



This morning we draw to a close the series we've been in this summer going through the book of Acts looking at the mission of the church. It's been more of an overview of Acts, as we haven't gone through every single verse. But it all began with the resurrected Jesus giving His mission to the disciples, when he said, **“Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** - Jesus Be my witnesses in Kirkland, in King County, Washington State, and to the ends of the earth. Something along those lines would be a rough approximation for us today.

And so we've seen the Holy Spirit come upon the disciples in a powerful way at the day of Pentecost, and then continue to move in their lives in amazing ways as they preached, ministered to people, stood up for Christ in the face of persecution, traveled, made big sacrifices, and started churches, as they took seriously the mission that Jesus gave them.

In this morning's passage, we see this continue as Paul demonstrates the courage that God gives him even in the face of opposition. **Paul is on trial for his faith in Jesus and his preaching of the Resurrection, with pressure from Jewish religious leaders to have him imprisoned and even put to death because they believe he's teaching blasphemy.** Because Paul is a Roman citizen, he appeals to Caesar, the Roman King, in Acts 25:11. Originally, Caesar was the last name of Emperor Julius Caesar, but it became a title of sorts, adopted by Emperors who followed. So there are lots of Caesars, which can be confusing. So today's passage tells us of Paul before King Agrippa, who is representing the Emperor, with a lot of pressure from the Jewish religious elite to eliminate Paul.

Agrippa is the King of Judea...or you could essentially say, the King of Israel...and he has come to Caesarea Philippi, north of Jerusalem a ways, to welcome Festus, who is the new governor of the region. Agrippa was the 8th and last ruler of Judea in the Herodian Dynasty – there were 5 kings in the dynasty, and three rulers of other types. So, he was often called, “King Herod Agrippa II” – his dad was King Herod Agrippa I. Here is a bronze coin from

38 A.D. with his dad, Agrippa I on it.

Agrippa's grandfather was the King Herod who reigned at the time when Jesus was born. You may remember that he was the power-obsessive, psychopathic king who murdered babies, and I think his own family members if I remember right, in an effort to keep his position as King.



These are some of the people that Agrippa II, from today's passage, was related to – and the whole line of them was filled with deception, murder, and craziness. *And* they're all called King Herod, because they were part of the Herodian Dynasty. Just as "Caesar" was a title that applied to any Roman Emperor, "Herod" is a name/title that applies to any Judean king in the Herodian dynasty. Confusing, I know.

So Agrippa II comes from a line of famous and infamous Judean kings, who at this time were under the Roman Emperor. 5:23 tells us that Bernice was with King Agrippa, who was not his wife, but his sister. And this verse tells us that the two of them entered the audience room "with great pomp" along with other high-ranking officers and leaders in the city. This is a grand affair. A lot of pomp, a lot of formality... He's probably wearing a purple robe. A lot of officials and leaders are there. Festus, the governor of the region was there, and would likely have been wearing a red robe, and he announces and introduces Paul at the end of chapter 5.

Then Agrippa invites Paul to share his side of the story. Now, you may recall a couple weeks ago we read the passage where Paul stood before the Areopagus and presented the gospel message of Jesus, and he really put it in terms and language that his Greek, philosophical, cutting-edge audience would understand – he quoted their poets, he connected his message to the statue of the unknown God that he'd seen in town, and so forth. He appealed to all kinds of cultural things to connect his message to stuff with which they were familiar. Paul does nothing of the sort here. **This time, he doesn't appeal to anything outside of Jewish religious culture or the Scriptures.**

He's back closer to home now, where there's a much stronger presence of the Jewish faith, and he's speaking to a Jewish audience.

Because of his audience, he appeals directly to the Jewish faith and the Scriptures when speaking of Jesus. He reminds them how even the people who are accusing him of false teaching can testify that even though he was born a Roman citizen, he grew up in the area here, that he was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, even. Some of these people have known him since he was a little kid. Then, verse 6 is a key verse. He says, **“And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God...” (Acts 26:6-7).** He's appealing to the hope that they all have in the promises of God, as revealed in the Old Testament, the Scriptures. What is this hope? There are probably a few different levels of answers that could have been given: God's faithfulness, the promise of God's Kingdom, and more...but ultimately, what Paul is talking about, is the hope of resurrection. He says in verse 8, **“Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8).**

Now, Paul does then take a moment to identify with their unbelief that Jesus could in fact be the answer to this hope. Like them: he used to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth as well. Like them: he persecuted the people who proclaimed this name. Like them: he put them in prison, he voted against them when their lives were on the line in a trial just like this one. Like them: he went from synagogue to synagogue – remember, Christianity at first was a movement within Judaism, so oftentimes they would meet in the synagogues – he would go to those places and try to get them to speak blasphemous words so he could punish them even more. So Paul was like them.

And then, God got a hold of him. **Jesus spoke to him, asked him why Paul is persecuting Him, and told him that this is a pointless, and painful task. That's what is meant by this phrase, “it is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14).** A goad is spike or stick used for driving cattle. In other words, Jesus is telling him, “Look, I'm trying to prod you and a whole crew of my disciples in a certain direction to spread the word about me...to be salt and light in the world...and you keep resisting and kicking the

instrument I'm using to prod you. That's painful. Cut it out and go where I'm sending you and let this whole Jesus movement get some momentum.”

And so that's what Paul does. He does a complete 180, and ends up being this amazing champion of the cause of Christ. And so Paul's message is completely centered on the resurrection – first of Jesus, who demonstrated that he was alive by speaking to him in this vision, and then the resurrection of others who trust in Him.

I want to pause for a moment and dwell on his past. This past he has of persecuting the early Christians is something that a lot of Christians wouldn't ever admit to in their own past. We want to cover up our past and pretend like it never happened, and present ourselves to the world as the new creation, as though there never was an old. **But Paul shows us a better and more powerful way to share our faith journey: And that is to include the ugly parts.** Don't be afraid of the past, and sharing it, because when we do share our past and how it contrasts with who we are today, we share the transformative power of God.

William Barclay tells the story of a famous evangelist and preacher whom I've never heard of but he had to be an awesome guy, because his name was Brownlow North. I mean, if you have a name like Brownlow... ☺ Actually, the first name is odd...but the last name is awesome. And maybe I'm related to him somehow. He had a really bad past that God saved him from, and he gave his life to the Lord and became a preacher. He once received a letter that he read just a bit before he was to preach. The writer of the letter said he knew of a particularly disgraceful incident from Brownlow's past, before he was a Christian, and that the writer of this letter was going to interrupt the service that morning and tell the church about it. Brownlow took the letter into the pulpit, read it, told the congregation what he had once done, and then proclaimed about the transformative power and grace of Jesus Christ that had turned him around to be the man he was before them.

You see, God's transformative power brings about this full transformation from sinner to saint! Sin still gets the best of us some times...we're not perfect...but there's a complete transformation of the mind and our way of

life. It's like a piece of rock being transformed into a diamond...or being transformed from blind to 20/20 vision; from legs that can't walk to running a marathon; ...or from a snowboarder to a skier. Ok, maybe not that last one. This is life-changing, ground-breaking spiritual work that God has done in our lives...as God transforms us from the inside out. And sometimes we're like, "Well, God is awesome because, you know, I had a hangnail that I tore off and it hurt for a couple days and now it's better." No! Your heart was covered with sin and deceitfulness and God as made it white as snow. In his eyes, you are completely clean and pure, even if we struggle to live into that reality of how God sees us. Paul gives us a great example of not minimizing or hiding our past. **It's in light of the past that the new creation we are demonstrates the glory and transformative power of God.** So don't be afraid to share what you once were, just as Paul isn't afraid to here.

In verse 24, continuing beyond where we read this morning, Festus, the governor, pipes up and accuses Paul of being out of this mind and insane. In fact, the Greek word for "mad" when he says that Paul is being driven "mad"...the word is "mania" and is the root for our "maniac." Considering the family lineage of Agrippa, if anyone should know about people who are crazy and insane maniacs, it's him, actually...but Festus is the one who says it. And Paul very calmly replies, **"I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. (Acts 26:25-26).**

Then, Paul makes what is his boldest statement. "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." Oh, man...what I would give to be a fly on the wall to witness this. I think this is one of the gutsiest lines ever spoken by a human being. Paul's life is on the line, and he utters this to the king?!? I mean, this is like something out of a movie.

A couple years ago, some of you may recall that I got a ticket for parking in a limited mobility parking space. It was the most expensive sermon illustration ever. It was a complete oversight by me and the other two adults in the car – none of us noticed the sign. I got the ticket, appealed, and had a court date. At the court, I got to listen to others go before me. One gal was another person who had parked in a handicap parking place. She was a secretary at an

elementary school, and she admitted that she parked in those spaces on occasion when she couldn't find a regular spot to park in, saying that they are never used. She happened to get caught this time.

I was next. I let the judge know it was an honest mistake, and he said, "I think most people who park in handicap spaces don't do so intentionally." I couldn't help but responding, "Unless you work at an elementary school, apparently." I remember giving a bit of a sideways glance to the court reporter, and she cracked a pretty big smile. The judge did not. It felt gutsy, and the moment after I said it I thought I probably shouldn't have. I thought for sure I had upset him, and that he'd tell me that my comment was inappropriate. Fortunately, the judge ignored my comment, and reduced my ticket the most that the law would allow him to: from \$500 to \$250.

I think Paul had to feel a little like I felt when he uttered this line. **"King Agrippa, do you believe in the prophets? I know you do" (Acts 26:27).** What a challenge. Really...it's throwing down the gauntlet with arguably the most powerful man in the Empire outside of Rome. And it's in front of leading officials of the city, government officials – and most of these people think Paul should be strung up by his toes. They're just waiting for Agrippa to give in to the pressure they've applied to convict Paul. And here Paul delivers the line of a lifetime. He's evangelizing the King in his own court, in front of all these people, in a hall that historians believe was built by his grandfather, King Herod the Great.

And Agrippa sees exactly what Paul is doing. He responds, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Notice he doesn't close the door on it...but it's going to take a little more time. And Paul responds that whether it takes a short amount of time or a long amount of time, he prays that Agrippa would come to faith in Jesus.

But what we see is that in the face of opposition...as students head back to school and all the social and academic challenges that come their way...in places where faith is usually not affirmed...in our places of work...in our neighborhoods...in places where there's an imbalance of power and we might feel like we're the underdogs and the odds are stacked against us and

our faith: **Paul demonstrates that when we stand on the promises of God, and keep our lives centered on the resurrection of Jesus and the hope that gives us, we become a living witness to Jesus Christ.** There is power in the resurrection of Jesus. It's transformative power – even to transform death into life. And we can lean into and proclaim that message wherever we are, just as Jesus' mission statement tells us to do. And as we do that, God will take care of us. God is so faithful. He will sustain you and be with you no matter what the circumstances. He just calls us to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. To be his witnesses in Kirkland/Bothell/Redmond/Woodinville, etc., in King County, Washington State, and to the ends of the earth. May we be on that mission with him now and ever more, bringing glory to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let's pray...Amen.