

“PAUL BEFORE KING AGRIPPA.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 25:23-26:11

Introduction.

Detours. Did any of you have to take a detour from your normal path to church? I am not a fan of detours. They interrupt my plans; they slow me down from getting where I want to go.

I had to take a detour off I-5 at Slater Road last week because traffic was backed up. There have been several detours in Lynden this past summer, on Grover, on Badger and there is still one on Main.

But I shouldn't be complaining. Paul has been on a detour for over two years, and I don't hear him complaining. Have any of you been on a two-year detour you had not planned, not anticipated, didn't see going? Or maybe you feel like you are on a longer one?

Paul had a plan to carry the Gospel to Rome. He had an idea of how and when he would do that. And then he ran into a huge detour. He was arrested on false charges and ended up going through several trials before a Roman tribune, a Jewish high priest, two governors Felix and Festus, and now before the king of Palestine, King Agrippa.

God thinks nothing of changing the course of history, and He thinks nothing of changing the course of our lives. Actually, He does think about it and when He does it, it is because He has thought about it and has very good reasons for doing so. Reasons related to redemption, to salvation, to bringing us to faith or increasing our faith, for our good; or to make us to be without excuse because of our lack of faith.

Detours and interruptions are all acts of God, God is always up to something, they are acts of God's grace, reminding us our lives are not our own, we belong to God; or making us face our sin, or showing us our dependence on Him, how He wants to transform us some more.

Acts 25:23-27, King Agrippa and Queen Bernice.

For the fifth and final time over the course of two years Paul finds himself in court. Luke's account of Paul's appearance before King Agrippa and Queen Bernice is the longest and most detailed. We will only get through the first part of his defense this morning.

God has His purpose in inspiring Luke by the Holy Spirit to record these events. They are for the sake of the church and Christians who will encounter trials over the next two thousand years.

When I preached Acts 24 I mentioned what an unsavory pair Felix and Drusilla were. But King Agrippa and Queen Bernice were worse yet.

Bernice was first married to her uncle and now lives with her brother, Agrippa, in the sin of incest. When the scandal of that became too great, she was married off to another king, but that didn't last long, and she came back to Agrippa. There were many more sordid details and other relationships I will spare you of.

Agrippa II is the last king of the Jews before Jerusalem falls. Paul is brought before the last of the Herods, the last of the worldly, ambitious, morally corrupt Herods who for generations had opposed truth and righteousness, had resisted God and sought to kill the Messiah and His followers. They represent all that is wrong with the world, government, man's ambitions, man's ways. They represent why the Gospel is needed, just as much now as then.

Luke paints a picture of great contrasts here.

We have great pomp and circumstance like we have been watching surrounding the death of Queen Elizabeth II. This is an intimidating scene, kings and queens arrayed in purple, with gold and diamonds, Governor Festus in his official garb, military commanders in their dress blues, heads of state, politicians, religious authorities, prominent men of the city, people who had great influence. And into this is brought a lowly Jewish-Christian missionary bearing the marks and scars of beatings, floggings, in iron shackles.

What was their fancy attire compared to the righteousness of Christ Paul was clothed in, what was their power compared to the power of the Holy Spirit indwelling Paul, what was their authority compared to Paul's commission from God.

How often does the world dazzle us? How often do we fall for what the world says is important? Would we rather be something in the eyes of the world or in the eyes of God? Remind yourself over and over again, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul.

I was reminded of this when I met with the Einfeld family and learned how poor they were growing up, how tight the budget was, how many sacrifices were made for the kids to attend Christian school, how long they lived on very little. And what do they have to show for it? A loving, caring family, faith being passed on, peace in knowing John is with his Savior in heaven. That is riches the world knows nothing of.

Governor Festus has a problem. There are no charges against Paul. He has nothing to write. By his own admission, Paul is innocent and should not be sent to Rome. A Roman official is declaring what the Jews were saying against the Way in general and Paul in particular, was false. Christianity stands up to the scrutiny and accusations of the world.

To his shame, here is a man with a conscience who is afraid to act according to his conscience for fear of the Jews. Festus wants Agrippa's help in coming up with

something to write. To his credit a wise man seeks good counsel. Don't be afraid to ask for directions in life.

Acts 26:1-11, Paul's defense.

King Agrippa invites Paul to speak, and Paul stretches out his hand, handcuffs and all and begins his defense.

Can you believe this Paul? Two years of unjust imprisonment, constant harassment from the Jews and today he considers himself fortunate, blessed, happy and hopeful.

Paul never saw himself not as a prisoner of man but as a prisoner of God and for God and the Gospel. His perspective on his life changed his outlook on life. God is in control and God is good, "so I am in a good place for a good purpose."

When we are in the midst of life's trials and facing all manner of difficulties at home, in marriage or parenting, at school, at work, in this world of ours, do we see them as divine opportunities or do we just grin and bear it and try to power through? Do we see God's grace, an opportunity for the Gospel, counting ourselves fortunate to witness to our hope in Christ?

How can we take this to heart? I have been praying for Todd and Emma with the arrival of little George. They have two little ones in their house, life is challenging enough already. Sleep is a precious gift and now it is almost nonexistent again.

My prayer is that by God's grace they will feel fortunate, blessed, happy and hopeful in the midst of this hard season of babies and little children.

The thing that drives Paul is his full assurance of hope in the Gospel and confidence in Christ.

Notice Paul could have simply answered, "I have appealed to Caesar and Festus has said to Caesar I will go, so I have nothing more to say here."

Or Paul could have used this occasion to attack his enemies, he could have spoken with bitterness or resentment. He could have railed against the injustice of the Roman legal system for keeping him bound for two years on false charges.

What is it that sets Paul apart from everyone else in the room? How is it he is the dominating presence in the room? Notice his quiet, Christ-like dignity and confidence.

Think about how we get nervous, anxious, worried in high powered situations. Why is that? Because we are thinking about ourselves, about how we will be perceived, what others will say or think.

But consider what sets us free from self. We are filled with the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. God is with us and in us, we have nothing to fear. We can get our eyes off ourselves and look to Jesus.

How often have we been asked to do something and out of fear or nerves we have declined? How often have we missed an opportunity for God to do something we couldn't do without Him? Every week I watch men get up to lead us in prayer when they would rather not, and hear how God uses them for His glory and our blessing.

Paul is free because this isn't all about himself or his case or his freedom. He is about the Gospel, and the glory of Jesus and His cross.

Vss. 4-8, hope.

Paul's innocence should be obvious to everyone. He was one of them, educated among them, well known by them all, having distinguished himself in all matters Jewish. He was the strictest observer of Judaism. He lived as a true Pharisee, a most orthodox keeper of the Law.

All their attacks on his character and reputation, were unfounded. They had no grounds for accusing him of being ignorant of Jewish beliefs, practices, customs and traditions. He knew them better than any Jew.

What irony that they should accuse him of disloyalty. He dismisses all such accusations with the sweep of his hand.

The accusations against him are that he affirmed the faith of the fathers of the faith. This is the irony, the Jewish hope, the thing the Jews long for and desire more than anything else, the thing they worship and pray for day and night, the thing anticipated by all their sacrifices, that hope is the very thing Paul preached and proclaimed and held out to all.

To put it as plainly as possible Paul believed all the promises of the OT concerning the Messiah and the hope of salvation and resurrection. And that is what he is being persecuted for. So don't be surprised when we stand on the plain teaching of God's Word, and we get in trouble for it. We proclaim the same hope, the only hope the world has and the world rejects it.

Why all the fuss, why any argument with God raising the dead? After all God already vindicated the truth of the resurrection by raising Jesus from the dead, and there had been at least 500 witnesses to it. Why does anyone think the resurrection is too incredible or fantastic?

Do you believe God can raise the dead? Do you think that is a thing too great, too fantastic? Why does the world judge this to be a bridge too far, a thing too great for God to do?

I will tell you one reason. Because if the resurrection is true then Jesus is true and everything Jesus said is true and that makes claims on us, that makes demands on us. That means we have to make decisions, choices, changes, or we are without excuse.

In order for the Jews to know the hope of the Gospel, they would first have to confession to their guilt and sin. The cross was the stumbling block, as it still is today. Is the resurrection your hope? Can you be accused of having this hope? Does the statement Christ is Risen change everything for you?

God has all power and that power raised Christ from the dead, and Christ now rules and reigns and will exercise that resurrection power to raise us from the dead and transform our lowly earthly bodies to be like his resurrected glorious body. That hope takes away every fear.

Vss. 9-11, hate.

But why should anyone believe Paul? This is the case he now goes on to make as he begins to recount his conversion. Paul points out this very message he is now proclaiming was a message he was violently opposed to, as everyone knows and can attest to. This is public information.

Paul was public enemy number one against Christianity. There was no one as passionately and violent opposed to the message of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:13 You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

I Timothy 1:13 Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

Acts 8:3 Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Paul was a terrorist, committing hate crimes. Paul was absolutely convinced he was right and doing his duty for God, to rid the earth of this vile lie called Jesus.

Paul is now being treated just as unjustly as he was treating the Christians before.

Notice, Paul was not ashamed to confess how great his sin was, how shamelessly he committed the worst sins and crimes against God and God's people, how he ruined the lives of many good and godly people, how he tortured people to deny Jesus and voted to shed innocent blood.

Why does Paul reveal his wickedness to such a degree, why does he disgrace himself in this manner?

Two reasons.

First, he does it that the glory of Christ and the mercy of God may be more clearly revealed.

I Timothy 1:13-15 ... *formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.*

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

Do we hesitate to confess our sin, our great offenses against God? Do we try to gloss over our sin and iniquity, minimize it in order to excuse ourselves or make ourselves look better than we are? Do we try to protect our reputation but in so doing rob God of His glory and grace toward us? Do we see our confession as Paul does, as an opportunity for the Gospel to be put on display? Do you see how great God's grace is to cover your worst sin?

To what do you attribute your transformation, from an enemy of God to a child of God? To what do you attribute your being changed from a child of Satan to a child of God?

Second, Paul wants them to see that the change he underwent was not of his own free will, not of his own doing, not brought about by man or anything on earth.

Paul wants them to see what happened to him was none other than the hand of the living God.

Conclusion and Application.

We will pause to hear the rest of Paul's incredible testimony next week. Until then live this week, detours and all, in the light of the glory of the Gospel, in the hope of the fulfilled promises made by God to you, God raises the dead, Christ is Risen, and that same immeasurably great power that raised Him is at work in you by His Holy Spirit for all who believe.