

***Words and Deeds: Troubled Times***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***June 23, 2019***  
***Psalm 9; Luke 19:41-44; Acts 21:26-40***

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 21:26-40. Hear now the perfect and sacred word of the Lord. “The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them. When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, “Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place.” (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.) The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, “Away with him!” As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, “May I say something to you?” “Do you speak Greek?” he replied. “Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?” Paul answered, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.” Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he spoke to them in Aramaic.”

When I think of the word “trouble,” I think of *The Music Man*. You might remember the musical where a flimflam artist named Harold Hill comes to River City in 1912 trying to sell the town musical instruments and band uniforms, even though he doesn’t know how to play anything himself. How does he do it? He convinces the town that “We’ve got trouble...right here in River City...with a capital “T” and that rhymes with “P” and that stands for POOL.” Assured that the children in town are one step away from moral collapse because of the billiard hall in town, they buy into starting a band as a way to keep their children safe. Never mind the fact that Harold Hill’s argument makes no logical sense whatsoever. The crowd gets swept away in worry and winds up right where Hill wants them – giving him all their spare cash for a band he can’t deliver.

I was reminded of *The Music Man* this week as I was preparing my sermon because trouble often starts not because of a true injustice but because someone stands to benefit from it. We’ve seen Paul deal with mobs before – the last one at the hands of Demetrius, who united the idol makers of Ephesus who thought Paul’s teachings might mean less customers.

Now there's another mob forming. You might remember from the last few weeks that Paul and his friends were heading for Jerusalem, certain through the message of the Holy Spirit that Paul would face severe hardship and persecution there. When they arrive, things are relatively quiet, and Paul agrees to help some Jewish men fulfill their vows to God to show the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that he was still one of them. He'd gone to the temple, started his own purification rites, and then told the temple when they could expect these men to come back with their sacrifices to fulfill their promise before God. His final washing at the temple was on the seventh day – probably the same day the men could fulfill their vow.

Now some Jews from the province of Asia see Paul at the temple. We've talked about how Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years teaching. It was for a long time the headquarters of his ministry. These fellows are most likely from there, definitely from the surrounding area. They know how effective Paul's message has been – lots of converts, enough that even the pagans like Demetrius knew what an effect Paul had been having.

So now they have their opportunity, and they take it. They make four specific accusations – that Paul is against the Jews, against the Law of Moses, against the temple, and that he has profaned the temple by bringing Greeks into the inner courts, where Gentiles cannot enter under penalty of death. All of these charges are serious, and they are echoes of the charges made against Stephen in chapter 7.

None of the charges truly holds up. Paul loves his people and wants them to come to Jesus and receive the fulfillment of the promises made to them in the Law of Moses. He was going to the temple to finish his ceremonial vow. And Paul was trying to help the Jewish Christians see that he was a part of them, that his work among the Gentiles didn't change the fact that he was still Jewish. Why would he even think of bringing a Gentile in the temple, which would have meant certain death, while he was displaying his Jewishness to the Jewish Christians? It's ironic that he is arrested at the point that Paul is at his most Jewish!

Something telling and important happens – Paul is hauled out of the temple, and the temple gates are shut. I'd never noticed this before, but this is the last time the temple factors into the story of Acts or into the worship of Christians. Symbolically, the gates of the temple close for Christians. They have rejected God's messengers to them, many of them who confirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, and this is the last one. And within a generation, the temple will be completely destroyed – and to this day, it is still in ruins, with a portion of it covered by the Jerusalem mosque.

News of the riot gets around fast, but it doesn't hurt that the Roman garrison was right by the temple. (They stationed the soldiers there intentionally because they knew the temple would be the center of any trouble in the town.) So the Romans come out, and it's a big enough deal that they come out in force. The officers are centurions, by definition leaders of a hundred men. Likely 200 armed Roman soldiers have out to stop the mob. (It also explains why they stopped beating Paul – it was always a big deal when the Romans got involved.) Nobody can give the commander a straight story about what Paul has done, so he has Paul put in chains and brought back to the barracks; they have to carry him just to get him out of the crowd, they're so upset.

The commander is far more understanding when Paul speaks to him in polite and fluent Greek. The commander thought this might be the return of a guy who led a huge gang of “dagger men” in a revolution plot a few years back. He’s surprised to find out that Paul not only not the Egyptian they’d been watching for, he’s a Greek speaker from a respected Roman city, and he is in fact a Jew. The commander figures that because of all that, he actually has something worth hearing. He lets Paul speak to the crowd, and we’ll get to hear Paul’s defense next week. Come back; you won’t want to miss it!

Now I have to admit, this is a hard passage to preach; a lot of folks skip it in a study of Acts because in a sense, it’s all plot. Nothing deeply theologically jumps out at you for you to say, “Boy, I need to think about that when I get home today and should talk it over at lunch with my family.” But it points to so many things in the modern world that I could go in a hundred different directions. So I hope you’ll indulge me a little bit to tell you what I see in this passage and hopefully what God is wanting us to perceive as we study this.

*Persecution of Christians begins with the worldly fear of losing power and control.* We talked about this in a different way several weeks ago with Demetrius the idol maker and the issue of fake news. The same thing is absolutely true here with the Jews from the province of Asia. Their whole story is, “Paul’s speaking against our people and our faith and our temple.” Paul is preaching Jesus, who not only fulfills Judaism but also radically overturns the power structures within that faith. No wonder Paul was on his way to being killed by the mob!

Now I want to turn this to today, and I want to look specifically to the powers and authorities around the world today and the persecution of Christians. Hinduism creates a class-separated society where the upper castes have power and the lowest classes usually have none. While occasionally someone breaks through the caste scheme, Hinduism promotes the power structure. Islam centers power in the religious hierarchy and in dictators carrying out the religious hierarchy’s will. Communist atheism centers power in the state and gives power to the well-connected, those who are loyal to the government. And to be fair, historically, there have been times where the Christian church attempted to gain secular power for itself, when it allied itself with nation-states for the benefit of the clergy rather than the building of the Kingdom of God. We are not immune to the world’s desire for control.

But true Christianity rejects all of that. Christianity accepts one Lord, which is not the state and not the king and not even the church – it’s the Lord Jesus Christ. The power in Christianity comes through our own weakness and our surrender to the Lord who empowers us to do His will through His Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, we speak truth to power. We call every power on this earth to account because all of them are subject to God. Even the powers that often agree with us, we praise them when they do right and we call them out when they do evil. Not too many chapters ago, Paul confronted Peter – the head of the church – when he was in error and started shunning Gentile Christians because of pressure from the Jewish believers.

True Christians threaten every power structure because true Christians acting according to Christ's ways can't be bought. We will bow to no earthly power as supreme. We believe Jesus when He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." That means that we can't say all religions lead to God. We also can't celebrate what God calls sin. We can tolerate it in the sense that we let everyone live their lives without persecution even when we radically disagree with them. When Jesus said to love our neighbors, He was speaking to a world where the neighbors of many Jews were pagans living in pagan disobedience to God.

But the message was never, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." (Which is true, by the way, but only wonderful in the eternal, godly sense, not in the earthly, worldly sense.) The preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus and the disciples was always, "Repent of your sin and believe, trust, in God, because the Kingdom of God is at hand." The message was the same to everyone.

People who can't be bought, who won't bow to a political party or ideology or false religion out of expediency, who love others enough to warn them of the coming judgment of God on the world, who have already accepted that to follow Christ is to learn to die daily to our selves and our selfishness – we're dangerous. Even if you're quiet and unassuming and mind your business, wearing the name of Jesus means your loyalties always lie with Him before any earthly power. And even today, just like with Paul and the crowd at the temple, there are those who would silence Christians because the more of us there are, even though we don't seek power for ourselves, the more we threaten the world's way of business.

*The persecution of Christians in the modern world is real and growing.* We have seen some attempts at it in the United States, people using the legal system to try and force Christians to abandon their ethics, but it's pretty minor. According to the organization Open Doors USA, over 75% of the world's population lives in the 73 countries where Christians live under high, very high, or extreme persecution for their faith. 1 in 9 Christians faces high levels of persecution for standing on the rock of Christ; that's up from 1 in 12 in 2018. On average, 11 Christians a day lose their lives directly because of their belief in Jesus. And it's only getting worse as countries begin to use advanced technology to spy on their people intentionally to marginalize and persecute Christians.

We usually hear nothing of it. A month ago, 17 Christians were abducted in Nigeria for ransom. I didn't know about it until I researched persecution this week. Many people are unaware of the 320 lives lost on Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka. Nobody is reporting on these awful crimes, or if they do, they're gone by the next 24-hour news cycle. As Pastor Andrew Brunson, himself held for two years in Turkey under false charges, said recently, "I don't think that we're prepared for what is coming. Especially the next generation, I fear that many of us are complacent and we're unaware and this means that the people in our churches are going to be blindsided by what comes. You are the ones as pastors and leaders of churches who have the task of preparing the next generation." A book about his experiences is being published by our denomination in the fall, and I already have two copies on order for us to share through our library.

All that said, our final thought is, *persecution makes for unusual partners*. It's the Roman soldiers that chain up Paul and fulfill the prophecy, but it's also the Romans that keep Paul from being torn apart limb from limb. The Roman commander, met with Paul's fluent and polite Greek, warms up to him enough to let him speak to his accusers under his protection. The very people the Jews hated and many Christians feared were the ones God used to save Paul.

In some areas of the world, Christian groups once divided by theological issues have begun to embrace one another because of persecution. In some areas where all religious beliefs are targeted, people of completely different faiths work together, giving the opportunity for Christian witness to them. Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, addressed a Mormon crowd at Brigham Young University saying, "I do not believe that we are going to heaven together, but I do believe we may go to jail together." We are in this location today because the property manager and owner is an Israeli Jew who knew we had lost our old church home due to issues of religious liberty in our old denomination. Many times, persecution brings more people into His Kingdom as others see our faithfulness in trial.

Where does this leave us? What can we do? The most effective thing we can do is pray – make prayer for the persecuted church a part of your daily prayers. Doesn't have to be long; you don't have to know a lot of details. Just be praying for the persecuted church. Just this week, I downloaded an app from Open Doors USA, an organization dedicated to publicizing the persecution of the church and relieving its struggles. (It's where a lot of my statistics come from.) They have an app that they update with just a couple stories every day of how you can be praying for the persecuted church. If you search for Open Doors Prayer App, you'll find it. We know that God hears our prayers and will answer them. I believe that when we enter into God's Kingdom, there will be so many people we will want to thank for their prayers for us – and if we've acted faithfully, others who will thank us when they learn of our prayers for them.

Now you can write to government officials – remember, persecution is a way God makes friends somehow, and He can use government officials for His purposes. God may lead you in that direction. But one of the things I'd never thought much about is that Open Doors is sending letters of encouragement to believers who are struggling to stay faithful – the families of kidnapped children in Nigeria, imprisoned believers in Iran. Through radio messages, you can even send a note of encouragement to those believers behind the curtain of the awful North Korean regime. We can let them know that they are not alone – which is actually the primary discouragement that almost all persecuted Christians share. There are fliers on the back table to remind you the website where to go so that you can participate. And they aren't the only organization doing this. Our goal is to get involved, to do something, to be actively loving our brothers and sisters around the world who have been saved by Jesus' blood and are now facing the wrath of this world for the honor of being with Christ in the next.

Next week, we'll hear Paul give his testimony to the crowd and their response. Lots of good stuff. For this week, I encourage us...may we keep the church around the world in prayer. We are blessed in so many incredible ways. I want to end today by reading our letter from Gracie that we just got in the mail. While the church in Peru isn't one that's under persecution, it faces staggering poverty. It is proof that our prayers and our support really do make a difference in the global church. Just listen...

“Dear sponsors [literally godparents], I greet you in the love of God. I am very happy about receiving your letter. I tell you that I spent a nice Christmas with my family and we had jelly, chocolate, Peruvian fruitcake, cake, and food; we stayed celebrating with my cousins. For Mother’s Day, I participated in reciting a poem for all the mothers. How did you spend Mother’s Day? How do you celebrate Father’s Day? I tell you that I am preparing a surprise for my dad that my little sister and I are going to give him – we hope the surprise comes out well. I say goodbye with a big hug and I ask you to pray for me and my family so that we know more about God. I will continue praying for you because I love you so much. May God bless you, Greysi Xiomara Yanayaco Cunyarache”

That is what happens when we faithfully support the least of our brothers and sisters in Christ. May that lead us all to greater faithfulness in praying for and helping the faithful around the world in their struggle for faith.