

WHEN GOD ISN'T FINISHED

Acts 12:1-19

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on June 30, 2019, the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series on the Acts of the Apostles, entitled "When..."

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) 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. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. 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. The angel said to him, 'Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.' He did so. Then he said to him, 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.' 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 seeing a vision. 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 a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. 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 people were expecting.'

As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. 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. They said to her, 'You are out of your mind!' But she insisted that it was so. They said, 'It is his angel.' Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. 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.

When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

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Earlier this week, on the same day, I had two theological conversations in my office – which happens less often than you might believe – about two different but related characteristics of God.

- One person expressed appreciation for the acts of *deliverance* we see from God, particularly in the Israelites crossing the Red Sea from slavery to freedom; and the death of Christ promising deliverance from sin. This person also noted that the death of Christ occurs during the season of Passover, when the Exodus from slavery is celebrated, thus linking deliverance *from* sin with deliverance from *slavery*.

- Another person appreciated the *intervention* of God – in history, in individual lives – but remains understandably troubled by its selective and inconsistent occurrences. God seems to intervene in the lives of some but not others, this person said; and in the lives of some nations and peoples *but not* others.

As I reflect on these two conversations, I cannot help but see both *deliverance* and *intervention* in the story before us today.

I.

We are in the midst of a sermon series on the Book of Acts, a book which recounts in dramatic fashion the story of the early Christians who – *armed* with the good news of the resurrection and *commissioned* by Christ at his ascension to carry that good news to all people and nations – are about the business of taking the spiritual force, the humanitarian idealism, the promise of ultimate redemption found in Jesus and translating it into the world of facts and fancies, kings and empires, families and fortunes, gained and lost. Jesus started a movement; and beginning in Acts, the church translates that movement into a religion, an institution, a global community “*in the world*” but not “*of the world*.”

In doing so, early Christians had a continual need for *deliverance*, a need often met by *intervention* on the part of God.

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Our story today provides one such intervention. It opens with ominous news and tone:

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) When [Herod] had seized [Peter], he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers [ten people each] to guard [Peter], intending to bring [Peter] out to the people after the Passover.

The name “Herod” itself calls up fear and trembling; anger and outrage on the lips of Christians then and now:

- There was Herod the Roman ruler at the time of the birth of Christ, who sought to use the wise men to find where the infant was so he could kill him, and who, failing that, ordered the death of “all the children in and around Bethlehem two years old or under.”¹
- There was the Herod before whom Jesus was tried.²
- And there was this Herod, who, like his predecessor, was willing to use violence to thwart the words of Jesus and those who believed in him after his death.

Notice as well the element of political theatre in our story, as Herod is “intending to bring [Peter] out [and parade him in front of] the people after Passover,” the feast in which they celebrate their ancestors’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the feast during which Jesus was arrested and likewise paraded before the people. Think hostages in Iran. Think Otto Warmbier.

¹ Matthew 2:1-18.

² Luke 23:6-12,

The world of violence and virulence, dictators and death, tyrants and treachery never ends: Kim Jong-un; Vladimir Putin, MSB. Herods are still around.

II.

But in this situation, God intervenes. Luke describes it this way:

The very night before Herod was going to bring Peter out to parade him before the people, Peter is asleep in prison, between two guards, bound in chains

Suddenly a light shines in the cell, not that of a guard's flashlight doing a bed check but light from an angel of the Lord. The angel taps Peter on the side, wakes him up, and says "Get up, fasten your belt, put on your sandals."

Chains fall off Peter's wrists. The gate to the prison swings open.

Peter follows the angel, but he thinks he is having a dream (Why wouldn't he?) and makes his way to the home of Mary, where many of the Christians in Jerusalem have gathered in a vigil to pray for his release. In response to Peter's escape, Herod orders the deaths of the guards on whose watch Peter's deliverance has occurred.

Like Daniel being rescued from the Lion's Den;³ like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being rescued from the fiery furnace;⁴ and like Peter himself and a group of apostles had earlier been rescued,⁵ Peter is once again rescued by divine intervention; a ruler is humiliated; the prayers of the people are answered; and God prevails in a way that sparks hope and inspiration for the early Christians to keep on despite persecution and violence. It is a great story told of a great event of a great God rescuing a great people. And it brings us hope when we hear it.

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But the intervention is indeed selective. Peter lives; but James has been killed by the sword. Prison guards are killed by Herod for not staving off a miracle; while Herod retires to his summer palace in Caesarea. Deliverance occurs. God intervenes. But not in a way that is easy, smooth or complete. A lot of people are hurt. In fact, a few verses later, when Herod is worshipped as a god by his supporters, an angel of the Lord strikes Herod down. A just end, we might say, but not the way we want the world to be, not the way we want God to act to make the world closer to what we want the world to be. We prefer swords being beaten into ploughshares and classes on the study of war being scheduled no more.⁶

III.

What to say about this?

Both people in my office were on to something.

God delivers.

- God delivers us from slavery, literal and spiritual, physical and psychological.

³ Daniel 6.

⁴ Daniel 3.

⁵ Acts 5.

⁶ Isaiah 2:4; Joel 3:12; Micah 4:3.

- God delivers us from oppression, poverty, hunger, tyranny, genocide.
- God delivers us from the power of sin and evil; from ways we participate in and sometimes embody that power; and from ways we are injured by sin and evil, our own and others.

God delivers. And it *is* exciting and hopeful for us.

But God's deliverance is *not* complete until that day on which God will make *all things new*, that day of *promise* toward which we *live* but over whose arrival time and circumstances we have *no control*. That final intervention on the part of God – which will originate in a realm beyond time and which may or may not occur in time as we know it – promises to be such that no one will remain enslaved, no one will be put to death by tyrants, tyrants themselves will face justice or be healed of their tyranny or some rare and mysterious combination of both. We know that *that world* is not here...but it is *promised* and we live *toward* it. *Deliverance* and *intervention*, both anticipated, both welcomed.

IV.

The story as Luke writes it ends on a *comical* note, and it is a story which needs comic relief.

Once the angel has left Peter on his own, Peter goes to a house owned by a disciple named Mary. Her home is large enough to hold a prayer vigil for the church. Her home is luxurious enough to have an iron gate at its entrance. Mary is prosperous enough to own a household slave/servant named Rhoda. When Peter knocks on the door of this gated community, it is Rhoda who answers.

Rhoda recognizes Peter's voice, I suppose from having been around him when he had attended other church meetings at Mary's home. And she is overjoyed when she hears his voice. In fact, her joy is so pronounced that she forgets to open the gate and let Peter in. Instead, she runs back to the house and tells the others.

Ironically, when Peter had escaped from prison, the iron gates of the compound opened fully before him. But now he has to stand outside the gate where the church is gathered; and he has to *keep knocking* to get in. He has to persist to be received by the people of God.

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But Peter is not the only one who has to persist. When Rhoda arrives back at the house brimming with good news, she too has to persist, for the disciples are skeptical about what she is saying.

- Maybe their skepticism arises from the fact that she is a servant, and they are not inclined to take her seriously.
- Maybe it is because she is a woman.
- Maybe it is because they have not seen enough interventions and deliverances to believe that this one could be real.
- Or maybe it is because they begin to wonder that if God has in fact intervened to free Peter, it may call into question the legitimacy of their having in their midst and possessing another human being who is enslaved.

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We only see Peter one more time in the narrative. We never see Rhoda again. But once the early disciples walk down the driveway, open the gate at which Rhoda had stood, and let Peter in, perhaps they realize – or Luke is signaling us as readers – that there is still *another gate* to be opened:

- A gate through which God will intervene and deliver all like Rhoda down through the ages
- A gate through which Rhoda will walk in freedom
- A gate through which her stories of good news will be taken seriously
- A gate through which it will occur to Christians who have gathered to pray for freedom of one of their own might need to ask themselves why they are still served by someone who is not free
- A gate through which not only Christians shall enter and experience a change of heart and mind, but the Herods of the world as well.

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I hadn't intended to preach a Fourth of July sermon today, but this theme of freedom rang through the text for me. The closed gate outside Mary's compound reminds us that God's work of intervention and deliverance is not yet finished; that God's freedom continues to unfold, marching forward at what seems at times to be a glacial pace and what seems at other times to be too much too soon.

The freedom our intervening God brings is spiritual, personal, physical, political, national. It brings with it a whole cadre of responsibilities, of which the Bible is also deeply aware. Even with these responsibilities, and our seemingly congenital capacity to forget them, one thing of which we can be certain is that God's intervention on behalf of freedom is not finished. It continues. It will occur again. It will not turn back. And because God work of deliverance is not finished, neither is ours.

Amen.

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