



Sunday, February 4, 2024

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Acts 12

Sermon Title: God's Sovereignty – Our Responsibility

The Lord's Supper

God you're so good. Praise the Lord. We gather today around the Lord's table. To remind us of what that was like, let me begin with a story. Jesus is together with His disciples. They're having supper. They have been together for three years. They are a very close group. They're eating together and enjoying fellowship. They have just spent a week in Jerusalem thinking about all the things. And in the back of their minds, they keep hearing this phrase that Jesus said, "I am going to die." They don't want to go there because they love being with Jesus. And then Jesus says to them, "Brothers..." and He would say to us today... "Brothers and sisters, my desire is for you to be with Me forever. And in order for that to happen, there is something that I have to do. I have to die so that you may live."

And the disciples around the table were confused. They're like, "I don't get that. Why do you have to die so that we can live?" And Jesus said, "Because we are all sinful. In order for our sins to be paid, there has to be justice done. And the only way to pay for your sins is through the death of a savior." But the other thing Jesus did was this. He said, "I know how quickly you forget things. I know that when things happen, you're thinking, 'Oh, I will remember this forever.'"

If we think about it ourselves, how many times has that happened in our life when we're like, "Oh, this moment was so big. I'm gonna remember this. And six months down the road, you're like, "Well, I remember some of it. Yeah, I can remember some of the details." For those of us, 20 years later, you're like, "Well, I mean, like, okay..." I mean, think about it. How many of you remember, for those of you who are over 30, what you got for your birthday when you were five years old? Some of us do. All right. At five years old, though, what you got for your birthday was the biggest thing. You think you are never going to forget that. But how soon we forget.

Jesus said to His disciples, "I want to give you a gift which you remember over and over again so that every time you do this, you remember the gift of life I gave you. And you remember what it cost Me to give you that." So Jesus, after supper, took some of the bread which they had and He broke it. He took a piece. He said, "This piece of bread... every time you eat this, I want you to remember that I sacrificed My body so that you can live. I am the bread of life. [Pastor John breaks the bread.]

Then Jesus afterwards took the wine [Pastor John pours the juice] and He said, "This is my blood. I am the light source of life. So every time you eat the bread and every time you drink from the cup, I want you to remember the gift of life that I give."

So I would like to invite the elders to come forward. As they are coming forward, I want you to think about the life that you have been given, and how, through the death and resurrection of Christ, you too receive life. I'm going to invite you to take a piece of bread - we serve gluten free bread here - and I invite you to hang on to it. Remember Christ's body which He gave for you, so that you may have life. And then we will eat it together.

[Elders pass out bread to the congregation.]

So Jesus took bread and when He had taken it, He said, "This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me. So every time you eat, remember that I sacrificed My life so that you may have life with Me." Take, eat, remember and believe the precious body of Christ was shed for you.

[Congregation eats bread.]

This time we will pass the juice. Again, we ask you to hold it. Think about your life and how we too require blood to be shed for us. And think about the fact that we have all sinned and what it means that Christ said, "I give my blood so that you don't have to."

[Elders pass out juice to the congregation.]

Jesus took the cup and He blessed it and He said, "This is my blood which I have shed so that the curse of man's sin may be paid for." And now He invites us to remember that through His death and resurrection, we too have our sins paid for. So take, drink, remember and believe that the death of Christ and the shedding of His blood paid for a complete remission of all your sins.

[Congregation drinks juice.]

Join me in prayer. Heavenly Father, we give You everlasting praise and thanks. That you have given us poor sinners so great a benefit. That you have drawn us into the communion of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior, whom You surrendered to death for us, and whom You give us this food and nourishment for eternal life. Grant us this benefit also that You will never allow us to forget these truths, but rather, Lord, that You will imprint them onto our hearts, that we may grow and thrive vigorously in faith, a faith committed to all good works.

And in doing so, that we may order and direct our whole human life to the exaltation of Your glory, and the upbuilding of our neighbor, through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, who in the unity of the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns with You eternally. Amen.

Sermon

God's Word, as Corry just prayed, never comes back empty. It comes to us today from Acts 12 as a place in which God speaks to us once again to remind us of some key aspects of how we can live and how we can grow in our faith. I invite you to turn with me to Acts 12. We will read the first 24 verses. Verse 25, you may notice, is in a story that's connected with Acts 13.

Peter's Miraculous Escape From Prison

12 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. **2** He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. **3** When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. **4** After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. **6** The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. **7** Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. **9** Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. **10** They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen." **12** When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. **13** Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door.

14 When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

15 "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." **16** But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. **17** Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. **19** After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Herod's Death

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. **20** He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

21 On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. **22** They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." **23** Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. **24** But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

Barnabas and Saul Sent Off

25 When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from [a] Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You for Your Word. Lord, we thank You that Your Word is living and active and Lord, that Your word pierces our hearts so that we may know You better. Lord, we ask that today You will open our ears, open our hearts, that we may hear Your voice, and that Your words may be spoken and that nothing of me may be said, but that it may be to Your glory and to Your honor. In Jesus' name, Amen.

So here we have kind of an interesting story which happens in the book of Acts. And in order to get this straight to begin with, it begins with a person by the name of Herod. Now Herod appears throughout the Gospels and into Acts. And some of us might think that Herod just keeps living. But then we know that Herods have died. So who are all these Herods?

So let's go back to the time when Jesus was born. That was Herod the Great. Herod the Great had three wives. One of them was Mariamne, who was actually of Jewish descent. Herod the Great died in about 4 BC. Then we have the story of Herod cutting off the head of John the Baptist. This Herod that we have here is a grandson to Herod the Great.

So this is Herod Antipas. He is a descendant of Mariamne, so he is also partly Jewish. Because of that, he gets along really well with the Jews. They like him.

When he was a boy, he was sent to Rome and while he was in Rome, he became friends with a guy by the name of Claudius, who later on became the emperor of Rome. And when Claudius became the emperor of Rome, Herod benefited because he had been king of a small section. And when Claudius became emperor, he enlarged his territory to include all of Judea, Samaria, and that whole area. So that's how Herod Antipas comes to this place. The Herod who cut off John the Baptist's head was this Herod's uncle. So we've got three of them.

And there's lots more Herods. But we're not going to get into all of them. But just so we know who Herod is in this place. So this is the grandson of Herod the Great. And he is Jewish.

So he captures James, the brother of John. So that is the Apostle James, who is one of the triune group of disciples who was very close to Jesus. Peter, James, and John was there at the Mount of Transfiguration. He captures him and he kills him. Now, he kills him with a sword. Just so we're straight, what he does is he beheads him. To behead him with a sword is different than the traditional way of beheading at that time. It was done with an ax. So this is a statement in which it's like, this is different. And the Jewish people thought this was kind of nice because here, Herod was helping them in going against the Christians.

So earlier on in the book of Acts, we have the story of Stephen, who was martyred. When Stephen is martyred, he is martyred by Jewish people. And it talks about the persecution of the Christians, and the persecution at that time was by Jewish people. Now Herod steps into the picture. Suddenly the Jews have an alibi. They have a political force which is going to help them persecute Christians. This is good. Herod recognizes that and he sees that they are quite pleased that the Jews were happy. And he's thinking, "Well, if you're happy that I killed James, just think about how happy you'll be if I kill Peter. He is the headstone. If we get rid of him, you're gonna be thrilled."

So he decides to have Peter put in prison. He does it at the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Now, today we celebrated communion. Passover was the time in which Jesus gave us communion. Passover is this time in which Jews flock to Jerusalem. So there are 1000's upon 1000's of Jews who are coming to Jerusalem. And Herod is there, and he's thinking, "This will be good." And part of it was, he beheaded James but he didn't make it a public ordeal. They kind of found out about it afterwards. And he's like, "Oh man, we need to take advantage of this." So he captures Peter. He puts him in jail. And right after the Passover, there is this Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days. So Peter is in jail for seven days.

We should also mention that Herod, in order to make sure this is secure, puts on four posts of four guards each. It kind of reminds you of Pilate, when the disciples come say to him, "You know, can we secure the grave of Christ?" And he says, "Make it as secure as you can." So here it's got four posts of guards of four each. Two of them would be right next to Peter. Chains on either arm. One would be at the first gate, second one would be at the second gate. There's no way Peter's getting out.

And Peter's there. Then it says that at the end of that seventh time just before was going to go to trial, Peter is sleeping peacefully. That says something about Peter. We heard this morning as well. That we know God provides. In **Isaiah 26**, it says this, "**3** You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. **4** Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal."

Peter, knowing that the next day he was going to be killed, was sleeping in peace. In fact, he was in such a deep sleep that when the angel came into the room and the bright light came on, it didn't wake him up.

It says there in **Acts 12:7**, "7 He struck Peter on the side and woke him up." Notice the word struck. It wasn't a gentle whisper, "Hey, Peter. Peter, you need to wake up." It was more like, "Hey, Peter!!! GET UP!" You understand now why Peter thought he was still in a dream, right?

The angel takes him out. Chains fall off. They go by the guards to get to the city gate and it opens up automatically. By the way, the Greek word used is *automatos*, which is where we get our word automatic from. It opens up. He gets in there. And he realizes suddenly that he's free. Do you notice where he goes first? He goes to the house of Mary. Mary is the mother of Mark who is also called John. Just a side note. Mark was also called John. We will see him a lot more in Acts later because this is John Mark, who goes with the Apostle Paul on many of the mission trips. This is the John Mark who was well known to Peter. This is the Mark who wrote the gospel which we have of Mark, which is likely an account of his hearing the stories from Peter, who was with Christ. So John Mark is pretty important.

But here's where Peter goes. Peter goes to the house of Mary because he knows that Mary's house is a house of prayer, which means he has been there many times before. They know him, as we see when Rhoda is like, "Oh I recognize that voice. Let me go tell everybody." But he knows that there is a house of prayer.

Wouldn't it be nice to be known as being a house of prayer? And that is how Mary is known. So Peter gets there. They are astonished to see him. Which in some ways might say something about their prayer. "God please let Peter out of jail. Hold on, you're here. No, it can't be right." How often don't we pray things and when God answers them, we're like, "Did that really happen?" And Peter says, "Shhhh. I need to go." And Peter leaves and he hides.

We need to think about this aspect of prayer a moment. You'll notice that he went to Mary's house and it says in **Acts 12:12**, "... many people had gathered and were praying." The people who were praying. They were praying earnestly. They were doing a 24/7 prayer fast for Peter. And God answered their prayer. Peter was released.

Did they know that James had been captured? Did they pray for James to be released? Did they also say, "Lord, we need to protect all the disciples and all the apostles. Lord, we ask that you will protect them and keep them safe." And yet, James was beheaded. And Peter was released. Hang on to that fact for just a moment.

Just before Peter leaves, he says, "I need you to tell James... " And we might think, "Hold on, James just got beheaded." This is a different James. In the New Testament, we read a number of James. But this James is the brother of Jesus. Mary and Joseph had more kids after Jesus was born and one of them was named James. And James, after Christ died, became a prominent person within the church. And so Jesus's brother James became someone who led the church and is likely the person who wrote the gospel of James

So Peter is saying, "You need to let him know what God has done." Peter knew that the story of God's work needed to be shared. So Peter leaves and then we get this interesting story of Herod and the people from Sidon and Tyre and there was this conflict.

But to make it real quick, basically what was happening was, Herod was in a position in which he could rule and get what he wanted.

So at one of the festivals which they had, as Josephus writes about it, who was a Jewish historian, Herod got up and the sunrise was just coming up. And Herod had this incredible cloak which was of woven silver. And so as the sun was coming up, it shone on Herod's cloak and made this great brightness shine around him. And the people started saying, "He is a god and not a man." Herod did not respond in any way. He didn't say, "Yes, I am." He didn't say stop it. He just stood there. And because of that, God killed him.

So here within the story, we have God allowing for James to be killed. We have God rescuing Peter. And we have God killing Herod. We have a sample here of God's sovereignty. God's saying, "I am in charge. No matter what happens, it will be my way."

As we were singing in the offering, the Lord's Day question one, there is a piece in Lord's Day question one in which the question is, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" It says, "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." And then just further on, it says this, "He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation."

All things must work together for my salvation. That's a tough one. We often think of God's sovereignty and we are blessed by what God gives us. We're not always so happy when things don't go well. And God says, "I take every moment of your life and everything which happens to you and around you, and I work it out for your salvation." It might not be that you are saved like Peter. Maybe it is that you are beheaded like James. Ouch. That's kind of hard to take.

Let's go to Lord's Day 10. The question says, "What do you understand by the providence of God?" It says, "God's providence is his almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand."

God interacts in our lives every day, including, as Charlotte pointed out, turning lights green, so that we can be at church on time. God is sovereign. He provides.

The second question in Lord's day 10 says, "What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by his providence?" And this is what their answer is. "We can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love; for all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move."

So when we look at today's story of James being beheaded, of Peter being taken from prison, of Herod being killed at the end for not acknowledging God, for just ignoring it all, we can see how God moves in our lives as well.

There are times in which things do not go well. And we can be reminded that in those times, God is still there working. There are times when things do go well and miraculous things happen. And we have to say, "Thank you, Lord, for giving us that." And then there are times in which we need to acknowledge the Lord purging the evil which is here.

Let's change that around a little bit to the Lord's Supper, which we participated in earlier. When we take part in the Lord's Supper, we understand that Christ died for our sins. In fact, in one of the songs which we sang, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," there is a verse in there which says, "He breaks the power of canceled sin, he sets the prisoner free; his blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed for me."

If we think about the prison of sin which we were all in, and we remember what Christ did for us and how He released us from that prison, then how do we live? We live the way Mary lived. We live in prayer. We live our lives in a way in which we know that there is a sovereign God who is ruler over everything. And we come to Him with all we have in our prayers.

There are times when He answers our prayers and we come back with praise. And there are times when our prayers are not answered and we come back with praise knowing that the sovereign God, whom we worship, works all things together for His good. And to Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You that You are sovereign. We thank You, Lord, for Your gift of grace that You give us. Lord, we thank You that You have released us from the prison of sin, that we may live for You. Lord, may we always remember Your gift of grace and Your sovereign rule over us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I'm going to invite you to stand and I will give you a final blessing. Then we will close with a final song to go home. I invite you to extend your hands to receive from God, our Sovereign Lord, this grace.

In your journeys to and fro, may God direct you. In your happiness and pleasure, may God bless you. In care, anxiety or trouble, may God sustain you. In peril and in danger, may God protect you. May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who loved us by His grace and gave up His life for us, and may God our Father, the God of endurance, encouragement and hope, give you encouragement and hope in your hearts, and strength and endurance for every good deed and word. The grace of God, the love of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, both now, and forevermore. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*