

Blessed Helplessness

Acts 12:1-19

I think you can already see how the Lord has been at work, knowing what was in store for our church family this morning. It's a complicated morning for me, for the other pastors, and I'm sure for many of you. There's a lot of grief in my heart. I grew up with Scott in the second row next to Pastor Stan. I used to love seeing his hand go up when Stan would make a good point. Obviously, grieving for the Lozier's and the tragedy that that is. There's a lot of grief.

And there's joy too. Like Stan said, there were three engagements that were going to be announced this morning. There's a lot that we're looking forward to this week. We're anticipating God doing some great things in our children, and our church family. I'm excited for the ministry week.

It's a complicated morning. It's a mixed bag. But the Lord is working in it. Like I said, I think you've probably seen it in the songs we've sung. Could there have been a better set of songs to sing in the midst of all this? To remind ourselves that regardless of what happens, regardless of the season we're in, regardless of the circumstances we're walking through, "It is well."

And the Church that we find in Acts 12 this morning is in a really similar set of circumstances as us, and a really similar moment as us. So again, I think the Lord was working ahead of us, preparing for us. And so I think He has something to say this morning through His Word. I trust Him for that.

I wanted to start by reading Psalm 2: "1 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 3 "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." 7 I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." 10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him."

Last week, Pastor Brad began by taking us to Isaiah 40, wherein the nations of the earth with all their power are likened to a drop in the bucket and dust on the scales in comparison to God, which is to say they are of no account whatsoever. Psalm 2, which I just read, is a poetic expression of this reality. The nations rage and plot, mustering their strength, preparing to assault the throne of God. God's response? Laughter. All their plotting and peacocking is a big joke to the Almighty. At least, it's a joke, until it's not a joke.

"Then He will speak to them in His wrath..." God's first response is derisive laughter, but that then turns to terrifying fury. God has enthroned His King, and though the raging of the nations can do nothing to dethrone Him, God will not stand for it, and so these kings and rulers have a choice. Serve the King, kiss Him in submission, or perish before His quickly kindled wrath. For while those who rebel against the King will be destroyed, those who take refuge in Him are blessed. As we come to chapter 12 in our study of Acts, we will see this reality displayed in the life of the early Church, and her struggle with the earthly powers that be. Let me pray as you turn there, and then we will look at it together.

Let's begin by reading Acts 12:1-5: "About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 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. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."

Now, I just told you that this passage was going to display God's utter power over the earthly powers that be, and yet, from these first few verses it would seem like the opposite is being shown. God's church is being threatened with

violence, and, not only that, but they are taking some serious blows. Herod launches an assault against the church, highlighted by the murder of James.

James the apostle, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, the brother of John, one of the “Sons of Thunder” as Jesus affectionately called them, one of Jesus’ three closest friends during His time on earth. Now, Jesus had promised James and John that they would drink the same cup and be baptized in the same baptism of suffering as Him. For John, that would mean eventual exile, but for James it meant death at the hands of Herod. You can imagine some of the questions the Church must have been asking after James execution. “How could God let this happen?” “How could He let James be taken?” “How are we supposed to go on without him?” “How are we supposed to move forward when life has been so dramatically altered?”

And then, seeing that killing Christians improved his standing in the eyes of the Jews, Herod proceeds to arrest Peter, the leader of the Christians. And there was no doubt about what would happen to him: Peter would be subjected to a corrupt trial, and then executed for Herod’s political benefit to the cheers of the Church’s enemies. It’s a tragic, bleak, seemingly hopeless situation that Luke describes, and all the church can do is pray. But then things take a turn in verse 6-11.

“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. 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. 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.’ 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. 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. 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.’”

What a remarkable few verses. Maybe what’s most remarkable is the tone. It goes from tragic, bleak, and desperate to humorous. I think this episode is supposed to be kind of funny. First, there’s the image of an angel poking Peter in the side to wake him up, like some teenager who’s overslept his alarm is funny. This scene reminds me of getting my daughters ready to go somewhere: “Get dressed. Ok, now get your shoes on. Ok, now get your cloak on. Ok, now follow me.” Then Peter sleepwalks his way between the squad of soldiers around him, completely oblivious to the fact that the whole thing is real, only coming to himself at the end.

It’s a funny picture that Luke paints for us, which we would hardly expect given how this chapter opens. But perhaps, it’s kind of funny because God is laughing at Herod’s attempts to destroy the Church, to thwart the expansion of the Kingdom, to stop the work God wants to do through Peter. And by the way, if you ever wonder if God can use you, remember this: God didn’t even need Peter to be fully conscious to rescue him from a heavily guarded fortress. God can use you for whatever He wants to use you for, because it’s not about your innate usability, but His ability to use what would be useless to anyone else. So, the point is humorously clear: Herod with all his power is a joke to God. And the humor actually continues in verses 12-17.

“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. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. 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. 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!’ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. 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.”

Once Peter comes to his senses, he heads to a friend's house. It's hard to know if Peter knew there would be people gathered there for prayer, or if he just went to the first place he could think of, but I'd venture a guess at what they were praying about. And can you imagine what that prayer meeting must have been like? You're praying for Peter to be saved somehow, and suddenly he's there, knocking to get in. I imagine we'd maybe react like Rhoda: scream, forget to let him in, and run in and tell everyone, while Peter (the guy that just got miraculously broken out of prison) nervously keeps knocking while looking over his shoulders to make sure no soldiers were coming to get him.

Or perhaps we'd respond with the disbelief of the others, "No way, Rhoda! You're either crazy, or it's his angel, because if there's one thing we can be sure of, it's that Peter is not at the gate (even though that's more or less what we've been praying for)." It would have been incredible, and hard to believe! Finally, they do open the gate and get the unlooked-for answer to their prayers. Peter fills them in on his miraculous escape, and asks them to pass it along to James and the other brothers. And then, notice that Peter doesn't view God's clear protection over him as an excuse to be foolish and pick a fight, but sensibly gets out of town. But what of his imprisoners and would-be executors? We find out in verses 18-19. "Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 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."

Suddenly, as in Psalm 2, God's humor turns to wrath. Peter's would-be executors are executed. Not only the guards, but in a few short verses, Herod, who had plans to judge and execute Peter, is himself judged and executed by God. And so it is that the truth of Psalm 2 is fulfilled: the king who raged and plotted against God and His people perishes in the way, and those who sought refuge in the Lord are blessed with salvation.

So here is the main point of this passage, I believe: God's people ultimately have nothing to fear, while those who pit themselves against God and His people have everything to fear. Now, perhaps you're thinking, "Well, what about James, and the other Christians Herod persecuted and killed?" And yes, it's complicated. God saved Peter, but He allowed James to be executed. Did the church not pray for James? Of course they did. And we're not given the answer as to why God answered one set of prayers one way, and the next set of prayers another way.

So, yes, they suffered, and died. But then what? They went to be with Jesus! And do you think a single one of those saints would have traded a millisecond of time in Jesus' presence just so they could avoid their suffering? Of course not! If they even remembered their suffering upon entering Jesus' presence, it would only have served to sweeten that glorious experience, as they realized the truth that their light, momentary affliction had only prepared for them an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. It's not that the afflictions we endure here are light and momentary at the time. No, at the time they are heavy and feel unending. But when the day comes when we experience the glory they have been preparing for us, they will seem like nothing in comparison.

So again, I say, God's people, while they may suffer, be persecuted, or even die, ultimately have nothing to fear, while those who pit themselves against God and His people have everything to fear. We follow and are cared for by a God who laughs in derision at the raging of kings, and the plotting of rulers, and all we need do to secure His help is pray. But I have to ask: do we really believe this? If it's true that we who take refuge in God have nothing to fear, then why is that we (and I'm speaking to myself here as well) are so often anxious and afraid? I can only speak for myself, but perhaps you can relate, and I think for myself it's because I do not recognize my helplessness, and thus I do not cast myself in complete dependence on God. In other words, I have too high a view of my own ability to help myself, and too low a view of God's ability to help me.

If I think I'm heading into a difficult conversation, I am more prone to mentally marshal my arguments, and try to anticipate likely counterarguments, than I am to simply pray for God's wisdom. If I am overwhelmed with the demands of life, I am far more prone to cut or rush time in prayer for the sake of having more time to get things done, than I am to extend time in prayer in faith that God will get things done. As a parent, I am more prone to obsess over perfecting my parenting, than I am to simply spending that time praying for my daughters. My problem, so often, is that I don't think I'm helpless, and so I do not pray as I ought. Ultimately, I rely on myself rather than God, and so I am anxious and afraid.

Notice, the Church in Acts 12 has no other options, they know they are helpless, and so they made “earnest prayer” to God for Peter and receive help beyond their wildest dreams. So often we think of prayer as a last resort, when it should be our first resort, and is, in fact, the only thing we need. I said earlier that when faced with the death of James and the imprisonment of Peter, “all the church could do was pray...”, when I really should have said, “*BUT the church could pray!*” And from that simple fact, we should have known how the rest of this story would go.

I entitled this message, “Blessed Helplessness,” because helplessness *is* a blessing when it drives us to the God who is a “very present help in time of trouble”. Now, helplessness in and of itself is no more a blessing than poverty, mourning, meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, or being persecuted, all of which Jesus calls blessings in the Sermon on the Mount. Rather, those things are blessings because they drive us to our Father and Savior, who is a better help than any help the world or our own feeble strength can offer. This is why prayer should be the first and most frequent place we go to for help, because God is the best and really only source of help we truly need; in fact, every other source of help is simply a channel through which His help comes to us.

And so, for application I want us to consider different areas of our lives, and ask, “Am I anxious and afraid in this area of my life because I have been relying on myself more than I’ve been praying to God?” Because, if God could rescue Peter in response to the prayers of the Church as He did in Acts 12, surely, He is capable of helping us in our difficulties. The question is, do we trust Him or ourselves more, and do our prayers show it?

So, kids: when you’re nervous about fitting in at school, do you spend as much time praying as you do worrying about your clothes, your hair, or how you are going to act? Young adults: when you’re unsure of where your life is headed, do you spend as much time praying as you do worrying about what school you will go to, what job you will have, or if you will get married? Husbands and wives: when your marriage is hard, do you spend as much time praying for your spouse as you do worrying about his or her or your own faults, shortcomings, and mistakes? Parents: when you consider your children, do you spend as much time praying for them as you do worrying about your parenting, their choices, or the culture around them? Older generation: when you consider the direction you see the world taking, do you spend more time praying for the next generation or more time reading, watching, and worrying about what you see on the news? And finally, just to be fair and give you a glimpse into how this applies to me (although the spouse and parent examples already hit close to home), pastors and ministry leaders, VBS volunteers: when you consider those under your care do you (or will you this coming week) spend as much time praying for them as you do worrying about the perfect lesson, or sermon, or shepherding interaction? Again, the big question is this: do we really trust God in these areas of our lives?

Understand, there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to make a good impression, or being thoughtful about your future, or being realistic about your marriage, or working hard at parenting, or addressing concerning trends in culture, or wanting to give a good sermon. Unless we have put our primary and ultimate trust in those things, instead of God. Once we’ve done that, we’ve made an idol. And I think one way we can tell we’ve done that, is if we can’t have peace about the things that concern us. If we truly trust in God more than ourselves, we will start with and persist in prayer until whatever trial we’re facing has passed. Even when it seems as though our prayers go unanswered, we ought to persist, because to give up would be to show that ultimately our trust is not in God, but something else. In fact, often God allows trials in order to stretch us in our trust of Him. But if God is laughing, then those who take refuge in Him can be at peace.

This doesn’t mean we will never experience tragedy, or worry, or stress, or struggle; it just means we turn to God with those experiences over our own abilities to fix things. But I will say that in my experience, when I take my difficulties to God, the worry, stress, struggle, and even pain do tend to dissipate noticeably, if not completely. The things of earth do indeed grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. You see, it is impossible to truly pray without considering the One to whom we pray, and when we consider the One to whom we pray we encounter a Being who dwells in perfect peace. I think this at the root of Paul’s encouragement in Philippians 4:5-7, “The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made

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known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Let the nations rage; let the peoples plot; for though we be helpless babes, indeed because we are, we will be blessed as we find unassailable refuge in the Lord who laughs. The Lord who laughed at Herod, and effortlessly saved Peter from his hand. The Lord who is our very-present help in time of trouble. The Lord who knows that in the end, He is going to destroy all grief.

I think it is helpful in times of tragedy to remind ourselves of how the story ends. John, the brother of James who was executed by Herod, records this in Rev. 21:1-5, “1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’

And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’”

This is how the story ends. This is the ultimate destiny for all who put their trust in Jesus. Understand, He is not just going to sympathize with our sufferings, He is going to take them away, as if they had never happened. He is going to make the sad things come untrue. So, as we turn to celebrating Communion, let us, even as we grieve, rejoice in the One who will one day make grief to be no more. Let’s pray.