

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 28, 2018

Christ the Rock Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

Acts 4:23-31 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. **24** When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. **25** You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?

26 The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.'

27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. **28** They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. **29** Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. **30** Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

"Mastering Hostility"

Toddlers can be impossible. One moment smiling and playful, the next scowling and violent. Giving giggles and hugs, then kicking and screaming almost as if a switch has just been flipped in their brains. You can marvel at the amazing developments that God is allowing in this little person, then sigh in frustration as they demand something that doesn't even exist, purple dinosaur juice and unicorn nuggets. Not to belittle those who aren't Christians, but their behavior often reminds us of toddlers. Irrational and impossible to please. Yet similar responses are necessary. Consistent and firm, gentle and patient. Above all, knowing what's at stake and being will to be bold and courageous enough to stick to it. What we could call mastering hostility.

Last week we we let in on a very personal and powerful prayer from Saint Paul on behalf of fellow believers. Today we get a glimpse into the hearts of the Apostles and an amazing boost in confidence for facing imposing situations in our personal life. This prayer helps us face opposition and tension with confidence that God has things figured out. We approach the worst the world can throw at us with confidence God will accomplish his purposes even in the face of oppositions. So when we face difficulty, we can turn to God in prayer and ask him to help us speak boldly. These fellow believers from hundreds of years ago give us great insight into God's plan for mastering hostility.

This section of Scripture opens up: **“On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.”** (Acts 4:23) Peter and John had to be released by the temple guards by order of the chief priests and religious authorities. Their arrest came because they had healed a man who was begging just outside the temple compound. They had acted in amazing kindness to a man who had no means for providing for himself and no hope for any future. But their real crime was carrying out the healing in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:1-10). Then they proceeded to use this miracle as an opportunity to preach about Jesus (Acts 3:11-26). That’s why they were arrested.

Maybe that shouldn’t surprise us too much. Unbelievers typically claim to base their hostility to Christianity on science and reason. But that doesn’t mean their rejection is always logical. So many times people made up their minds about spiritual matter, about ultimate concerns for their spiritual welfare before they have really given Jesus an honest chance. And so when they hear anything that clashes with their assumptions, they instinctively reject the Christian faith without giving it a legitimate chance. In this case, the religious leaders followed this less-than-logical approach. Just a few verses before this section starts we learn: **“Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”** (Acts 4:18) Realizing they couldn’t legally keep them under arrest or punish them, they threatened them some more and then let them go.

So what should be their prayer in response to this tricky situation? They should probably pray for protection. Maybe it would be better to ask God to get rid of the bad guys. Make it easier for them to be Christians and remove obstacles for them to live out their Christian lives. Instead, once we skip down toward the end of their prayer, this is what we get: **“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”** (Acts 4:29) They wanted God to help them keep doing what they were doing. They wanted to do it better and do it more and do it with greater intensity rather than backing down. They understood the importance of bearing witness for Christ and didn’t want anything to stand in their way.

Let me just say I don’t think this is a normal prayer. It’s more normal to start to question God when things go wrong. If Peter and John got arrested for doing the Lord’s work, then God must not be in control or powerful enough to stop this hostility. If he actually is powerful, then he must not care enough about his people to prevent this sort of thing from happening.

Just being a Christian feels like running the steeple chase. Not only do you get to run long distances, but you also get to jump over huge hurdles and leap over water barriers. Much more interesting than the half step above hamster wheel running in circles on the track. But those barriers turn out to be bigger than you bargain for. And the water pit turns out to be bigger and longer than expected. And so each lap around the track, as wetter and more worn out, the barriers start to look more and more imposing. That’s how it feels so often when it comes to practicing the Christian faith and sharing the Christian faith when things get tough. The barriers are all we can think about. All the threats and hostilities keep

growing in our minds. We get discouraged. We start to give up. We disengage from the work God gives us to do. We end up running our Christian race with a sense of dread.

We can go back to the believers in Acts chapter 4. Before they asked God to give them “great boldness” to keep sharing the gospel, they recognized God had already won. Mastering hostility means going back to realize God overcomes opposition to achieve his purpose. So much of our disengagement from a bold and vigorous faith is rooted in expectations. We experience disappointment when God doesn’t do what we hope. We feel disengaged when we get push back for living Christian values. We feel intimidated when we feel outnumbered by people who believe differently. Martin Luther called it a “Theology of Glory.” The simplest way of thinking about a theology of glory is the promise that if you are a believer God will give you a nice car and a big house and straight teeth for your radiant smile perpetually plastered across your face. A theology of glory is natural. It’s normal. It seems logical for people who do what God asks and put themselves out there for God’s greater purposes that God should make life better for us. The only problem is it is completely unbiblical.

That’s why Peter and John and their fellow believers quote Psalm 2 at the start of their prayer. All the way back at the time of King David, God’s people had this awareness: **“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.”** (Acts 4:25,26) This Psalm expresses the frustration and exasperation of God’s people when enemies try to stop God’s plan. Hostility toward God has been around for thousands of years. The rest of Psalm 2 goes on to show how God basically brushes aside these threats. Even the most arrogant attacks from the world’s most powerful people can’t put an end to God’s plans. God still overcomes to accomplish his purposes.

That’s not just a general principle about God’s power and place in history. The believers responding to the threats against Peter and John connect Psalm 2 to what just happened in Jerusalem. They show the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 2 in Jesus: **“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.”** (Acts 4:27) A king like Herod and a ruler like Pilate conspired against Jesus. But it turned out, nothing they schemed or plotted could prevent God from accomplishing his plan: **“They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”** (Acts 4:28) God turned their raging hatred to serve his purpose. God overcame that hostility to accomplish the salvation of humanity.

Jesus went along guided by God’s hand. Jesus carried out God’s will even when attacked and ridiculed and mocked. Jesus was the servant of God anointed, commissioned to carry out this purpose. And so Jesus never disengaged from the plan. Jesus never backed down from opposition or let the disappointment of fickle followers distract him from what he needed to do. This is the Theology of the Cross. We can see things how they really are and be honest about the brutal reality of the lack of glory we see everyday. Only because Jesus went to the cross to suffer and die, can we make sense of believing in him in the first place. Only on the other side of the suffering Jesus endured on behalf of all humanity, on the other side of that

death that spares you from eternal damnation, the empty Easter grave that declared death of its power can we make sense of pain, suffering and opposition in this life. What looked like ultimate defeat is actually ultimate victory. The theology of the cross helps us see the world from God's perspective.

On June 23, 1910 John Mott addressed the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. He expressed the optimism that in a short time the final goals of all Christian missions would be achieved and "that before many of us taste death we shall see the Kingdom of God come with power." History shows quite the opposite of his predictions. Within four years the First World War broke out. Then the Bolshevik revolution began one of the greatest persecutions of the Christian church in history. When that same movement took hold of China within a few decades, Christian missionaries were forced to leave the greatest mission field in the contemporary world. Mott's mission for glory lay in tatters.

In the middle of the last century the Christian leader Herman Sasse commented: "It is not only nationalism and pacificism, liberalism and socialism, fascism and communism, militarism and antimilitarism which are deprived of the glory they used to have in the eyes of their adherents. Also deprived of such glory is that Christianity which prevailed in all denominations over the last centuries. It is a Christianity which dreamed of a Christian nation or a Christian world, a Christian faith which has been secularized by the theology of glory. Now the time has come to hear the theology of the cross. When the church today asks "What shall I preach?" the only answer can be: "*Preach one thing, the wisdom of the cross!*"¹ In other words, if we put our trust in any political system or worldly power, we will always be disappointed. But if we keep the focus on the cross, we will keep things in proper perspective. The cross is the one thing that triumphs over every other effort to achieve glory. The cross gives us God's victory over opposition.

And so we can be realistic about dangers and threats we face as Christians today. And in the face of opposition or setbacks we bring those concerns to the Lord. We trust God to work it out. And then we get to work carrying out God's calling for us. We echo the words of the Apostles: "**Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.**" (Acts 4:29)

Parents raising a difficult child know this impossible phase won't last forever. But they honestly don't know how that child will turn out. Will he cause heartache for decades to come or will she be the one to take care of them some day? God wants you to understand the ultimate spoiler. When things aren't turning out the way you planned, it's easy to get discouraged. When bad things happen to believers, it's easy to blame God. But if you know how it all ends, then that changes things. God sees all of human history from a vantage point we aren't privileged to see. And yet God chooses to us know he has ultimate vindication in store. Rather than giving up or becoming discouraged, we can be fully engaged in gospel work. You don't have to be consumed by negative barriers that are outside of your control. You can stay focused on God's power. You can be driven by a

¹ Letter 18 of Hermann Sasse's "Briefe an lutherische Pastoren." The translation is a reworking of the work done in The Lutheran' Outlook, October, 1951

commitment to the divine purpose God has given your life. The good news of Jesus will not be defeated. God give you the boldness to openly and freely share this good news. This is the key to mastering hostility. Amen.