

May 1, 2016

No Small Commotion

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Acts 12:1-19

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church.² He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.³ After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.)⁴ When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover.⁵ While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

⁶ The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison.⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists.⁸ The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."⁹ Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision.¹⁰ After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him.¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

¹² As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying.¹³ When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer.¹⁴ On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate.¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel."¹⁶ Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed.¹⁷ He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, "Tell this to James and to the believers." Then he left and went to another place.

¹⁸ When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.¹⁹ When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

Herod needed a life coach – or someone to help him with his identity issues. He'd feel bad about himself and look around for a way to feel better. Violence was his way of choice. Acts 12 tells of a time his eyes landed on the church. James was the first killed. Some of Herod's fans liked it so much, he decided to do it again. And so he had Peter arrested and jailed for execution the following day. Knowing Peter had escaped before, he had him chained between two soldiers and guarded by fourteen more. Peter slept like a baby. And escaped anyway.

Another Keystone Cops kind of caper ensues in which he tries to get back to a church safe house, where a woman named Rhoda answers the door, can't believe it's him, and leaves him outside while she tells people. The apostles AGAIN don't believe what the woman with the information tells them. They argue. She's right. Peter comes in and says, "Sshh." He gets out of town. Herod is so furious and embarrassed – his craving for violence so strong – he murders his own soldiers to satisfy it.

Since Easter we've been on this trail through Acts, following our earliest beginning as the church, watching our founders make it up as they go along, knowing their job is to preach Jesus to anyone and everyone along the way, but having no idea how to manage this organization that is assembling around them; inheriting all the normal issues of human family – "*Pastoral care*" we call it now. And *theology*. It's both wonderful to meet the living Christ and not enough.

Questions inevitably arise, questions about God, about how God works; in this case: why James and not Peter? Or why Peter and not James? Or, why didn't God rescue James from Herod? And secondly: how to be faithful to Christ in a world that doesn't care to know Him?

These are my two questions for today. Why did God let James die and not Peter? If I were James' mama or wife, you can bet I would be asking. But you know who wasn't asking? Peter.

Eugene Peterson translates verse 6 to say *Peter slept like a baby between two soldiers*. Would you sleep, the night before your execution by sword? I'd be in the prison ladies' room. Not Peter. When the angel woke him, he thought he was still dreaming. He fell asleep knowing what the next day held. Knowing he would experience nothing more Christlike than this very imprisonment, this exact sentence, this perfect death. And he is not afraid. He IS at peace. Because whether we live or die we belong to the Lord.

If we die we have life, and if we live we have life and work to do. Many months before she died, I went to the oncologist with my mother, and he told her that except for having metastasized lung cancer she was in remarkably good health. It would have been a joke, except that he wasn't joking at all. He was complimenting her. I thought so often about that – about how she was both so healthy and so sick at the very same time.

I think about it now, in relationship to the church and our own capacity to thrive and fail simultaneously. Mark my words, Friends: the final failure of the contemporary church in the West to reach the world in need of Christ will not come by way of state-sponsored persecution. It will come from within. From a morally corrupt clergy that function as corporate executives instead of shepherds, leading believers to treat faith in Christ Jesus as a commodity with which to attain a more apologetic, religious version of the same American dream their non-religious neighbors pursue.

And I know that is pretty harsh. But what I don't know is if it is overstated? What I do know is that we are not persecuted. I know that the same conditions that existed in the New Testament church now exist, but thousands of miles from where we worship today.

Acts is great for churches who need to be faithful in a hostile, threatening world – North Korea today, for example. Imprisonment is an everyday reality for Christian brothers and sisters in North Korea, a country run by as nutty a fox as Herod ever was. Though preachers there would never waste words saying so. Preachers there spend their words like gold.

But what about us? What do we learn about being faithful, where the church is safe – protected, even? Friends, do you ever think about how I can stand here and say whatever I want about Barack Hussein Obama? “His ears are big! His jokes aren't funny! He's wonderful! Vote for him! Don't vote for him. He's terrible! He's lovely!” Anything at all I want to say about him. You can fire me, but President Obama can't arrest me. He can't put me to death for the things I say. Because the law is on my side. The law protects me, not him.

And what do we, the church, DO with the great privilege of this protection? We are supposed to be doing what James and Peter were doing when Herod laid his creepy hands on them, what Jesus told the church to do from the very beginning, protected or not: *love one another, feed my sheep* – a redundancy, of course. As Luke wrote it, the apostles were in fact feeding people when Herod snatched James.

A prophet named Agabus got wind of a crop failure that was going to cause famine throughout the Roman Empire. He reported it to the apostles, and they got busy collecting money to buy food to feed their churches in Judea when the time came.

I love that they were busy at the ordinary business of church life when Herod turned on them again. I've no idea what we do for brothers and sisters in North Korea directly. Pray, of course. But just as critical, it seems to me, we must not squander the freedom they don't have – this freedom of ours to tell and to love in the name of Jesus without fear, the freedom that makes our life together something other than a security blanket for comforting ourselves, reassuring ourselves that we really are *good, kind, generous, loving, helpful* people.

Friends – Beloved – if we choose, this freedom might just as easily be conceived as armor and supply, as the equipment for doing the work and will of God in our own time and place. My favorite English translation says in verse 18,

When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.

I like thinking of Christian discipleship as the Spirit leading the church, our church, in our life together, to make *no small commotion*: by serving the poor with dignity and joy; by sharing the love of Christ however and wherever we noticed it lacking; by being authentically engaged with our community and the human need we find there. And by living our lives joyfully and fearlessly in this tense and fearful world.

We are allowed after all. It's not the tiniest bit dangerous. It's ever so much fun. And it is precisely as the Lord has directed. Would you pray with me?