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Catalog No. 20170108

Acts 12:1-25

15th Message

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January 8, 2017

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A Familiar Plotline

I began working at PBC two years ago and quickly got to know our then Junior High Director, Emily Guest. As my friendship with Emily grew, I discovered a new calling on my life. I saw a need in Emily that God had particularly equipped me to meet, so I began a new ministry—that of movie mentoring.

You see, Emily is a decade younger than me, so she missed a bunch of classic 80s and 90s movies, which as you know, would create a huge void in her life. When we would hang out, I would make all these cultural references or quote iconic movie lines and Emily would just give me this blank stare. So I took it upon myself to movie mentor Emily, to expose her to the notable, best and worst films of the 80s and 90s.

One of those films was *Adventures In Babysitting*. As the plot goes, a teenage girl named Brenda decides to run away from home, but she doesn't run away very well. Brenda gets stuck at the Greyhound Bus Station in downtown Chicago. She has no cash, no car, she's lost her glasses and can't see, and she's surrounded by the shady characters that frequent urban bus stations. Brenda needs help, so she calls her best friend Chris to come get her.

Now Chris has a license and a car, but she's babysitting and the audience is left wondering—can Brenda be saved? But hearing the desperation in Brenda's voice through the pay phone line, Chris loads her babysitting charges into her mother's wood-paneled station wagon, and drives into the wilds of downtown Chicago. She's determined to pick up Brenda and get back home before the parents return from a party.

Chris's simple plan to rescue Brenda leads her and the kids on a perilous misadventure. In one evening, they encounter a gun-totting, jealous husband with a hook for a hand; a carjacker; and a ruthless crime boss. They accidentally stumble into the middle of a turf war between rival gangs, and later they are chased onto the

stage in a blues club and are told, "Nobody leaves this place without singing da blues."¹ Then they must sing their way to freedom. It's a harrowing tale, but in the end Chris gets all the kids and Brenda back home safely.

This a familiar plotline: an innocent needs rescue; a hero or heroes vault into action; they come up with an elaborate plan and go out on a rescue mission.

We find the same plotline in Acts 12, with a few minor differences. Here, an innocent is imprisoned by a tyrant. There's a real threat of violence and death. The early church is at yet another crisis point. What will they do? What will happen to the innocent prisoner? Let's pick up the story in Acts 12.

Acts 12:1-6:

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. 2 He killed James the brother of John with the sword, 3 and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. 5 So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.

A Violent Crisis

This is first mention of Herod in Acts. Though Herod was a pivotal figure in the Gospels, Kings Herod make only minor appearances in the story of the early church. The Herod we encounter here is Herod Agrippa 1, the grandson of that so called "Herod the Great" who had all the toddler and infant boys of Bethlehem killed in Matthew chapter 2. Agrippa follows in his grandfather's violent footsteps and persecutes the church.

We know from historical sources that Herod Agrippa had great power. He knew the Emperors Caligula and Claudius personally. This meant that Agrippa had greater power and more territory than his grandfather Herod the Great. Jewish historian Josephus wrote of Agrippa's popularity among the Jews. He described Agrippa as a generous king who was "mild tempered," and "equally liberal to all men."² (Jewish Antiquities. 19.7.3) But in the book of Acts, Luke makes it clear that this was *not* the perspective of the early Christians.

We read that Agrippa "laid violent hands" on some in the church. Specifically he had James killed with a sword. Though less famous than crucifixion, death by sword was a popular execution method for Romans. James was likely beheaded with that sword, which implies that he was a political enemy. Now it seems that Herod will continue executing for political favor with the Jews, and the next person to die is Peter.

We see Peter guarded by a number of Roman soldiers. Though it sounds like overkill, what is described here is the usual number of guards for an important prisoner. Two guards were locked in the cell with Peter, with an additional two posted outside. This set of four guards would be changed every three hours overnight so the soldiers would be alert for any escape or rescue attempts.

Peter's position is precarious. Herod is simply waiting for the religious festival to be over so he can bring Peter "out to the people." That phrase meant there would be a public trial, likely followed by a guilty verdict and a quick execution.

I wonder what the members of the early church were thinking in these days. Were they thinking of ways to rescue Peter? Were they sending out messengers to enlist the help of the zealots? Or were they subdued after James' execution, already mourning for Peter?

And what was going on in Peter's mind? Was he afraid of what would happen in the morning? After all the ups and downs of his discipleship, was he finally, fully trusting? Or was he looking around his cell for unorthodox tools to use for a MacGyver-esque escape?

If Acts 12 followed the classic movie plotline, someone would certainly be planning a jailbreak. But the Bible is no box office cliché. Instead of digging an escape tunnel, Peter is sleeping! And the members of the church? There was no frenzied plotting. They were praying. That's it. That's their grand plan in this crisis. Rest and prayer.

Now, that would not play well on our movie screens. Modern viewers would see it and likely think—snoozefest! Where's the action? Where are the courageous heroes?

If *you* had never read the Bible before, wouldn't you be wondering— is this it? Is prayer really all the church is going to do in response to Peter's imprisonment? Their brother and friend, one of their great leaders, is about to die. Is prayer enough?

Earnest Prayer

We live in a fix-it culture. When we are confronted with inconvenience, challenge, or crisis, we are told to problem-solve. To strategize. To come up with a plan to make it better or make it right. Americans are tired of navigating heavy traffic and long commutes? Invent a self-driving car. The world is at risk to an Ebola outbreak? Develop a vaccine. A soldier is abducted by a terrorist cell? Send in a SEAL team or Delta Force. Overall the message is: if there's a problem, do something!

But in Acts 12 the early church gives us a different example. It seems that their first and only response to Peter imprisonment was to pray. We don't know the words of their prayers. Luke tells us only that they prayed earnestly.

Now, I believe that prayer is an open line of communication, and sometimes God talks back and prompts us to act. There are instances in Acts where the believers helped people escape—remember Acts 9 when the Jews wanted to kill Saul, so Saul's disciples helped him escape by lowering him down the city wall in a basket? Sometimes God wants his people to act; but other times it's clear that the earnest prayers of his people *is* action enough.

The word earnest comes from the verb "to stretch out." In the Gospels the verb is often used as Jesus healed others; he would stretch out his hand and touch the sick. We see a live-action example of earnest prayer in Luke 22. There, Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives just before his arrest and death. He asked God to intercede and deliver him from the coming suffering. Luke 22:44 reads, "And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground."

Can you picture the fervor of Jesus in these moments? He's praying so intently, he's so focused on his need, that he's visibly sweating. This is earnest prayer. It's intense action. It stretches you. It comes from the depth of the soul where strong emotions like agony swirl. It's so heartfelt that it has physical consequences.

Earnest prayer was the church's response to Peter's imprisonment. They didn't rush to gather blueprints or weapons or recruit zealots. They gave the force of their emotions and the intent focus of their bodies to praying for a brother in need.

Praying Together

No one here needs me to tell you that prayer is a fundamental and important part of the Christian life. You've read the Bible. You've seen Jesus' example. Rather than remind you *to* pray, I'd like us to think about *how* we pray.

Generally, I hear Christians talk of prayer in terms of personal communication with God. As such, we often pray alone, and we pray about our own stuff, our individual lives and needs. But as we've seen in the early church, prayer was often a group exercise. There are several instances in Acts where the believers prayed together. If you peek down at chapter 12, verse 12 you'll see that the believers had *gathered* to pray for Peter.

Is there something significant to this gathered prayer? Does something special happen when people pray earnestly *together*? I assume that you've prayed earnestly by yourself. And you've probably prayed earnestly with your spouse, your family, or even with a small group of friends. But what would happen if a *large* group of us got together and prayed earnestly for a critical need in our community?

My friend Sharon and I traveled to England in 1999. We stayed with a friend of Sharon's in London, and our host invited us to a prayer meeting at her church. I assumed it would be like all the prayer meetings I'd attended before—20-30 people praying quietly and slowly in a small room. Instead, we entered a packed sanctuary of 500+ people. Even the balconies were full. There was no devotional reflection or instructions by the pastor. He simply got up and said that we had gathered to pray for the city of London, for those in need. And then he said, "Let's pray." And suddenly, all 500+ people began praying out loud, with passion and at great volume.

At first I was overwhelmed by all the noise and what felt like chaos. But as I settled in and began to pray, I got swept up in the energy of the prayers around me. We prayed for 2.5 hours, non-stop. It seemed like we could have gone on all night. Later as we walked home in the dark, I felt that our earnest prayers had somehow made London a safer and brighter city.

Acts 12 shows us that the earnest prayer of the gathered church matters. It is powerful. We'll see what comes of that prayer in a moment. But would you like to experiment with me, and see what could happen if we gathered for some earnest prayer?

There's a prayer gathering here at PBC on February 1st at 7:15pm. We will pray specifically over issues of race in our community and country. I wonder—could the local church and the global church effect mighty change if we gathered together and earnestly prayed over this divisive issue? Let's see. Let's give it everything we've got. Consider joining us on February 1st.

Let's continue with Acts 12 where the action picks up in verse 7.

Prison Break

Acts 12:7-17:

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

12 When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. 13 And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" 16 But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

There's quite a bit of comic relief in these verses: the angel having to strike Peter hard to wake him up; Peter thinking he's seeing a vision even as he walks out of the prison; the soldiers somehow missing this entire, obvious escape; and Rhoda forgetting to unlock the gate, leaving Peter knocking at the door. It feels like a children's fable, where elements are exaggerated to enhance the moral of the story.

But this is not fantasy. It's a fantastic moment where we witness divine action in the human story. Like Luke 2, when the angel suddenly appeared before the shepherds to tell of the birth of Jesus, Acts 12 makes us witnesses to another triumphant moment.

What happened that night in Herod's prison is remarkable. The church prayed earnestly to God and an angel of the Lord appeared. A bright light shone, chains fell loose, the doors swung opened, and Peter was free and safe with no soldiers in pursuit. God sent an angel as his Delta Force.

Peter realizes that God interceded for him in a very special way, sending an angel to do the work no human could. In verse 11, Peter says, "the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me." Rescued literally means "to choose out" and it is often translated *deliver*. This is the language that is used to describe God's work for his people when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

God has a long history of rescuing his people. The theme of divine rescue started long ago at the Red Sea. It continued when Israel was oppressed by mighty Canaanite armies, so God sent judges to rescue his people. Later Israel suffered the consequences of their own idolatry, and God sent prophets to call them to repentance. And much later God rescued his people from exile in foreign countries. Acts 12 shows us that these divine rescues continued into the days of the early church.

It's a recurring story. God's people are in crisis. Suffering and persecution are here. Death is coming soon. There seems to be no way out. But God! God shows up and rescues. God's steadfast love for his people endures forever. Even into the days of the early church. Even to *this* day.

I know that God has rescued each of us at least once. We were all once slaves to sin, facing certain death. But Jesus took our place on the cross. He rescued us from sin and death and gave us new life with him. So there's one major rescue you can note. But are there other times God has rescued you?

Few of us may have been imprisoned like Peter, but have you ever suffered persecution? Have you been in a crisis where it seemed there was no escape, and no plan or person able to rescue you? Did you see God show up? Maybe you were like Peter, not seeing clearly in the moment what was happening. But now, looking back, you can see God's hand in your rescue.

We live in an age when we are more dazzled by special effects than we are by real rescues. But I know that God still rescues. We should be moved by what God does for us. Rhoda shows us what should be the natural response to being rescued by God: joy. Rhoda's joy was so full that it made her forget to unlock the door for Peter.

How has God rescued you? Do you feel the joy of your rescue? Is it still fresh or has the joy lost some of its sizzle? This isn't a guilt trip—strong emotions fade over time—but it's important that we remember our rescue stories and reconnect with that joy. Peter confirms this importance.

Tell Your Rescue Story

Once the believers finally let Peter in the gate, he told them how God rescued him. Then Peter says, “tell these things to James and to the brothers.” His instructions seem rather bland in English, but in Greek they tell another story. He uses the verb ἀπαγγελλω. Ἀγγελλος is the word for “angel”. He’s not telling them to be angels, but to do what angels do. Angels are God’s messengers, sent to tell God’s Good News to God’s people. “Proclaim” would be a better translation here, one that catches the spirit of Peter’s command.

Peter knows that the best response to God’s great rescue, other than deep joy, is to proclaim the story to others. Why is it important to retell our stories? Because we dole out hope and encouragement in the retelling.

If you know me, you know that I love telling stories. That’s because I come from a storytelling family. My father is famous for his stories. The grandkids all want Papa to tuck them in at night so they can hear about Chief Red Cloud or the Man with the Golden Arm. The kids have heard the same stories their entire lives, but they never get tired of hearing them. These stories make them feel good, and those feelings have bonded the kids to my dad. Bedtime stories have the power to transform a grumpy gremlin into a happy kid at the end of a very long day.

In the same way, proclaiming God’s rescue stories restores our joy in the Lord, and passes that joy to others. If *you* are suffering, lost, and scared, you might find hope in the story of how God showed up in my crisis. Hearing these stories bonds us to one another and to our Father, and this will give us the hope and positivity we need to continue living as disciples sent to a dark and difficult world.

When we see the results of God’s work on earth, we must share the story! Follow the example of the angels and the encouragement of our brother Peter and proclaim God’s victories.

The end of Acts chapter 12 is a departure from the rescue story. Peter’s part is done, but the effects of God’s rescue continue. Let’s read the remaining 7 verses that focus again on Herod Agrippa.

The Word Endures

Acts 12:18-24:

Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 19 And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king’s chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king’s country for food. 21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” 23 Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Herod is peeved that Peter has escaped. In his fury, he has the guards executed and then travels to Caesarea, which was his administrative capital. We won’t go into the details of why he’s gone there and the people with whom he interacts, but it’s a strange way to close the story of Peter’s escape. Why did Luke place this story here?

Certainly Luke includes this bit for its historical importance—he wants readers to know that Herod died. But I think Luke also records Herod’s death to make a greater point. I’d like you to look at these final 7 verses of the chapter as a parable. Placed directly after Peter’s rescue story, this vignette sets up strong contrasts and allows readers to make judgments.

Notice how this bit about Herod stands in stark contrast to the story of Peter. When we meet him at the beginning of the chapter, Peter is powerless. Herod was the man with all the power. Their contrasting positions sets up the tension in the story.

And look at the contrast in posture! In the earlier verses, we saw the church praying earnestly to God for Peter. Here, we see Herod soaking up the praise of his subjects, the kind of praise that is meant for God alone.

Then note the contrast in God's response. God honored the disciples' prayers by sending an angel to rescue Peter. But here, God sends an angel to kill Herod.

Certainly this parable teaches that God values humility, and that God can rescue even the most powerless of people. But hear this part again—I'm splicing the verses together—Herod delivered a great speech, but the Lord struck him down. Herod died, and "the word of God increased and multiplied."

Friends, human power is finite, but God's power is infinite. God's Word cannot be stopped, even by the most popular, powerful, arrogant, violent king. Acts 12 reminds us that God's Word will always overcome and endure, increase and multiply.

And we have to note the implication. God's word endured because God rescued Peter...and then Peter shared his story with the believers gathered at Mary's house...and *those* believers shared the story with James and the other apostles...and then Luke wrote it down so generations of believers could hear and retell this story of rescue. The Word multiplies because people proclaim the Word.

Now *we* are the sent ones. We are to be the joyful messengers of God's rescue! We can pass hope to one another. God wants us to tell our rescue stories so his Word will spread across the earth, so that all might be saved.

So here is your mission today, if you choose to accept it: share your rescue story. Maybe with the person sitting next to you this morning. Maybe with a friend over lunch. Maybe with your small group when you meet this week. Or maybe you can share with your family when you eat dinner tonight. Tell your stories and then watch and see the good things that God will do among us. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ *Adventures in Babysitting*. Touchstone Pictures, 1987.

² Josephus, Flavius. *Antiquities of the Jews*. 19.7.3.