

March 3, 2024

The Acts of the Apostles
VIII. The Words of This Life
Acts 5:17-42

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If you close your eyes and imagine the good life, what comes to mind? For some reason, my mind immediately goes to an image of me sitting on the beach under an umbrella with a cool breeze blowing from off the coast. Not a care in the world. Which is strange, because I hate sitting on the beach. It's hot and it's boring. But that's the image, I suppose, that has been drilled into my mind by years and years of watching commercials on TV telling me what the so-called good life is meant to be. It means leisure. It means solitude. It means a lack of responsibility. Certainly, it's nothing like what we read about in this morning's text. No, the apostles are living out an entirely different conception of the good life. One that stands in stark contrast to the TV commercial image I carry in my mind.

In our passage for this morning, we find once again that the apostles have gotten themselves in trouble. There's a pattern emerging in the book of Acts, it seems. Proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ tends to bring trouble.¹ This time, the party of the Sadducees, together with the high priest, heard what the apostles were up to in Jerusalem. You'll recall that the Sadducees were a powerful branch of Jewish leaders whose unspoken allegiance was to the order imposed by the Roman Imperial government. They were defenders of the status quo. As much as it was possible to do in an occupied land, these religious leaders were living the "good life." They had power and prestige and respect. But along come the apostles, preaching a different kind of message. A message that speaks of a different kind of allegiance to a different kind of power. And the text tells us that the religious leaders were filled with jealousy. And so, they put the apostles in the public prison.

Now you'll also recall that the Sadducees only believed that the first five books of the Bible were authoritative. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. So, that means that they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or the concept of heaven, or of angels. You can imagine their surprise, then, with what happens next. During the night, while the apostles are in prison, an angel of the Lord came to them. An angel whose existence the Sadducees denied.² And the angel, miraculously, opens the prison door and lets the apostles go free, telling them to "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."³ The text says that the chief priests were "greatly perplexed."

Now, we know that the book of Acts is full of miracles. You'll recall in the earlier verses of chapter 5, for instance, we heard how even Peter's shadow had the power to heal people. Miracles are nothing out of the ordinary in these opening chapters of Acts. So, we can be

¹ (Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, & Tucker, 1994)

² (Mohler, 2018)

³ Acts 5:20

forgiven for thinking that the miraculous opening of the prison doors is not particularly remarkable. But there's a hidden miracle here in this text. A miracle which, according to the text, strikes great fear in the hearts of the religious leaders. You see, the more profound miracle is not that of the angel opening the prison door, but that once the door was opened, the apostles actually returned to the temple to continue preaching!

It's incredible. The transformation within the hearts of the apostles is nothing more than miraculous. Surely if it were me, if I had been miraculously released from prison, I would have gotten out of town. If these people want me dead, why in the world would I stick around? After all, sitting in a prison cell is nobody's idea of the good life. There's no refreshing sunlight or cool breeze or beautiful landscape to enjoy. Persecution by the authorities was not only likely, it was practically guaranteed if they stayed. So why in the world would the apostles remain? What possessed them?

To provide some context to that question, let's look back at another story in the New Testament that makes the profound shift within the hearts of the apostles perfectly clear. It occurs a few months before the events of this morning's passage. So, let's turn back the clock to another prison of sorts. Another locked door. Another miraculous appearance. But this time, the door was locked from the inside. The apostles locked themselves in an upper room out of fear. You see, in this story, Jesus had died only a few days before, and the apostles had been hiding away. John 20:19, "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'"

"The doors were locked where the disciples were because they were afraid." My friends, what a difference a few months makes. It is indeed a miracle. How could these be the same people boldly preaching in the temple? What power could have possibly possessed them? John 20:21, "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

I spoke before about a pattern having emerged in the book of Acts. One where the apostles would seem to constantly run into trouble. But there's second part of that pattern which is even more important. It's that despite the trouble the apostles face, the Word of God always goes forth. The Gospel always triumphs. And why? Because God desires it to be so, and nothing on earth can thwart the purposes of God. Time and again, the Gospel meets an impediment, but time and again, God's Word prevails.

And the clues that reveal to us the ultimate power of God are right there in the text. An arrest. A sentence of condemnation. An appearance of an angel. A guard standing by unaware. An empty prison, much like an empty tomb. Doesn't that sound a bit familiar? It certainly should. It's a direct link to the Easter miracle. The power of God at work in the apostles is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. And this power cannot be overcome; it cannot be stopped.

And so it is within the human heart. Those disciples once gathered in a locked room, afraid to leave for fear of persecution, those are the very same people who escape from prison to boldly preach the words of Life; the truly good life. The Gospel triumphed within their hearts because of the Gospel always triumphs. The God who conquers death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the same God who conquers sin within our hearts. That power is poured out upon us by

the Spirit of Christ which He breathed upon his church. Friends, *this* is the good life. In fact, it is the only life that is truly life. Not to amass power and prestige like the religious leaders of the day. Not even to preserve yourself out of fear like the apostles a few months before. To live the good life is to be fully alive in the Spirit of God. This is the Life of which the angel commanded them to speak. “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”

The Heidelberg Catechism, which I’m sure we’ve all memorized, forms part of our church’s constitution. And it opens with the question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death? Answer: That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ... Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”⁴ Since We belong to God, Christ sends us his Spirit to enable us to live for him.

The modern world often tells us that we need to cultivate our own personal brand.⁵ That everything that happens in our lives is a stepping stone to acquiring the good life. That we are the captains of our own destiny and that we can and should do everything in our power to build our brand.

But it’s not such a modern impulse, is it? Because I suppose that’s part of the reason the religious leaders felt so threatened by the apostles’ teaching. They had built a brand for themselves with power and with authority and with respect. They had cultivated the good life, and the apostles’ teachings threatened to take that life away. Because the good life as the world defines it is precarious. Any number of things can upset it. An illness or a career change. An unforeseen expense or perhaps a marriage crumbling apart. A son or daughter who has lost their way. And even if, by some chance, we achieve the good life, what becomes of us then? Where do we go from there?

“Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” The miracle of our text this morning is that when the apostles received the resurrection power of God through the Holy Spirit, they abandoned their pursuit of any life apart from God; including any idea they might have one day achieved of the so-called good life. And so, when sufferings came, they were able to rejoice. The text says, “And when they called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”

True freedom is not the freedom to flee. True freedom is to live without fear of being bound. For when we allow the Spirit to enter our hearts, to live through us the Life to which God calls us, we are bound by God’s love and nothing else. Because ultimately, as the catechism says, we do not belong to ourselves, but to God. Our lives are God’s business, not ours. And so, with that truth written upon their hearts, the apostles could quite easily return to the temple to preach. After all, the only thing that mattered to them was the life they lived in Christ, knowing their lives are not their own. I was reminded this past week of the apostle Paul, in his own way following the command of the angel to speak to the people all the words of this life. It comes from the latter part of his letter to the Romans. He says,

⁴ (The Office of the General Assembly, 2016)

⁵ (Zahl, 2023)

⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.⁶

Thanks be to God.

References

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⁶ Romans 14:7-8