

HEROD'S HANDS AND PETER'S ESCAPE FROM PRISON

Acts 12:1-19

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We're going to deal with this section of scripture in two, maybe three, sermons. Today's sermon will deal with the entire story of Peter and his imprisonment while next Sunday, Lord willing, we'll take a deeper look into the topic of angels. A couple of you, even for years now, have been asking for a sermon on angels, so next Sunday is it.

This existence of Herod with his "violent hands" raises the question – a sort of theological question – as to why EVIL exists.

After all, if the God to whom we this morning have offered praise, and thanks, and adoration, is such a **wonderful, kind, benevolent and good God**, why on earth, if he truly is SOVEREIGN (meaning over all things), **WHY does he allow this evil to go on?** If this evil had just **suddenly popped up** (seemingly out of nowhere) one could understand somebody asking, "How did this come about?" or "So what is God going to **now** do about this evil?" But the evil we are talking about is **as old as mankind** and seemingly older than that! Most Bible commentators read Job 38:7 to be suggesting that the angels of heaven were already around at the time of the creation of the world.

Job 38:4-7

So if the angels were **already around**, Satan was already around, and if Satan was already around, why didn't God do something about him? Most Christian theologians are not willing to suggest that the fall of mankind was a surprise to God, so Satan's temptation of Adam, with Adam and Eve's resulting "fall" into sin, was also likely **no surprise to God**. God dealt with the man and woman at that time: casting them out of the garden of Eden, removing from them access to the tree of life, and promising a livelihood to Adam by the sweat of his brow and pain to the woman in giving birth to a child. But why didn't God, at that same time, just **wipe Satan out?** Why not annihilate him?

There has been a growing school of liberal thought within evangelicalism that come the time of eternal judgment, God is going

to simply ANNIHILATE – meaning "wipe out" – bring to nothing, to non-existence – the unrighteous. Yet...yet...these same liberal minds for some odd reason have trouble promoting the idea that God should annihilate Satan and those angels who fell with him (according to Revelation chapter 12).

If it had been left up to me, I would have annihilated Satan long ago. Think of where mankind might be if the great enemy of our souls was gone!

So, why does this EVIL continue?

According to scripture, God has a plan for Satan. It is an eternal plan.

Matthew 25:31-46

So, hell, according to verse 41, was prepared or made for the devil and his angels. That individuals should or could or would possibly go to that same place is presented as almost an afterthought.

But let's forego the issue of Satan and his angels and deal, from this Acts 12 text, more directly with the question as to why God allowed (and continues to allow) people like Herod to do their dirty work...the work of violent hands?

Two weeks ago Ruth and I celebrated our 41-year anniversary. Every time we think of our having gone to Italy last September to celebrate our 40 years of marriage we are SO HAPPY and SO RELIEVED that we went back then. For now...well, what can anyone say about this year...2020? It is a year unlike any year we have ever known, and there is no end in sight to it.

But anyway, we celebrated our 41-year anniversary a couple weeks back.

By and large Ruth and I get along fairly well with each other. I'm going to move this into a bit of marriage counseling right now, so allow me to continue...

Now WHY do we get along fairly well together? I think a lot of it has to do with

1) **We are both Christians** who STRONGLY BELIEVE in the teaching of the scriptures. Neither of us can even fathom how we could survive as a married couple without this first point being in place. And if you are listening to this and don't have a strong bond in Christ with your mate, all I can say is that there is NOTHING that you should be praying for more than the conversion of your spouse. So Ruth and I have that.

2) **We are of one mind** when it comes to the big issues in life: be that in regards to money, or spending, or what is most important time wise. Ruth was always much better with the children than I was, but without me around her physical world would likely begin to crumble quite quickly. Which leads into the third point...

3) **We have reached a good balance** in regards to expectations regarding the duties of each. Ruth is a GREAT COOK and buys the food. I'm a GREAT LAWN MOWING, CAR MAINTAINING, FIX OR PAINT kind of guy. She does the laundry and I often do the vacuuming. Together we do the dishes. I balance the checkbook. We've found our middle ground on all these issues and that too has helped us.

4) **We truly believe that love is a commitment**, so even on those days when we maybe aren't doing real well with each other, we always come back to the basics of what LOVE is all about, and that is the COMMITMENT TO STAY COMMITTED.

So that is who we are.

Yet for all the positives, there are days when we don't do very well with each other.

I have often said that I would like to hire a videographer for a day and have that person go around with me. We would go golfing, and then swimming, and then to a shooting range, and then I'd get out my bow with some arrows. And this videographer would just keep shooting the whole day. And

then, at the end, I would have that person take that tee-shot on the 7th hole...the one where I drove the ball 230 yards on to the green...and I would couple that with the video of the 14th hole where I sunk a 30' putt. Then I would have them show those three arrows (out of some 25 that I shot) that hit the bull's eye. On and on, I would have them pick out the absolute best moments: the over my back hook shot with the basketball, the shooting of the clay pigeons – shooting from the waist – with the shotgun, and the bowling of the strike. By the end of my 8 hours of events, but shrunk down to 2 minutes of viewing time, if one were to view **ONLY THOSE TWO MINUTES** one would walk away convinced that I had to have been one of the **most dynamic, amazing athletes that ever lived**. And then I'd make a bunch of copies of that and give them to my grandchildren. A hundred years from now, my grandchildren's great-grandchildren would be marveling at their fantastic great, great, great grandfather.

So too, I could show you many minutes of Ruth and me that would make you think we have the greatest marriage on the entire planet.

But it would be deceptive...just like my athletic prowess video would be deceptive.

And why?

Because the truth is: at times Ruth and I struggle for the same reason that Herod, by means of **VIOLENT HANDS**, killed James and then arrested Peter with the clear intent of killing him as well. We struggle because we are sinners, and evil is not far from any of us. Sure, Ruth and I have been redeemed and Herod was clearly not, but sin is sin, and a sin nature has plagued **EVERYONE**, save God's Son, from Adam down to the youngest of those among us.

So before the atheistic antagonist comes challenging you as to **WHY** this good God would allow **EVIL** to continue on this earth, we **ALL** – including that atheistic antagonist – we all need to take a **good long look in the mirror**. Because in wanting to rid the world of Herod and his "violent hands," or Hitler with his hatred of the Jews, or some modern day politician

that you may think is the epitome of evil on two feet, we had all better consider the consequences of a world free of evil.

For the only way you are going to get a world free of evil is to get a world free of people...including not only Herod, but you and me as well.

A number of weeks before Burning Hearts reopened Ruth and I attended Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Lancaster City. This is the predominantly African-American congregation that is pastored by my 6'10" friend, Ed Bailey.

In my opinion, when Ed Bailey is "on" (meaning preaching really well), there is **not a better preacher that one will find anywhere**. Should I die before Ed Bailey, Ruth knows it is my desire that Ed Bailey preach my funeral. For if he preaches, and you attend that funeral, it will likely be a funeral you will never forget! Ed is that good of a preacher. But one of the Sundays that we were at Bethel Ed said (and this is a direct quote),

"You will never get to heaven until you have gone through the hell of the church." (repeat)

I have to admit, that line made me smile.

For if you have been a Christian for a long time, **you know** what Ed Bailey was talking about.

You know about

- the gossip that can arise out of prayer/prayer meetings
- those board meetings that can become platforms for power
- how musicians can feel pulled towards or away from songs, or kinds of music, by those who have some power. Or how
- a church can literally split down the middle over the most insignificant of issues.

These petty issues in church life...in married life...in our own lives...these are all **evidences of the fall** of Adam and its subsequent taking us all through what Ed Bailey might call a bit of hell.

But until God decides to **PURIFY the entire cosmos** of evil, putting Satan and his angels in a place made just for them to keep them eternally locked up and under key, we are **each** going to struggle in our lives, our homes and even in the church.

So Herod did his thing...the kind of thing this Jewish puppet king of Rome did best: he persecuted the people of God.

- A few years earlier he had had John the Baptist's head cut off.
- He interviewed Jesus on the day of his death but didn't do anything to affect that outcome.
- Now we here find him gaining points with the unbelieving Jewish leadership in Israel by killing James, and arresting Peter.

The James of whom we read here is the James who was the brother of John, what the gospels call "The Sons of Zebedee" and "The Sons of Thunder." These were two really great guys who had a mother who thought them to be the best of the best...

Matthew 20:20-28

Well, James, according to Acts 12, DID INDEED come to "drink" from the same cup – the cup of persecution and death – that Jesus drank from.

And having seen how that pleased the unbelieving Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, Herod arrested Peter. This would now be Peter's THIRD time in prison, as recorded in the book of Acts.

- First he was arrested with John, back in Acts 4
- Then he was arrested along with the rest of the apostles in Acts 5
- And now he is arrested again here in Acts 12.

People make too big a thing, I think, about being arrested. I was talking to someone the other day (who had themselves spent time in prison) and I was mentioning all the people I know who have been arrested and spent time behind bars. The fact is, a good number of people, including some who would be

among my closest of friends, have spent time in prison. And in doing so, they have been in the company of a lot of great saints.

Here is a list of men, in the Bible, who were arrested or taken as prisoners...

Lot
Joseph
Daniel
Jeremiah
John the Baptist
Jesus
Stephen
Peter
John
James
The rest of the apostles
Paul, and
Silas

So, if you've gone to jail, don't sweat it. Big deal.
Like catching the coronavirus and recovering, at least
you can say, "I got THAT over!"

So for the third time Peter was arrested.
Peter denied our Lord three times, and now he has been arrested 3 times.
Seems fair.

But this arrest ended in the most amazing, even humorous of ways. You can picture this in your mind...

Those who knew Peter were praying. Indeed, it appears that a special prayer meeting had been called. And a good group turned out. What that group didn't know was that at the exact time they were praying, God was doing something... Did you catch that: at the exact time they were praying, God was doing something.

It was 19 years ago RIGHT NOW, that I was in the midst of a deep depression. Things had turned ugly at the church I had been pastoring for some 15 years. It had started over a new counseling ministry that had come into the church. That led to

disagreements and that, in turn, had led to personal attacks upon individuals. People had left the church and more were thinking about leaving. Try as hard as I could I could not bring peace to the situation. And then, on the Fourth of July fireworks show in Lititz, something happened – I won't go into the details – the end result was that inwardly I snapped, I broke, and with that break I quickly spiraled down into a depression that took me deeper and deeper into despair. Within days I was laying on my bed thinking of how hopeless the future seemed.

"If I resign from the church, no one will hire me." I thought. "No, no one will hire me. I wouldn't hire me. There is no hope. I'm done with the church...I'm done with the family...I'm done with life."

Time went by. I went through the motions but it was all a show. I was deeply depressed and didn't know what to do about it. I wouldn't go see a doctor because I didn't want to admit to anyone where I was in my mind and spirit.

Ruth, knowing and seeing clearly where I was, without telling me, had called together a small group of close friends for a special prayer meeting for me. I knew nothing about it. So one night while I was busy transporting our children to an evening vacation Bible School at the church building, Ruth and these friends were praying for me. As I drove on to the church property, SUDDENLY – and I mean SUDDENLY – it was as if a TON OF ANXIETY was lifted off me, I suddenly felt free...euphoric...and as close to an audible voice as I could imagine said to me, "Speak against negative introspection" (negative introspection had been at the heart of the new counseling ministry). Suddenly there was a sense of hope...of a future...that while I had no idea where things were heading, it was going to be alright.

I came home later that night a different man and it was only then that I learned of the prayer meeting that had taken place.

At the very time they were praying, God was freeing me. And I have never gone down into that deep bottomless pit called depression since that day. Hallelujah!

So an angel of the Lord releases Peter,

Peter goes to the home of John Mark's mother, Mary, and Rhoda meets him at the door.

Rhoda.

A few weeks ago we learned about a GREAT PROPHET of God named Agabus. But no one seems to name their child Agabus.

But here is Rhoda, this rather innocent...almost foolish, young girl. And many parents name their daughters Rhoda. Go figure.

Rhoda answers the gate (or door) and sees Peter, but instead of letting him in she runs in to tell those praying that Peter is at the gate. They don't believe her, but soon Peter is let in and then he relates the amazing story of his escape from prison.

The next day, the prisoner having escaped, the guards who were watching over him are put to death. It wasn't their fault that Peter had been arrested and one could argue it wasn't their fault that Peter had escaped (maybe the angel had put some sort of Jedi "go to sleep" spell on them...who knows?). But as a result, those two soldiers were put to death. Doesn't seem fair. Maybe we should tear down all statues dedicated to Peter, Christ's apostle, since it was because of Peter's escape from prison that two Roman soldiers died. Yeah, that seems like a good idea...NOT!

Yes, when people pray, some amazing things can happen...