

Herod, Peter, Rhoda and the Church at Prayer

Acts 12:1-24

5/10/2020

Here is one of the wildest chapters in the Bible. It's like a short story in 24 short verses. There's grisly violence and high comedy; there's faith and blasphemy; there's ruthless power and the power of love called prayer. Let's get going!

I

Scene One sets it all up, a contest between King Herod and the church. Verse one: “*About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church.*” He had James, the brother of John, killed; then he had Peter arrested and thrown in prison.

And the church? Verse five: “*While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.*” There it is: ruthless power versus fervent prayer. We might say, In face of ruthless power prayer doesn't have a...chance!” (I was going to say “prayer”) But there are more kinds of power than the power of the sword, and the church is called to lay hold of a different kind of power through prayer.

Nancy Hastings Sehested told a story in her Davis Lectures at Grace Baptist. She at the time was a chaplain in a high security prison for men. The head prison guard did not want her, a woman minister, there, but she slowly won him over. One day there was a threatened riot at the prison, and the head guard got her safely out.

He came to her later in her office and said, “You don’t like it, but you need me. And I don’t like it, but I need you.” Nancy said, “I know why I need you, to help me in days like today. But why do you need me?”

The guard said, “Because you are in touch with a different kind of power.”

Herod laid violent hands on the church, but the church prayed fervently for Peter in prison. Two kinds of power. Which will prevail?

II

Scene Two. It is the night before Peter’s scheduled execution. Peter was asleep, chained between two soldiers. And outside were four squads of four soldiers each standing guard. Herod is taking no chances. This pesky apostle had escaped before.

As Peter slept soundly in his cell an angel suddenly appeared, and light filled the room. You might have expected something like that with an angel’s appearance: light, music, a *gloria* or two. But this angel was different. His name

was not Gabriel. He should have been named *Bubba*. Bubba the Angel. When the light did not wake Peter up, the angel *shoved* him, yes, that's the word, shoved him in the ribs.

Jostling him awake the angel said, "Wake up, Peter, hurry, wake up." The chains fell off. Peter was in that foggy, fuddled, half awake, half asleep state of mind. The angel then pushed him to get dressed, practically putting his clothes on for him. Like parents getting their children dressed for church.

Get out of bed, Peter. First, put on your shirt, now your pants. That's right, your socks, now your shoes. Not that shoe; it's for the other foot! Now your coat. Yes, you have to wear your coat. Now you're ready. Wait, let me slick down your hair. O.K., let's go!

Peter, now dressed, was still in a daze as he followed the angel out. He didn't think it was happening. He thought it was a dream.

They passed out the cell door, then past the first squad of soldiers and the next. The soldiers were fast asleep.

They came to the big iron gate leading out to the city. The door seemed to swing open by itself. Out they went and began walking down the lane. Suddenly, the angel vamoosed, and Peter was all alone.

It does seem like a dream, doesn't it? Light flooding into the cell, chains falling silently off, an angel jostling him awake, playing Mr. Mom, leading him past the guards, the giant gate opening for him, then they were free.

Peter thought he was in a dream until the angel suddenly left and just as suddenly Peter woke up. As the angel left did he feel the yank of separation?

"How did I get here?" He must have wondered. "This isn't a dream! I'm free!" Then he headed directly to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where the tiny group of believers were gathered praying for him.

III

Scene Three. The high comedy of God's church.

Peter knocked on the door. "Are they going to be surprised to see me!", Peter said to himself. He knocked as loudly as he dared, he a prison escapee in the middle of the night in a strange neighborhood.

The one who heard him knocking and came to the door was a maid-servant named *Rhoda*. That's right, *Rhoda*. Finally a name in the book of *Acts* I can pronounce! The name *Rhoda* means "red", as in rhododendrons. Today she might be called "Red" or "Rose".

From behind the locked door *Rhoda* asked, "Who is it?" When she heard Peter's voice she recognized it was Peter. She ran to tell the others the great news.

But in her excitement she forgot to unlatch the door and left Peter standing out in the night air.

She told the group: “Peter’s at the door!” Now picture this. The church group is huddled together praying for Peter locked away in prison. Rhoda runs to tell them that Peter is at the door.

They didn’t cry, “Hallelujah, God has answered our prayers! God is Good!” No. They said, “Rhoda, you are *crazy!*” That’s the word they used, crazy! Rhoda kept on insisting on what she knew. They said, “Couldn’t be Peter; it’s his angel!”

Then they went back to praying “Pulleese, Lord, pulleese, help our brother Peter who is in prison. “Pulleese, Lord, pulleese!”

Meanwhile Peter is still outside the door, getting more and more nervous. Who will spot him? Has his escape been discovered? Are Herod’s soldiers out looking for him?

He might well have muttered: “It’s easier to get *out* of Herod’s prison than *into* a house of people praying for me!”

Finally, the church got up off their knees and followed Rhoda to the door. When Rhoda opened it they were *amazed*. That’s the word *Amazed!* Some gasped; others squealed, some started praising the Lord. Peter motioned them to be quiet. Hush, it’s dangerous out here! Then he told them all that had happened,

and told them to go tell James (the brother of Jesus) and the other believers. Then he left into the night.

IV

The story tells us that God opens prison doors (God, by the way, sometimes needs *our* help in this!). And there are prison doors not made of steel but of things like *fear*. Somedays we need the jostling of an angel to lead us out of such prisons.

And what of the comic disbelief of the church? Hard at prayer yet not believing that Peter for whom they were praying was at the door?

They are us. We believe, we don't believe, we half believe. Too many unanswered prayers, perhaps. And we rightly shy away from the kind of prayer William James called, "lobbying in the courts of the Almighty for special favors."

But prayer is a form of love, and love, God's kind of love, never fails.

Let me step away from the story for a pastoral comment. Prayer is not magic. There is no direct relationship between the prayers we utter and what happens. James the disciple was killed by Herod, and I am sure the church was praying for him. And Peter himself later was martyred in Rome and no doubt the church was praying for him then. All this is beyond my understanding. Still I pray. Who has not prayed fervently for a person's healing, and they died? But our

prayers have not been in vain, because love is not in vain. Our prayers carry the love of God to them. And God's love will finally prevail for the final healing of us all and all the world.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, said that intercessory prayer at its simplest is this, "thinking of someone or something in the presence of God." Who knows what can happen if God is involved? And he says that the wrestling-like labor of intercessory prayer is :

...the struggle not to let God and the world fall apart from each other:

because that is the centre of this prayer, the recognition that, despite of appearances, God and the world belong together.

We pray, he says, believing that "there is nowhere the love of God cannot go."¹

So let us never forsake the form of love called prayer.

V

Last scene. I will tell it quickly. It points to this truth: *Evil always over reaches, and its over-reaching leads to its destruction.* Not as soon as we would like, but surely so.

Here's what happened next, and it's as real as the morning newspapers. When Herod finds out about Peter's escape, he has the guards killed. They had

followed his commands, done his dirty work for him, but when things went wrong, they were as expendable as old dish water.

Then this happened. Representatives from Tyre and Sidon came to him begging for food. Their people were starving. Herod arranged a meeting for them with his royal highness. He donned his royal robes, took his royal seat on the platform and delivered his royal address to them. Desperate for his help, the representatives bowed and shouted, “The voice of a God, not a man!” The king basked in their words.

And now the conclusion. Because of Herod’s refusal to give glory to anyone but himself, because of his presumption to take the place of God, an angel came and struck him down.

The *means* of the striking was *worms*. Yes, worms. The text says “He was eaten by worms and died”. No details given. But that little detail has been enough to keep fifth grade boys reading the Bible.

VI

This chapter in Acts began with this vivid contrast: *Herod laid violent hands on the church, but the church prayed fervently for Peter.*

And now it ends with this vivid contrast, in two successive sentences:

“Herod was eaten by worms and died. But the Word of God grew and multiplied!”

In Leonard Bernstein’s *Mass*, the priest sings a song called “The Word of the Lord.” Here is part of it:

You can lock up the bold men

Go, and lock up the bold men and hold them in tow

You can stifle all adventure for a century of so.

Smother hope before its risen, watch it wizen like a gourd

But, you cannot imprison the Word of the Lord,

No, you cannot imprison the Word of the Lord....

You people of power,

O, you people of power your hour is now.

You may plan to live forever,

but you never do somehow!

So we wait in silent treason

until reason is restored.

We await for the season

of the Word of the Lord.

We wait for the season
of the Word of the Lord.

The kingdoms rise and fall, the church keeps at prayer, and the Word of God goes on forever.

1. Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), p.138