

Charles R. Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
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I'm Not Sure About A God Who... 2. Doesn't Seem to Answer Prayer

Acts 12:1-17 About this time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. 2 He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. 3 After he saw that it pleased the some of the Jewish leaders, he then arrested Peter as well during the feast of the Passover. 4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. 5 While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. 6 The very night before Herod was going to kill him, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, *"Get up quickly."* And the chains fell off his wrists. 8 The angel said to him, *"Fasten your belt and put on your sandals."* He did so. Then he said to him, *"Put your coat on and follow me."* 9 Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was having a dream. 10 After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along the street, when suddenly the angel left him. 11 Then Peter came to himself and said, *"Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish leaders were expecting."* 12 As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, where many had gathered and were praying. 13 When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. 14 On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. 15 They said to her, *"You are out of your mind!"* But she insisted that it was so. They said, *"It must be his Spirit, his ghost."* 16 Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. 17 He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, *"Tell this to James and to the believers."* Then he left and went to another place.

We sometimes think of those of those first century Christians as being so much stronger in their faith and so much better at *praying* than we can ever be. And yet our scripture for this morning shows that those early Christians could be just as fallible and

flawed as we are, just as muddled about praying as we sometimes feel. We wonder if prayer makes any difference. We wonder if God truly does answer prayers. But this story from Acts tells us that our forebears in the faith sometimes had the very same questions we have. So let's hear the story of that night again.

It is the night before Peter is to die. The church that he led has gathered to cry and to hug each other and to pray. They pray that Peter's life would be spared even in the face of knowing that James' life had not been spared. So this story isn't inviting us to believe that God will or can spare from death everyone we pray for if we just do it hard enough. We know from sad experience that the Herods and the cancers and the violence and the viruses of this world have their way too much of the time. God created a world where everything, **everything**, has some degree of freedom – viruses and molecules and tectonic plates and human beings as evil as Herod and as good as a Mother Teresa – and because that is the case every one has sometimes prayed a prayer that did not get answered in the way that we had hoped.

Peter knew all this too. And I doubt that he believed that he would be spared. After all, his dear friend James hadn't been spared. I think Peter sat in his cell that night expecting to die the following morning. But astoundingly, on that eve of his execution, Peter is fast asleep! Would **you** be able to sleep? I wouldn't! And did you notice when this story is happening? It is during the feast of the Passover. Herod was going to kill Peter the day after Passover. That is a powerful anniversary for Peter. For any Jew it is powerful: the anniversary of God's liberation of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt. But for Peter it is also the anniversary of the Passover when God

didn't deliver Jesus from death at Roman hands, when God didn't deliver Peter from the shame of his own cowardice and shame, denying three times that he knew Jesus. Yet it is also the anniversary of Easter: after death on a cross for Christ, a resurrection; after guilt and shame for Peter, forgiveness and new life. So it's as if Peter is saying, *"Goodnight death. I will see you tomorrow. But I know who ultimately holds tomorrow and it is not Herod. So I will sleep well."*

But the church is not asleep. The church has gathered late at night to pray. *"Please, God,"* they pray, *"spare your servant Peter."* Now, like us sometimes, maybe they fear in the deepest places of their hearts that their prayers don't matter. And yet sometimes faith is the courage to pray even despite such doubt. For

- Faith can mean crying to God for help when part of you doubts that there will be or can be any help, but asking for it anyway. Does anyone here know that kind of prayer?
- And faith can sometimes mean wondering if it is all pointless and feeling so afraid and yet not letting the despair and doubt and fear stop you from praying, clinging to hope. Does anyone here know that kind of prayer?
- And faith can mean praying in a dark so deep that you cannot see any possibility of an answer, but praying anyway. Does anyone here know that kind of prayer?

Luke sums it up this way: ***Peter was in prison but the church prayed.*** And what that means is that their prayers here are the sign that they wanted to truly live out their conviction and their hope that finally and ultimately, God's love is more powerful

than the iron bars of Herod's prison. And, my friends, more often than our sometimes cynical minds will allow, the power of love **does** overcome the power of evil.

And that is Luke's answer as he takes us inside Peter's little cell, where suddenly that cell is filled with bright light and an angel sent from God. Only Peter is sleeping so hard he doesn't even wake up! Luke tells us that the angel has to actually poke Peter in the ribs to get him to stir. "*Peter,*" he says, "*get up quickly.*" My wife Barbara has a powerful sermon on this scripture and I have gratefully borrowed from her this morning. And I especially love the way she describes this scene:¹

...Peter is so sleepy that the angel has to instruct him on what clothes to put on next. Here Peter reminds me of a toddler, one that you have to wake up early to get someplace fast: "*Here Peter, wake up! Now put on your belt, that's right! Good! Now put on your slippers. Yes, now put on your jacket; it's cold outside. Hurry so we can go. It's time to go.*"

But Peter thinks he's dreaming. "*What a nice dream,*" he thinks, "*walking through the lovely Jerusalem night with an angel.*" They've gone a few blocks, apparently far enough to be safe, when the angel disappears and Peter suddenly realizes that this is no dream. He is a free man standing there on a Jerusalem street corner.

My friends, this is often *exactly* how God delivers us, this is exactly how God responds to our prayers sometimes. By that I mean, we find ourselves surprised over time to look back and see that while we were not even aware of it, people were praying

¹From the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell's sermon "The Crazy Maid," preached at United Community Church, Hilo, Hawaii, October 11, 2007. I am grateful to Barbara not only for this wonderful rendering of Peter's encounter with the angel, but for the ideas and many of the phrasings in this sermon.

for us and the Spirit of God was indeed loosening our chains and sending angels to set us free from some old prisons. We haven't even noticed it happening and we may even be a bit fuzzy on how it happened, but all of a sudden we realize we have been freed! Do you know what I am talking about? You wake up one morning to find that your grief or anger or fear or resentment or pain is somehow a little duller, a little less defining, a little less all-consuming. And that your prayers are thereby being answered.

That is where Peter is now – free! So he heads off to find his friends in the church. He knows they'll be praying. He walks through the night, finds the right house and knocks on the door. Coming to answer the door is a young maid named Rhoda. It is three in the morning, so she cautiously calls through it to ask, *"Who is it?"* And she hears this heart-warmingly familiar voice on the other side saying, *"It's me! Simon Peter."* She squeals with delight and says, **"Yes!"** and runs back to the others to tell them the great news (forgetting the one minor detail of opening the door to let Peter in), interrupting the prayer meeting to say, *"Peter is standing outside at the door!"* And they say to her, *"No! Be quiet."* Now, are you are catching the irony of this? They have been fervently praying that God will set Peter free from prison. And now they say to the maid, *"Please don't interrupt our prayers to tell us that Peter is free!"* Rhoda says, *"I'm telling you, he's here. I talked with him."* To which they answer, *"Oh my God, it must be his ghost. He must be dead already. 'O God, thou hast called him home and sent his spirit among us to comfort us. We are grateful that his suffering has ended. Comfort us now in our hour of grief.'" Rhoda must be about to explode. And meanwhile Peter is still locked outside. He's got to be thinking, "Wow. It's easier for God to open up a*

prison than it is for God to open up a church meeting!” Finally they all do go joyfully greet Peter, and he tells them to spread the word that he is alive and free before he heads off into the sunrise.

I love this story. I find it comforting that those early disciples were so much like us: sometimes praying for this broken and hurting world, thinking that it is what we **ought** to do, but not really sure we **expect** God to be able to do anything about it. And, my friends, that may be us this morning. On this beautiful Sunday morning, I suspect that we are praying for so many things:

- For a world torn by violence and war.
- For young people who face so much challenge.
- For the one in every five children in this country who live in poverty.
- For two million children in our country (and countless more elsewhere) who will find themselves homeless sometime this year and the twenty thousand of those children who will be forced into sex trafficking.²
- For the 265 children last year who accidentally shot someone with a loaded gun they curiously picked up to play with³ and for the 7000+ children hospitalized from gunshot wounds⁴ and for the children who die in America from gun violence at the rate of one every other day.⁵

²<https://www.covenanthouse.org/homeless-teen-issues/statistics>

³<http://www.ibtimes.com/accidental-gun-deaths-involving-children-are-major-problem-us-2250568>

⁴<http://www.webmd.com/children/news/20140127/twenty-us-kids-hospitalized-each-day-for-gun-injuries-study>

⁵<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/sandy-hook-american-kid-has-died-gun-every-other-day-n478746>

- For the police officers and firefighters whose commitment is to serve and protect us all and who do so in the face of the possibility of violence and despite those of their colleagues who haven't lived up to the high standards they expect of themselves.
- For the people outside our doors who think that God and "Christians" have judged them and damned them because of their orientation or the way their bodies were born.

We pray, but what do we expect our prayers will do? There is, of course the hope that our prayers will have some effect on us, that we will be moved to open our hearts and our wallets and our purses to mission. We know that our prayers make a difference in us. But does prayer make a difference "out there"? Because there is plenty of evidence that we pray prayers that sometimes don't get answered. We pray for healing and watch loved ones die. We pray for safe travel and watch planes fall from the sky. We pray for peace and weep over too much war. But this shouldn't surprise us, really. We live in a world in which we have come to understand that even sub-atomic particles don't obey the laws of physics, let alone the laws of God. As I said earlier, **all** creation has some measure of freedom. You see, the real miracle is really that there is **any** order to our universe, that there is ever **any** healing, that we can sometimes manage **any** measure of peace.

And **that** is why we pray – because of the mystery that goodness sometimes does indeed prevail, that life does indeed sometimes win over death. We pray because we know that God wants love and goodness and beauty to prevail in this world and so

do we. We pray because we want to trust that the power of prayer can sometimes overcome the power of prison, that the force of love can overwhelm the forces of hate, that abundance can replace scarcity, that grace can triumph over guns, that peace can vanquish war. The gospel invites us to pray this day, boldly, not timidly. Pray for real reconciliation among those torn apart by misunderstandings or betrayal or racism or xenophobia. Pray for a new way forward, out of that place in your life where you are feeling trapped. Pray for those who are hurting and confused. Pray in the conviction that it matters, that it can help enable God to do a new thing. And when your answered prayer comes knocking on the front door, for God's sake don't leave it out there in the dark because you have been too timid to trust that your prayers might truly make a difference. They have. They do and they will because of the power of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And for that gospel, thanks be to God.