



It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This?

TEXT
Acts 28:23–31

July 30, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Well, we have been working our way through the book of Acts. There is a lot more there still to mine from this story, but today we read the last verses of Acts.

We find Paul in Rome. If you are the hopeful type, you might have expected that to be the case from Chapter 1. Acts begins with the command of God: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” That’s the command — or maybe it is better read as a promise. The commandments of God are often promises.

On Pentecost, Peter preached in Jerusalem, and it says 3,000 joined the church that day. I don’t know if the number is particularly accurate, maybe it was only 2,813, but the point is the church was being established with folks from every place and time and growing in dramatic fashion. That happened in Jerusalem.

Then, according to the promise, the word moved to Judea and Samaria. Philip proclaimed the word in Samaria and believers joined the church. It was Philip who administered the first baptisms to occur in Samaria.

Do we get to the ends of the earth? Well, yes. Here, we find Paul preaching in Rome. For those in Jerusalem, Rome was the symbol of the rest of the world, the whole world. To reach Rome was to reach the ends of the earth.

The promise of God comes to full fruition. The church has born witness to the gospel in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We might think Acts is saying, “It doesn’t get any better than this!”

But a closer read provides a reflection with more nuance. The truth is, the response to Paul’s preaching, much like the response to Jesus himself, was mixed. Some responded with joy and others thought the gospel was ridiculous.

If Pentecost began with 3,000 joining the church, Acts ends in much less triumphant fashion. Paul is not preaching in some megachurch with overflow crowds and everyone sharing a spirit of forgiveness, and everyone tithing, and everyone treating the other with justice. No, Paul has had to defend his life against Jews; he has had to defend his life against Gentiles. Paul is probably under house arrest, preaching to those who

sought him out. He is the apostle appointed by God, and here he finds himself quietly living out his final days in Rome, waiting for whoever will knock on the door.

It’s not “It doesn’t get any better than this!” It’s “It doesn’t get any better than this??” It’s enough to be discouraging.

Paul remembers the lament of the old prophet Isaiah, who hundreds of years earlier said, *People listen, but they do not really hear; they look, but they fail to really see the grace and power of God.*

When it comes to the human response to God, the response has always been mixed. It’s discouraging. Life can be discouraging. You know that.

I have talked with some of you this week about matters of health: difficult surgeries; difficult medical reports. We all face that at times. Our bodies grow fragile or sometimes diseased. It’s difficult not to get discouraged.

I have talked with some of you this week about matters of the nation. The Congress rages on about health care. I don’t know anyone who wants other citizens to be prevented from seeing a doctor. And I don’t know any citizen who wants

their neighbor to go bankrupt because they need a knee replacement. But we haven't figured out how to balance these concerns. But what is most disturbing is how unimportant it seems to the deciders to figure this out. One thing for sure, those who will make the decision and those who will fund the deciders will not be negatively impacted by their choices. If there are losers, they will not be found in the Congress. It's discouraging.

And if that weren't enough, this week we witnessed national leaders talking in a way that shows such immaturity you wonder if they have escaped adolescence. Actually, I have probably just insulted adolescents. Someone should call their parents. If I were to speak this way about my neighbors, you would have me fired by lunchtime, as you should. It's embarrassing; it's small. There are too many with power who have cast values aside. If we cast aside our values, who are we? It's discouraging.

I imagine you have had experiences in your work where you endeavored for some identified goal that proved elusive. Or you have had circumstances in your relationships that have proved difficult to bring to fruition. It's discouraging.

I am pointing to this reality in life because I am sure Paul was discouraged as well. But in the face of discouragement, he also demonstrates some spiritual maturity, and he does so in a way that I think he can be our teacher.

I think the spiritual wisdom Paul demonstrates is the practice of patience. Patience is a spiritual gift. It's a spiritual gift because, for most of us, it is not a natural gift.

My friend Aaron is the son of a former colleague of mine. When he was a child, Aaron was seen standing in front of the microwave, with popcorn inside. And with exasperation in his voice, he was yelling, "Hurry up! Come on, hurry up!"

For most of us, patience does not come naturally. Patience is a spiritual gift. And patience is not something we feel; it is something we choose. Think about someone you know to be patient, and ask them in the moment of demonstrating patience what they are feeling in that moment. They won't be feeling patience. No, they will be choosing to be patient in spite of their feeling.

It was years ago now, before we had the Village Cup, and I was in Starbucks. I stepped in and the line was atrocious. I waited my place and checked email on my phone. I had worked my way to near the front of the line when a woman stepped up and said, "I'm sorry but could I step in front of you? I wouldn't normally do this, but I'm on my way to a funeral, and I just have to have some coffee. I would wait in line, but I think it is so rude to be late to a funeral." With that she stepped in front of me.

I said, "Of course." But what I thought was "Really?" I wanted to say, "I'll see you at the funeral. I'll be the one

up front. With you in front of me, you can guarantee that you won't be late to the funeral."

Patience is a spiritual gift; and like any gift, it must be cultivated, nourished. We think of patience as being about time. It's about waiting. Patience is not about time. It's about seeing beauty in an imperfect life.

I woke up a bit discouraged Thursday morning. I learned that with the deluge through the night, our basement took on some water. Our basement is unfinished, so there was very little damage actually. Things were really dirty. It was a mess. I thought, "No, I have things to do today. I don't have time to clean this up."

As I was muttering to myself, I got a text from George saying things were not well at church. I jumped in the car and came over to find George's team busy with shop vacs and moving furniture. It was a mess. My unfinished basement was no longer that big a deal.

And then I learned of some others, including some of you, who had real damage. I have no need to complain anymore. It's put in perspective.

Patience is not about time; it is about how we see the circumstances of our lives. It is about seeing beauty in an imperfect life.

There is no doubt Paul has the gift of patience. He quotes Isaiah to at least remind himself that the prophets before him, and even Christ himself, were always greeted with mixed reception. Paul should expect no more. This is the way things

are in an imperfect world. But Paul was at peace because he still had ministry to do. That was beauty enough. He noticed those who responded; those who joined him at the table for the sacrament; those who shared in ministry with him. He was not alone. It may not be a grand ending, but the church was present. It was enough. He was patient.

But there is something else going on here. I am inspired by the fact that as Paul sits chained in Rome, rejected by many, forced to defend his life to every power structure known in the world at that time, he never stopped talking about the kingdom of God. I'm inspired by this because sometimes discouragement causes us to lower our sights; to reign in our dreams a bit; to lower expectations.

But Paul continued living toward God's promised day. Why is that? What I see in this is a holy impatience. I have to be careful about this, but there is a holy impatience that needs to be practiced as well. What do I mean by holy impatience? I mean being persistent to claim the victory that can be claimed today. I mean being persistent in taking the steps toward God's promised day that can be taken today.

An obvious example is the letter that Martin Luther King wrote over fifty years ago. He was in jail for nonviolent protest in Birmingham, Alabama. Some of the white pastors in Birmingham called on him to slow down. Don't move so

fast. Show a little patience. To them he wrote the following: "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied.'"¹

King demonstrated a holy impatience. Sometimes the things of this world, aspects of our lives, can no longer wait; we must be impatient to bring about change.

I think Paul lived every day toward God's promised day.

The work on things that matter — the work on that which makes human life human — is always met with mixed response. And it always requires wisdom to discern if the situation requires patience and seeing the beauty in an imperfect life, or if the situation requires holy impatience and pushing persistently toward God's promised day when justice rolls down like waters and when swords are beaten into plowshares.

When things are a mess in your life and in the world, spiritual maturity invites us to pay attention to every cir-

cumstance and know when to choose patience and when to choose holy impatience.

¹James Washington, Ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1986), p. 292

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.