

Acts 12:6-19

"The Surprise of Answered Prayer"

A Sunday School teacher was struggling to open a combination lock on the supply cabinet. She had been told the combination, but couldn't quite remember it. Exasperated, she went to the pastor's study and asked for help. The pastor came into the room and began to turn the dial. After the first two numbers he paused and stared blankly for a moment. Finally he said, "You know, I can't remember the combination either." Then he folded his hands and looked serenely heavenward and his lips moved silently. Then he looked back at the lock, and quickly turned to the final number, and opened the lock. The teacher was amazed. "Pastor, I can't believe you prayed and God gave you the combination," she said. "It's really nothing," he answered. "The combination is written on a piece of paper taped to the ceiling."

I loved this story because it speaks volumes about the value that prayer sometimes has in our lives. What I mean is that, because we are "good church people" it is important to appear that we are people of prayer. But sometimes, we're really not. Let's be honest. How many times have you listened to someone's concerns and said, "You'll be in my prayers" and then walked away and never given it another thought? It's not that we are disingenuous. It's just that we are human and life gets busy and we forget.

At other times, I wonder if we just pray because we know we should but deep in our hearts, we don't have expectations for our prayers really changing much. As we at Nazareth seek to "be the church", this passage begs the question: are we a people of prayer? And if not, how do we truly become a people of prayer?

Praying is a major element in the Bible. It is how the great forefathers and mothers of our faith communicated with God, and God with them. We are told often that Jesus Christ, our risen savior, withdrew from others to be in prayer with his Heavenly Father for guidance, comfort and wisdom. And as we have studied the book of Act together this summer we have seen how the founders of the Christian church prayed for every decision and occasion that they faced. Also the Apostle Paul tells us many times to "pray without ceasing".

And this story in Acts is a perfect example of why prayer was so essential to the spread of the Good News after Jesus' Ascension. The church was being persecuted by the Roman leader Herod, who was doing a great job of following in the footsteps of his grandfather, Herod the Great. *He* was the Herod who felt so threatened when he heard about the king of the Jews being born as a baby in Bethlehem that he ordered all children in and around the area under the age of two to be killed.

Now, several decades later, this Herod discovers that putting Christian leaders to death is something that increases his popularity. So after having James, the brother of John killed, he has Peter arrested and schedules his execution. Our story finds Peter in prison, for the third time, I might add. It seems Peter was a repeat offender of preaching the Gospel! So he is sure that this time he is awaiting certain death.

But Luke tells us in a very dramatic turn of events that an angel appears and wakes Peter from his sleep and leads him out of the prison. It is a mystical sort of event as even Peter doesn't know if it is real, or a vision, or just a dream. The angel and Peter walk up to the iron gates of the prison and they open all by themselves.

And then Peter's story becomes a lot like our story. You see, while all of this is going on the whole church is praying for Peter's release. Yet when Peter appears at the door, the servant

girl Rhoda, who has heard the fervent prayers, is so shocked to see him that, instead of inviting him in and praising God for answered prayers, she shuts the door in his face. And when the praying church hears her tale, they basically say, "That can't be Peter – he's in jail. We're here praying for his freedom, so he can't be free." So what do we make of this story as we seek to "be the church"?

Well the first thing this story teaches us is that God sees our trials. Obviously, while this whole drama was unfolding among his people, God was aware of the danger that Peter was in. He understood the fear that Jesus' followers were facing after they had seen one of their brothers, James, killed. And this is because God is an active God who is involved in our everyday lives.

We know this because God was not content to just create the world and then watch us from afar. The prophet Isaiah says that God knows each of us by name. Luke tells us that we are so valued by God that God knows every hair on our heads. And while these may seem like pithy sayings that placate our needs, we KNOW that God wanted to experience life for and with us to the point that he would become one of us in the person of Jesus Christ.

But the real hope of this for us today is that it is a reminder that, if God sees our trials then this means that God is still sovereign. That our Heavenly Father still sits on the throne. And knowing that Jesus lived, died and conquered death for us helps us truly realize in our very being that whatever is over our heads is already under God's feet! What a comfort for us all to know that, even as we have watched with horror the events in the news this week, or when we experience personal sorrows and hardships that God still has a plan for our lives. We may not always understand God's ways, but by our knowledge of God's promises made and kept, we know that God's sovereign will is best. Friends, this is sometimes the only real hope that we have to hold on to.

The most logical next step in this sermon would be to say that God hears our prayers. But as a minister, I have found that most people believe that God hears prayers until they are dealing with a really awful crisis that is not being resolved in the time that they want it to. And it is only logical that when we are in the midst of something so emotional that we would say, "God, why aren't you listening to me?" If I were a betting woman, I would say that God knows that we don't really mean that – we just need someone to lash out at when the test comes back positive or the marriage dissolves or our child is involved with drugs. God hears our anguish and hurts when we hurt so God understands our feelings of despair. And does not hold them against us. I can say this, friends, because I have personally met the God who holds you when you weep. And that God is real. And I have lashed out in anger at God and God has not abandoned me yet.

So I think a more important thing to look at is Peter and his actions while this whole drama is taking place. Remember I said that Peter is basically on death row. He is chained to a guard on each side and one is standing watch over him. Yet, Peter goes to sleep! He completely trusts in God's plan for his life and knows that, no matter what happens, God will take care of him. This means that Peter truly turned over his life and all that was in it to God. Peter expects God to answer the prayers being made by and for him and is comfortable resting in God's answer.

Many years ago when I was sitting in a carpool line, I stumbled onto a female preacher on a religious radio station. To this day, I don't know her name but I will always remember her words. She said that she hadn't always been a Christian but when she became one, she was told to take all her "stuff" that she had carried around with her and lay them at the foot of the cross. So she did – just gave them right over to Jesus.

Then she said that after a few days, she felt so funny without her stuff that she went back and got it! And I knew exactly how she felt. It is easy to think to ourselves, "God has so much to deal with – war, homelessness, hunger, people needing to be comforted over the loss of loved ones and abilities. I don't really need to bother him with my little problems – I'll just take those off of God's hands."

Well friends, it is easy to convince ourselves that we are being noble or selfless when we do this but it is really just pure lack of faith in God doing God's job! And I say this only from personal experience! Yet, Peter slept like a baby in that prison knowing full well that God was completely in control and therefore, everything was going to be to his good and God's glory.

But what makes this story, which goes from being a tragedy to a comedy and then back to a tragedy again is the reaction of the people in the house with Rhoda. The new church was doing just what Jesus had taught them. Praying. Yet, when God answered their prayers, they didn't believe the truth when it was right in front of their eyes. So they were praying without ceasing but also without faith. In other words, they were not praying expectantly! And that is how the story becomes a tragedy again. And I believe it the desire of God's heart for each of us to pray expecting our good and righteous and sovereign God to hear us. And to still be our God. But that doesn't always mean that God will give us what we ask for.

Because we know that the Bible is full of unanswered prayers. Moses begged God to let him lead his people into the Promised Land. Moses died on Mt. Nebo, his prayer refused. Paul prayed three times for the removal of that "thorn in the flesh." He never tells us exactly what that meant, but whatever it was, he prayed earnestly that it would be removed from his life. But it wasn't. Instead, he was compelled to make the best of it for the rest of his life.

Even Jesus prayed a prayer that was left unanswered. Jesus cried out in the garden, “take this cup of suffering from me.” He prayed that he would not have to experience death on the cross. But as with all of these other seemingly unanswered prayers, the prayer were simply answered according to the will of God. Which means they were not really unanswered at all. There is an old Arabian proverb that says, "If God answered the prayers of dogs, it would rain bones." And then where would the world be?

So we are still called as a church to be people of prayer. To remember that we all made the promise to help Katie and Ben raise Ginny up in the ways of God. And since she will not be a part of this particular church, the best way to do that is with our prayers. Our young people have gone to Montreat for a week of spiritual growth, fellowship and fun. Next week they will be back and will help lead worship so we can all get a glimpse of the changes in their lives and their faith. There are nine young people and two adults – their names are listed in the bulletin.

I have contacted an individual or couple and asked them to be prayer warriors for each of these, our brothers and sisters in Christ. But I hope that we will all find time to pray intentionally for them while they are away. And to pray expectantly that the Lord will touch their lives in the way that helps prepare them to be the next leaders in God's church.

Peter's escape from prison reminds us that the Holy Spirit has already decided who the next installed pastor will be at Nazareth but if we do not pray expectantly for God to lead us in the right decision, and let God be God, then we may end up not following God's will.

So this story in Acts is a reminder to us that we are **all** asked to pray for one another and with one another and to EXPECT the prayers to be answered in a way that changes us. Because when our hearts and our lives are changed, miracles happen. And the Gospel continues to be

told and to be lived and the church continues to be faithful to God, just as God is faithful to each of us. Amen.