to let him in! She leaves him outside the door and runs inside to tell everyone, "*Hey, everybody! Peter, the one we are praying for, he's at the door!*" The text tells us that they say in reply, "*You're out of your mind!*" I just love this comical account ... Rhoda interrupts their prayers to say, "*Peter's outside!*" And all they can say is, "*Are you out of your mind? Now, be quiet, so we can get back to praying for Peter's release.*"

I can just imagine Rhoda going, "Aaaaaaaa!" They are so busy knocking on God's door in prayer, they cannot believe God's answer is knocking on their door ... do we believe God answers prayer? And sometimes God can answer prayers in a very dramatic fashion!

Some of you may have heard of speaker and author Tony Campolo; Dr. Campolo was on the faculty of Eastern University in the Philadelphia area as a sociology professor for years (*our young people have often stayed on that campus while on summer mission trips*) and went on to become a very well known speaker. In his book Let Me Tell you a Story¹ (*as well as in several of his engagements*) he tells about a time he was asked to speak at the chapel of a Pentecostal college near Eastern University. Before the service, eight men had him kneel so they could place their hands on his head and pray. He said he was glad to have the prayer, it always gave him a measure of peace knowing others were praying for him. However, being Pentecostals each of them prayed a really long time, and the longer they prayed the more they pushed on Tony's head and it became increasingly difficult to stay kneeling! And one even seemed to wander in his prayers and didn't even pray for Tony; he prayed, "Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road from here about a mile. You know the trailer, Lord, just down the road on the right-hand side." Tony wanted to interrupt and tell him that God didn't need directions, God already knew where the guy lived (*really, can you imagine God saying, "Will you give me that address again?"*); but he just knelt there dutifully trying to keep his head upright. The prayer went on: "Lord, Charlie told me this morning he's going to leave his wife and three kids. Step in and do something, God. Send an angel to stop him, Lord. Help that family. Bring that family back together."

Soon, the prayer time ended and Tony went on to preach at the college chapel. Afterward, he got in his car and began to drive home. As he drove onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike, he saw a hitchhiker and felt compelled to pick him up (*back in the seventies and early eighties hitchhiking was still fairly common*). As Campolo tells the story: "We drove a few minutes and I said: 'Hi, my name's Tony Campolo. What's yours?' He said, 'My name is Charlie Stoltzfus.' I couldn't believe it! I got off the turnpike at the next exit and headed back. He said, 'Hey mister, where are you taking me?' I said, 'I'm taking you home.' He narrowed his eyes and asked, 'Why?' I said, 'Because you just left your wife and three kids, right?' That blew him away. 'Yeah Yeah, that's right.' With shock written all over his face, he plastered himself against the car door and never took his eyes off me. Then I really did him in as I drove right to his silver trailer. When I pulled up, his eyes seemed to bulge as he asked, 'How did you know I lived here?' I said, 'God told me.' (Actually, I believe God did tell me through that prayer before chapel!) When he opened the trailer door, his wife exclaimed, 'You're back! You're back!' He whispered in her ear and the more he talked, the bigger her eyes got. I said with real authority, 'The two of you sit down. I'm going to talk and you two are going to listen.' Man, did they listen ... and I led those two young people to faith in Jesus Christ." Years later, Tony relates, he learned Charlie Stoltzfus was a pastor in an Assemblies of God congregation in southern California.

First, Peter was at perfect peace because he trusted in God. Second, Peter knew others were praying for him. And the third reason Peter didn't seem to be too worried is that he's BEEN THERE DONE THAT before! This was not Peter's first time he was released by an angel from prison. Acts 5 recounts the first time this happened. In the little time remaining, I'd like to take a quick look at that story. Those early chapters of Acts describe a great time in the early church: the apostles were doing signs and wonders, people were joining this new church by the thousands, people gathered from all the towns around Jerusalem bringing the sick and the tormented, and many were cured. In Acts 5:17, we are told that the high priest and all his associates (the Sanhedrin) were filled with jealousy. This movement threatened their authority, threatened their positions and everything they believed in. So the high priest took action, and had Peter and the other apostles arrested and put into prison. But later that night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, let the disciples out, and told them (v. 20) to "Go to the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life."

The next day, the Sanhedrin was told, "Hey, those men you put in prison are back out there again!" So the temple guards go back and get them, they bring the apostles before the assembly. And Peter starts telling them what the angel told him to tell ... *the full message of this new life* ... so Peter began preaching about Jesus. The Sanhedrin was so enraged that they want to execute Peter and the others on the spot. At that point, a wise and respected Pharisee named Gamaliel spoke up, "I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if their purpose or activity is of human origin it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

As we know from the standpoint of history, Gamaliel was correct, even prophetic. This was of God, and it wasn't going to be stopped. And through the centuries and around the world down to this day the full message of life, the Gospel, keeps bursting its restraints, and bringing peace, hope and life to all who will believe. If by chance you have not experienced this peace for yourself ... well, as God's angelic messenger did with Peter, and as He did for Charlie Stoltzfus through the angelic role of Tony Campolo, He may begin His deliverance in your life with an angelic nudge in your side and a voice that says, "For peace sake, wake up! Get up and follow Me."

And watch as your deliverance unfolds.

¹ See <https://emailmeditations.wordpress.com/2013/09/23/165-led-by-the-spirit-to-charlie-stoltzfus/>