

**Acts 4:23-31 After Peter and John were released, they went to their own friends and reported everything the high priests and the elders had said. <sup>24</sup>When they heard this, with one mind they raised their voices to God and said, “Master, you are the God who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup>By the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David, your servant, you said: Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>26</sup>The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers are gathered together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. <sup>27</sup>For certainly, in this city both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and people of Israel, were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup>They did whatever your hand and your plan had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup>Now Lord, look at their threats and give to your servants the ability to keep on speaking your word with all boldness <sup>30</sup>as you stretch out your hand to heal and as signs and wonders take place through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” <sup>31</sup>After they prayed, the place where they were gathered was shaken. Also, everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit, and they continued to speak the word of God with boldness.**

I mentioned at the beginning of the month that the word Epiphany means “revealed.” During this season of the church year we review the majority of Jesus’ three-year ministry. He worked to reveal himself to the people of his time. You would think that people would be thrilled to hear that God had finally sent the Savior. In the Gospel lesson for today we see that the people of his own hometown were so thrilled with that message that they tried to push him off a cliff.

The book of Acts really is just a continuation of Jesus’ Epiphany. He had ascended into heaven but he sent his fledgling church into the world with the good news of forgiveness of sins and eternal life through him. Some people were thrilled to hear that. The church experienced rapid growth. But as we see in this text it also came with massive opposition from some very powerful people.

This text should be very comforting to us as we continue the Epiphany today. It’s comforting in some obvious ways that we will talk about later. But it’s comforting because it reminds us that rejection does not mean that we have failed. It doesn’t mean that we should give up. We’re just facing the same thing that God’s people have faced throughout the centuries. God Knows what his people face and what his people need.

This text begins in the middle of the story. It starts “**After Peter and John were released.**” Why were they in prison? What had they done? Chapter 3 of this book and the beginning of this chapter tell us. They had met a man who had never been able to walk a day in his 40-plus years of life. He was begging for money outside the Temple. Jesus enabled them to heal this man so that he could not only stand up, but he could run and jump. Understandably he started praising God at the top of his lungs.

Peter and John then began to teach that they weren’t able to do this on their own. They pointed the people to Jesus and told them how he suffered and died to save them from their sins. Some of the Jewish leaders overheard them speaking and had them thrown into prison. The next day they were brought before the entire Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish ruling council. Since there was no crime they had committed they were released but they were commanded not to talk about Jesus anymore.

Things certainly haven’t improved over the past 2,000 years. That shouldn’t be a surprise. Every person who is born is born a sinner so by definition the world cannot get better on its own. The good thing is that what happened to Peter and John in this text cannot happen to me in this country. Our laws and constitution guarantee it. I would much rather live now than at the time of the apostles or prophets.

Back to this text: it was official. The proclamation of Jesus as the Savior was illegal and they could be thrown into prison for it. What do you do? Look at what the early church did because it can teach us a lot, “**After Peter and John were released, they went to their own friends and reported everything the high priests and the elders had said. <sup>24</sup>When they heard this, with one mind they raised their voices to God.**”

They were powerless to do anything about their situation so they turned to the only one who could. They began this prayer by saying, “**Master, you are the God who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and everything in them.**” The word “Master” is one of Luke’s favorite terms for God. It shows him as the one who is really in control. They weren’t trying to butter God up by talking about Creation. That was their confidence! If God can create the whole universe, what can’t he do?

That’s an important thing to remember when we pray. We are going to the God for whom nothing is impossible. In last week’s second reading Paul wrote that God is able “**to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.**” I’ve got a pretty vivid imagination but God’s power outstrips even my wildest dreams. So this is our confidence today. Whatever we pray for, God can do that and so much more.

The early church understood exactly why this persecution was happening. God had already talked about it in Psalm 2, “**25By the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David, your servant, you said: Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 26The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers are gathered together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.**”

The only thing that sinful human beings can do is set themselves up against God. It might be simply because they don't know him and therefore don't care. It may be like King Herod and the Jewish religious leaders who felt that Jesus was a threat to their power and authority. It may be because believing in Jesus means they have to give up on themselves and trust in him alone.

The early church pointed to the events around Jesus' crucifixion as fulfillment of Psalm 2. They said that Jesus' enemies “**did whatever your hand and your plan had decided beforehand should happen.**” Don't misunderstand that. It doesn't mean that Pontius Pilate and the Jewish leaders were nothing but puppets who had no choice but to crucify Jesus. God knew ahead of time exactly what they would do and he planned accordingly.

Look at what God did! He took their anger, their hostility, their unbelief, and turned it into blessings for the whole world. The Jewish religious leaders tried desperately not to have anything happen during the Passover. But since the Passover was pointing ahead to Jesus, that's exactly when he was going to die. Jesus proved he really was in control because when they came to arrest him, they all fell over backwards. They weren't taking him by force. He was surrendering himself for us.

The torture that Jesus endured on Good Friday is beyond our ability to comprehend. It is not, however, just another sad example of how cruel human beings can be to each other. It is a shining example of how great God's love is for us. Jesus knew what he would have to endure but he went anyway. He knew that that was the only way that there could be forgiveness and eternal life for the whole world. He went there for us.

That's another thing to keep in mind when we pray. We aren't just going to the God whose power is limitless. We are going to the God whose love for us is limitless. If he was willing to become a human being, live perfectly for us, and suffer and die in our place, what won't he be willing to do for us? Our Father who planned for us, our Brother who died for us, and the Holy Spirit who led us to believe all of this will do anything for us.

God Knows what his people face and what his people need.

What do people tend to do when the government is doing something that they don't like? Do they start a campaign and run for office so they can be personally involved in making things better? Probably not. Let's hop on Facebook or Instagram or TikTok and post many shouty words about how unhappy we are. Or let's write a letter to our congressman threatening to make sure that they are voted out of office if they don't agree with us.

Look at what the early church did. They didn't secretly plan to overthrow the Sanhedrin. They didn't form little militia groups to conduct some terror attacks. They didn't pray that God would strike the Sanhedrin dead for daring to try to undermine the plans of the Lord himself. They left any judgment in the very capable hands of the one who will come to judge the living and the dead.

Mind you, that judgment would come about four decades later. The Jews started a rebellion against the Romans. The war raged on for roughly four years. It ended when the Romans finally broke through Jerusalem's walls. The only part of the Temple that exists to this day is a part of an outward retaining wall. A mosque sits on the site where the Temple used to be. “**Do not be deceived. God is not mocked.**”

Instead of praying for violence or plotting a revolution, the early believers prayed for something far more constructive in keeping with God's will, “**29Now Lord, look at their threats and give to your servants the ability to keep on speaking your word with all boldness.**” They prayed that God would counteract evil the only way it can be—by proclaiming the truth.

When we read through the book of Acts we see that God answered that prayer with a resounding “yes!” The persecution did not end. There would be more imprisonments. Saint Stephen would be murdered, but the Word continued to spread. Instead of giving up when their own people rejected the good news of Jesus, they just became more bold to take the Word beyond Israel's borders, just like Jesus told them to do.

God has continued to bless the proclamation of his Word. Eventually it spread to northern Europe where many of our ancestors are from. They brought it here to the new world. Our own Wisconsin Synod is celebrating its 175<sup>th</sup> birthday this year—quite an accomplishment for a church body founded by a handful of pastors. Attendance numbers may be down stateside, but they are flourishing in our mission fields. Keep praying that God would make us all bold to bring our Savior to our friends and neighbors.

They ended their prayer with this, “<sup>30</sup>**as you stretch out your hand to heal and as signs and wonders take place through the name of your holy servant Jesus.**” Once again, they didn’t pray to harm people. They prayed to bring healing. Remember at this point the New Testament hadn’t been completed. As a matter of fact, the writing hadn’t even begun. These miraculous signs were proof that what they were teaching is true and comes with Jesus’ own authority.

Today I wish I could perform miraculous healings like they did. You may be aware that my cousin’s fourteen year old daughter died suddenly this past week. She would have been confirmed this spring at St. Paul in Saginaw. I would have loved to do what the Apostle Paul once did and raise her back to life. In his wisdom, God has not seen fit to give me that ability. He did give me the ability to bring my family what they truly need, which is comfort from God’s Word.

If you look at the verses after this text, we see the blessings that God poured out on his church, “**The whole group of believers was one in heart and soul. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they held everything in common.** <sup>33</sup>**The apostles continued to testify about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ with great power, and abundant grace was on all of them.**” Who wouldn’t want to belong to a church like that?

We know that wherever God builds a church, Satan builds a chapel. He will work hard to sow anger and disagreement here. He knows he already has the rest of the world. The church is the only hold-out. Unfortunately we can fall prey to that. We get our noses bent out of shape over a decision made by the Voters because it isn’t what we wanted. We air our grievances online instead of talking about them face-to-face. That will push people away from their Savior far more quickly than any outward persecution will.

But you do see some bright, shining examples. A GoFundMe was started for my cousin’s family because the medical bills will be massive and they didn’t have life insurance for their daughter. Within a couple of days tens of thousands of dollars had already been given. God’s people saw one of their own bearing a heavy cross. Their fellow believers joined in to make that burden lighter.

So I have an opportunity for all of you. It doesn’t matter if you are young or old, rich or poor. Imitate the believers in this text. Keep going to your Heavenly Father’s throne on behalf of your Synod, your church, and all of God’s people. Pray that pastors and teachers would stay faithful to God’s Word. Pray for opportunities to tell more people the good news of Jesus. Pray for those who are suffering that God’s comfort may be with them.

God Knows what his people face and what his people need. It won’t always be easy to keep revealing Jesus to people today. Not everyone is going to appreciate it. A few will be downright hostile to it. That’s OK. The early believers faced the same things. God blessed them and so we can be confident that he will be with us and bless our efforts too.