

The Second Sunday of Easter
April 23, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Acts 26:19-29 “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. 21 That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. 22 But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— 23 that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

24 At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

25 “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. 26 The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

29 Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” (NIV2011)

“God’s Proclaimer of Peace”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Do you understand what is going on in Syria? As best I can tell, it all started as peaceful demonstrations as part of the Arab Spring in 2011. But when government forces fired on civilians, it quickly descended into civil war. Other nations in the region started taking sides - Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf Arab states backing the rebels and Shiite Iran and its forces in Lebanese Hezbollah backing the government. Some of the factions against the government were purely political and secular. Others had a religious ideology, including an al-Qaeda affiliate. This made it tough for the US to figure out who they should be supporting. One group broke off to form ISIS. Now this became a bigger concern to the US than Bashar al-Assad. Turkey had been pro-rebel, but they were trying to work against Kurdish rebels in Syria who could throw things into confusion back across the border. Russia came to support Iran and prop up the Syrian government. So some rebel groups were fighting against each other and outside governments wringing their hands about who to support, but the Syrian government just had an easier time getting rid of them all. Sound confusing? Don’t worry, it’s confusing to me too.

Peace on the world stage is messy and complicated. And when you see how complicated things are, don't you sometimes just want to throw up your hands? Don't you want to give up even trying to figure it out? Because, after all, what's the use?

I. Peace is Complicated

Maybe Paul sometimes felt that way as the events progressed as recorded at the end of the Book of Acts. Paul stands trial. But it's not as simple as getting a guilty or not guilty verdict. Paul's prospects at personal peace are actually pretty complicated.

Paul is here because he barely escaped a deadly beating by a mob inside the temple grounds in Jerusalem. When transferred out of the hotbed of hatred to the provincial capital, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt. For two years he sat in jail until a new governor took over. Festus tries to sort through the history and the details of case. When the new governor tries to get on the local's good side by sending the case back to Jerusalem, Paul realizes the physical danger of being released back into the public, so he appealed to Caesar to have his case heard. But now Festus has to figure out what explanation he will send along with Paul when he ships him off to the Roman Emperor.

He must answer to a Roman governor who must just be rolling his eyes at the silly, petty disputes of this irrelevant people from the backwaters of the Empire. He even enlists the assistance of a local ruler who grew up in Roman culture but also has his finger on the pulse of Jewish religion and has a grasp on how their people think.

If I had to stand in front of people and offer a defense, I know I would be filled with inner turmoil, not inner peace. You know those courtroom scenes, whether they are the news broadcasts of real trials or Hollywood fabrications of justice. Even hardened criminals are on their best behavior. They address the judge as 'your honor.' They are acting out of character. That's what happens to you and I when we are put on the defensive. In any situation where that happens, we struggle with inner conflicts. Butterflies are the least of our problems. We just aren't ourselves.

It's complicated for Paul. It's dizzying for the Roman officials. But Paul uses this opportunity to get out the gospel message. That's what makes Paul an excellent role model of discipleship for us today. In a complicated world, amid all kinds of personal complexities, Paul is a first and foremost a proclaimer of peace.

II. The Maniacal Message of the Resurrection

The root cause behind the physical violence and death threats is the gospel proclamation. Paul sheds some light on this case: **"I preached that they should repent and turn to God... That is why the Jews seized me...and tried to kill me."** (Acts 26:20,21) Especially contentious is the message Paul emphasizes of repentance and turning away. This gospel message of spiritual enlightenment and liberation puts Jews and Gentiles on an equal plane as heirs of salvation. The gospel gives each person an equal status in their relationship before God regardless of race, ethnicity, or personal history.

Notice what triggers such an outrageous outburst from an otherwise composed and dignified public official? Paul talks about everything in his message and ministry is completely biblical. **“I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen,”** he informs the audience. (Acts 26:22) It had all be predicted by Moses and the Prophets and fulfilled when Jesus suffered and rose from the dead. That’s the trigger: **“that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”** (Acts 26:23) That little phrase “rise from the dead” caused this otherwise composed and dignified Roman official to explode: **“You are out of your mind, Paul!”** (Acts 26:23-24)

Isn’t that what sets apart Bible-believing Christians today? Isn’t that what puts us on trial in a world that values a healthy diversity of opinions and tolerance for a wide spectrum of beliefs?

But what kind of peace have the people in our world settled for? Peace comes through finding work-life balance. That’s partially true. Peace comes from finding activities that you can enjoy, things to do to give your life meaning and a purpose. To a degree that’s true. Peace is pursued through all kinds of efforts at healthy eating, meditation, money, pleasure, you name it. But what kind of peace do they really bring? And when you look around at the artificial peace we see people settling for all around us, doesn’t it make the mess in the Middle East look simple?

And what can you give them? A Savior who suffered? Forget it. Peace through someone who comes back from the dead? Doesn’t the world’s skepticism make you want to just throw your hands up in the air? Give up? Because, after all, what’s the use? After all, what good is the peace promised by God when the world calls it insanity?

III. Making the Most of Every Opportunity for Peace

Paul never did that. You know why? Paul knew he was God’s proclaimer of peace.

Let’s trace Paul’s journey to this witness stand. Before he even arrives at Jerusalem, his arrest is prophesied (Acts 21:11). His traveling companions try to detour Paul’s trip. Then when he got to Jerusalem, the leaders of the church expected an unwelcome reception. So they tried to make his appearance at the temple more acceptable to the locals. So in other words, Paul knew things could go wrong. He was well aware this could turn out badly for him, even end in his death. But he goes ahead anyway. He is determined to make the most of every opportunity to proclaim peace. Because without this proclamation, sinful souls are left without peace.

Jesus speaks to hearts with his peace. Remember what Jesus said to those fearful and timid disciples on that first Easter evening? Today’s Gospel tells us: **“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’”** (John 20:19) Jesus could have scolded them for their lack of faith. Jesus could have called them out for not comprehending his predictions and failing to act on his promises. He doesn’t do any of that. Jesus extends peace.

To timid disciples tempted to throw up their arms and ask what's the use, Jesus comes to you with his peace. To followers overwhelmed by the world's peace and disheartened by the artificial peace we see all around us, Jesus comes with the peace of his forgiveness. For doubtful hearts discouraged by the complexities of the world around us, Jesus comes with the peace of a restored relationship with God. And all of it is possible only because Jesus suffered and rose from the dead.

Paul is so bold in giving his defense, he must have been armed with a secret weapon. Scripture holds a key to actually giving this defense. We see Paul repeatedly giving a defense for his actions, or more often, for the irresponsible actions of others in response to his preaching. But this really shouldn't come as a surprise to any of Jesus' disciples. After all Jesus predicts that his followers will have to give a defense. But I'd like to take you to two beautiful promises of Jesus to give peace at the time of this troubling reality. First off, Jesus says: **"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."** (Luke 12:11) Jesus says "when," not "if." Jesus says don't worry, precisely the thing we are most likely to do, what we are incapable of avoiding. Jesus does it again, this time right before he is betrayed and arrested. Jesus predicts the persecution of his disciples and wants to make sure they aren't so caught off guard that they fail to live as his followers. So he says: **"But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."** (Luke 21:14,15) What you and I see as messy situations, Jesus sees as an opportunity for peace. He calls you and equips you and promises to go with you so you will be his proclaimer of peace.

IV. Prayer and Personal Appeal for Peace

This is the turning point for Paul as a proclaimer of peace. He has gone from his own defense to a personal plea for evangelism. He can come right out and say exactly what he is trying to do. I'm not sure if Agrippa is trying to change the subject or just lighten the mood. He tries to break in: **"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"** (Acts 26:28) Paul acknowledges Agrippa's suspicions and capitalizes on it. To Paul it didn't matter if it took a short time or a long time, that was exactly he goal.

There's a difference between crazy and passionate. Peace from Jesus provides that difference. The peace of sins forgiven, death defeated, a restored relationship with God cuts through all the clutter and complication. This is the one peace every soul on this planet absolutely needs. Sharing the gospel of Jesus' suffering and resurrection is our one passion in life. This is what God uses to make someone a Christian. There is nothing underhanded or secretive about the goal of Christians.

And your plea can be just as personal as Paul's. You might not have your work-life balance all figured out. You might be clueless about the best meditation techniques. You might still be searching for the right activities to fill in the gaps of your life. You might be a long way from finding peace through exercise or nutrition or money management. But you have the

one peace that really matters. You might not wish your life on anyone else, but above all else, you want them to have the peace that only Jesus gives.

Conclusion:

The word peace is completely absent in this account of Scripture. You don't read the word and it's never spoken by anyone in this chapter or even mentioned in any of the behind the scenes explanations in all of Acts 26. But peace has everything to do with what we see and hear from Paul. Peace from Jesus propelled him into the face of danger. Peace for troubled souls provided confidence for speaking boldly, making a clear defense of the resurrection. Paul made peace for those ignorant of the implications of Jesus' resurrection his primary goal rather than his own personal efforts to free himself imprisonment and personal danger. Peace points out light for souls trapped in the darkness of disbelief and doubt. Peace permeates our prayers today for the troubled souls around us in our world today. You might never figure out how to bring peace to the Middle East, but God is using you to bring peace to souls. You are God's proclaimer of peace. Amen.

+ May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will. Amen. +