

Narrative Lectionary- Peter Miraculously Released from Prison

April 29, 2018

I'm sure that you, like I, are praying that the relationship between North and South Korea will continue to thaw, and that nuclear missiles can disappear from that peninsula. Swords into plowshares. That's the vision of Isaiah. And I'm praying for productive talks between President Trump and Kim Jong Un.

But in preparation for my sermon today, I was looking up persecution of Christians around the world. And North Korea is one of those places mentioned. In North Korea, the state demands ultimate loyalty of its citizens. Christians are seen as enemies of the state because they will not give total allegiance to the state.

One of the earliest creeds was "Jesus is Lord," which was a political statement. It meant that if Jesus was Lord, then the Roman Emperor couldn't be. Christians had a higher allegiance than to whomever was in power. Their allegiance was to their Lord Jesus. So the North Korean state, and other totalitarian governments, don't like it that Christians will not give their total allegiance to the government. I read that there are 215 million Christians around the world who suffer from one form or another of religious persecution. And Christians are not the only religious group that suffers persecution, by the way.

In the Book of the Acts, we discover that the early Christians were persecuted for their beliefs. Stephen was the first martyr, because he preached a sermon that proclaimed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, and the Jewish leaders did not want to believe that. It was persecution, however, that caused the church to grow. Luke says in Acts 8:1- "Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word." It was as if someone thought they could get rid of dandelions in the yard by blowing the seeds off them. The Christians were persecuted, and so they scattered, and everywhere they went, they lived out the life of Jesus. And the church grew.

So let's get to our story today from Acts chapter 12. King Herod isn't happy because his political base isn't happy. That would be the Jewish leaders. They want to get rid of this little sect of Jews that they believe are heretics. So King Herod kills one of the church leaders, James, the brother of John, and that pleases the

Jewish leaders, so he says, What else can I do? He has Peter arrested. Peter has been the main leader of the church in Jerusalem. This is like having the bishop arrested.

This happens during the festival of unleavened bread, and you can't execute someone during the Passover. So Herod throws Peter into prison, and his plan is to execute him after the holy days. He puts four squads of soldiers around him in prison. Peter's wrists are chained to a guard on either side of him. There are two guards at the door. King Herod isn't taking any chances. For Peter and the Christian community, it looks pretty hopeless. But Luke says, "While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him."

If you've been a Christian for a while, you've prayed fervently for something. There are some things that just take you to your knees in prayer. On a sunny August afternoon many years ago, Toby heard that his former band teacher, Jeff Cumpston, had died while teaching at an international school in Zimbabwe. Toby had just had coffee with him earlier in the summer. Jeff, a very strong Christian, living out his faith in Zimbabwe, was in his early fifties. He was hit by a motorcyclist while he was bicycling.

On that Sunday afternoon, I remember our family just feeling stunned, and out on the deck, I led us all in prayer for Jeff's wife and two young children, and we prayed fervently for the whole community of people that loved and respected him.

Maybe you received that cancer diagnosis and it drove you to your knees in prayer. Maybe you found out about a betrayal, or the addiction of a family member, and you found yourself praying fervently.

Why was this the response of the early church? Well, they learned this from Jesus. Jesus spent a lot of time in prayer. He would leave a town, where people were lined up for healing, and would go to be alone to pray. He taught his disciples to pray. He prayed to his Father in heaven as he laid his hands on someone to ask for healing. He prayed fervently the night before he went to the cross, that this cup would pass from him, but he ended with, Your will be done. The early church prayed, because the disciples had learned prayer from Jesus.

And Jesus didn't make that up. He was Jewish. Moses pleaded with God for the sake of the people. The psalmists cried out to God for mercy and healing; they cried out to God with thanksgiving and praise. The early church prayed because Jesus prayed, Jesus who expanded the Jewish tradition of prayer.

So when the church in Jerusalem heard that James had been killed, and Peter had been arrested, how did they respond? They gathered together to pray; they were driven to their knees. They remembered Jesus saying, Ask, and it shall be given to you, seek, and you shall find, knock, and the door shall be opened to you.

And my goodness, the door gets opened for Peter. The night before he is to be taken out of prison to be killed, Peter thinks he has a vision. He's asleep, and an angel appears in his cell, taps him on the side, and says, Get up and put your clothes on! His chains fall off, and he is led down the hallway and out the front doors. And when the cold night air hits him, he realizes this is no vision, this is real. The angel disappears. And Peter comes to himself and says, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and all that the Jewish people were expecting."

Peter says, Now I am sure... He is sure that God is orchestrating this. He is sure that God has a different plan than his execution.

So Peter walks through the streets, goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, who will later go on a missionary journey with Paul and Silas. He knocks on the door. Remember, they are all praying somewhere in the house. A young maid named Rhoda comes to the door, and when she recognizes Peter's voice, she leaves him at the gate and runs into the house to tell everybody that it's Peter. I love their response. They have been praying for him, probably praying that he would be released unharmed, and when they get this answer to prayer, they can't believe it. You're out of your mind, Rhoda. Somebody else says, It's his angel. They've killed him. But it certainly can't be Peter.

Meanwhile, Peter keeps knocking on the gate, and when they let him in, he motions them to be silent, and he describes how the Lord brought him out of the prison. Then he says, Tell this to James and to the believers. And he goes to another house.

Maybe you're hearing this story this morning, and you're thinking, That's a nice story, Pastor, but that was a long time ago. Those kinds of things don't happen much anymore. At least they don't in my life.

First of all, let me say that throughout the history of the church, when the church is first starting in an area, miracles tend to cluster. This happened in the ministry of Jesus and it happened in the start of the church in Acts. It's as if God says, Let's get this started in some amazing ways, to get people's attention. But then historically these miracles lessen, and Christians are invited to trust, not so much in the miraculous, but in the love and care of the body of believers; to trust in God made known to us in Scripture and in the sacraments.

So if we believe in God because we want miraculous things to happen, we will probably be disappointed. I just finished a book called, *Limping But Blessed*, by a father whose three-year-old son died when he walked out of the house one Sunday afternoon while his dad was taking a nap. He climbed into the family's van and ended up dying of heat stroke before the family could find him. When the parents found him and got him out of that vehicle, they prayed fervently for their little boy, but he was not revived from death. There was no miracle.

The father, who is a Christian, at first does not understand why God did not get involved, why God didn't intervene to stop this from happening. And after going through depression and tremendous grief and wrestling with God, he comes to understand that God's promise is not to spare us from all suffering, but to allow freedom in this world, and that means suffering will happen. And God holds us in the suffering. God walks with us. That's the promise. He also comes to understand that in the struggling and in the questioning was where he found a more authentic faith. God does not cause tragedy to happen, but God uses suffering for our growth.

As this father says, you may walk away with a limp after the pain and the tragedy but there will still be hope on the other side of the struggle. You can walk away limping but blessed. Remember how this story starts today from the Book of Acts: it starts with the execution of the Apostle James. He was not spared. His family had to suffer. But the promise is that whatever happens, God will be with us. And God suffers with us. God is the one who suffers with us on a cross.

So yes, we pray fervently, when the illness strikes, when the relationship falters, when a family member struggles, we pray fervently. And sometimes that prayer simply puts us on God's wavelength. Sometimes things remain a mystery. Sometimes circumstances change. Sometimes the circumstances remain the same, but we are changed in the process.

One of my pastoral colleagues told me the story of a man in his congregation who was diagnosed with cancer. They prayed for his healing. For a while he got better, but then the improvement stopped. They continued to pray for healing. This man had several members of his family with whom he was estranged. As they continued to pray for healing, towards the last weeks of his life, he and his siblings were able to come together and forgive each other for past wrongdoings. He was able to die with a clean slate. There was healing: it just didn't happen the way they imagined.

I remember a dear sister in Christ in Eugene. I would visit Sigrid monthly. She was 89 the first time I saw her, and 99 the last time I gave her communion. Her entire body was riddled with arthritis. Her hands were tangled. She was always in pain.

One day I asked her if she prayed for God to alleviate the pain. I pictured her praying fervently, like the Christian community praying for Peter. Sigrid said, I only pray one prayer, Pastor. And what is that? I asked. This elderly saint said, I pray, Lord, have mercy on me. That was the only prayer she could muster. And yet, I thought later, that was the perfect prayer. Lord, have mercy on me. Give me what I need. Whatever is merciful, any good gift. Have mercy on my body, have mercy on my mind, have mercy on my attitude, have mercy on my response to life. Have mercy on me. If that's the only prayer you can pray, that's a pretty good one.

Maybe this story of Peter being released from prison has an allegorical meaning for you this morning. Something has you chained up. You are held captive to an addiction, or captive to a grudge, or chained to pain from the past that you can't seem to let go of. And maybe God is saying to you this morning, It's time to let me step into that cell and lead you out into freedom. I'm thinking you probably have some people praying fervently for you.

In fact, let's do that now. Let us pray. God, we fervently pray for whomever is in this sanctuary this morning who is chained to something that is keeping them from

being all that you have called them to be: it's an addiction; it's unforgiveness; it's hatred toward someone who has done them wrong. You are calling them into the light today, out of that dingy cell and into freedom in Christ. Shine your light into their heart and mind this morning. We picture the chains falling off. We picture your power leading them out into a new chapter of wholeness and freedom. Have mercy on all of us this morning, God. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.