

Sermon – November 5, 2023
“The church prayed fervently to God”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 12:1-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people, and through them ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Today we are in chapter 12 of Acts. We have two more chapters in the series and then comes Christ the King Sunday. Advent begins on the first Sunday in December, and we will move to scripture readings that anticipate the arrival of Jesus. We should start planning for a sunrise service on the water to gather together to watch the beginning of another Christian year and move into a new year of following Jesus. We are not done with our journey through Acts. There are twelve more chapters. We will return to Jesus working through the early church and the remainder of those chapters after Pentecost next year.

King Herod in this morning's reading is not the king who slaughtered the infants in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. That Herod died before Joseph and his young family returned from Egypt. Nor is this Herod the one who judged Jesus and sent him back to Pilate. This is another Herod, who is king over Israel for Rome and who seeks to please the Jewish leaders and people of Israel. Unlike those other King Herods, this Herod's ancestry is in the line of kings of

Israel, and because of that lineage, he is supported by many rabbis as a legitimate king over Israel. This Herod is motivated to have a connection to the Jewish people and earn their affection and tries to do that by arresting James, the brother of John, the “Sons of Thunder,” and to have him beheaded. We might recall that James and John came to Jesus with their mother who asked for them to sit at his left and right hands, and Jesus assured them they would drink the cup he drinks. James is the first of the apostles to drink of this cup, to be martyred. John, his brother, will be the last. Yet, all of the apostles will become martyrs. In verse three, Luke writes that the death of James pleases the Jews. As Luke does not limit those pleased with James’ death to the Jewish leadership, we are given the insight that those keeping the Christian faith among the Jews are not as well received as they once were. Peter’s eating with the Gentiles is a possible contributor to this response. Herod, who is striving for the affection of those he rules, realizes his popularity has increased with his execution of James, and he decides he will be even more popular if he does the same with Peter. Herod has Peter arrested with the intent of bringing him out after the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Herod has to wait till then as Jewish law forbids sentencing and execution during Passover and the festival.

Peter waits in prison guarded by sixteen soldiers rotating in groups of four to guard him 24/7. The norm for guarding a prisoner was to chain one arm of a prisoner to a soldier. Herod is so cautious and concerned about Peter’ escaping (as Peter has before from the Sanhedrin) that he has Peter chained to two guards and adds guards to the doors to the prison to ensure that Peter will not be freed and escape the plan Herod has for him.

Notice the response of the church to Peter’s arrest. In verse five we are told, “While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.”¹ The church does what only it can do when one of their own is in trouble: they come together and begin to pray. Keep this verse in mind as we will return to it shortly. As the church comes to the night before Peter is to be brought out for trial and execution, they continue in prayer. Meanwhile, in Herod’s prison, Peter is asleep. Now I don’t have any idea what I might be doing the night before I was to be executed but I don’t think I would be sleeping much. Peter is sound asleep, chained to two guards and dressed for a long night of rest. Peter seems to have great peace and no anticipation about what is to happen on the next day. Paul will have a similar response when he is faced with execution as well, telling us that for him to live is to work for Christ and for him to die is to be with Christ. He cannot decide which is more attractive but he tends towards staying and helping believers.

In the middle of Peter's rest, God acts. An angel shows up in Peter's cell, has to strike Peter to wake him up, has him get dressed, and then leads him out of the prison. Peter's chains fall off, the guards are not alerted to his leaving, and Peter is led out of the city with the large iron gate opening by itself for him to leave. Peter is free and realizes that Jesus has acted on his behalf. He lets the church know of his freedom and then hides from the soon-to-occur search for him by Herod.

Let's go back this morning to verse five in our text and spend a few extra moments there. In response to Peter's arrest, the church has gathered at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. It is a large house and most likely is a well-known gathering place for Christian Jews in Jerusalem. Some today think this is the house where Jesus and his disciples enjoyed the Last Supper, and the upper room in the house was where Jesus appeared to the apostles after his resurrection. Mary's house will be searched for Peter when his escape from Herod's plans is discovered. What I would like to point out is what the church has been doing the entire time Peter has been in prison. They have gathered and are in prayer. The NRSV translates the Greek word Luke uses as "fervent" prayer. The CEB translates it as "earnest" prayer, the NASB as "intensely" praying, and the NKJV as "constantly." From this diversity of translations, we might realize that the Greek word is difficult to capture in our English language. If we look elsewhere in Luke's writing, we find examples where he uses this same word. This is the word Luke uses for the type of prayer Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane and, "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground."ⁱⁱⁱ Luke also gives us two parables that are unique to his Gospel that describe the type of prayer he says in Acts the church prays for Peter. The first parable is the widow who persistently asks the unjust judge for a judgment in her case and, in response to her constant coming and asking, the judge gives her a judgment so that she will not wear him out. The second example of a parable of persistent petition is the friend who goes to his neighbor late at night and asks for a loaf of bread and continues to ask until his friend gets up and gives him what he is asking. Jesus tells his followers in these parables that this is how we are to pray. This is how the church prays for Peter's release: fervently, constantly, intensely, and earnestly. We should realize what the church is doing when they pray for Peter's release. They have not gathered on a Sabbath and prayed for a few minutes. They have not gathered for an hour a day to pray. They are in earnest, constant, passionate prayer until they receive an answer. They are praying passionately until Peter is released or he is with Jesus. They have been praying

day and night for Peter's release from bondage, and they have come to the last hours of the last night with no answer, yet they pray on. They are crying out before God for Peter. It seems as if their prayers are not to be answered, that time is running out. They have in mind the death of James, yet they pray to God on Peter's behalf without ceasing. Notice God hears their prayers and God acts, sending an angel to bring Peter out to freedom. Their prayer seems to have been so intense that when Peter arrives as a freed man, they struggle to realize that God has answered their prayer. The impression is that they may have all but lost hope that Peter will be released, yet they pray on. The early church's fervent prayer for Peter is a picture of the church doing the work of the church: praying for, petitioning on behalf of another, crying out before God on behalf of a brother even when hope grows dim.

Let me give voice to a few questions this morning about prayer in light of the early church's example. Do we pray this way? Does this type of prevailing prayer, filled with passion, earnest, constant and ongoing, describe our church as we pray for those who are in bondage to sin in our community? Are we known as the church where people pray? Is our church building a house of prayer? Are our bodies places where there is ongoing, constant, passionate prayer happening for the lost around us in our families and among the people of the world? What might we need to have changed in us that we would cry out for those who are lost in prayer as the early church prayed for Peter with fervent prayers? Can our church be transformed into a gathered body that cries out to God for those in bondage to sin? These are difficult questions. Yet they are questions that the example of the early church's praying requires us to address.

Let me point out that prayer is a deep theme in Acts. Remember back in Acts 1 when Jesus ascended to heaven to be at the right hand of the Father, he told his followers to wait in prayer for power from on high. We find in Acts 1:14 that the disciples are "constantly devoting themselves to prayer." In Acts 4:31 we find "when they had prayed [a prayer for boldness] the place in which they were gathered together was shaken." When Stephen and six others were selected to wait tables for widows, the apostles prayed and laid their hands on the seven men. In Acts 6:6, when Stephen was being stoned, he prayed for those stoning him. A blind Saul prayed and fasted for three days, and Cornelius, a Gentile, prayed constantly to God. There are many more examples of the Church at prayer not only in the first century but across the centuries. As the Church prays, God moves. The recent outpouring at Asbury University was preceded by growing prayers of students, teachers, and people in the community. On this day when we

celebrate and remember those saints who have gone on before us, who are now part of the cloud of witnesses, think how they prayed for us. If we want to see revival, then we need to be found in a posture of prayer, fervent prayer, constant prayer, crying out to God with passion for the release of the captives in our lives, in our community, and in the world. When the people of God pray, God acts. He sent an angel to set Peter free in response to the early church's prayers. He will send Holy Spirit to change us, to change our homes, to change our church, and to change this community if we will pray. The altar is open for us each Sunday during and after the service. Are there some we know who are in bondage, cruel slavery, or on a path to eternal destruction whom we can come and pray for during our weekly prayer times or for whom we can linger here after our service is over to pray for their salvation?

Acts has many themes; it is the acts of Jesus continuing through his followers. The prayers of Jesus continue through those who follow him. Acts, if it is nothing else, is a call to the Church, the body of Christ, those filled with the Spirit of Christ, to pray. It is a call for us to be those who are fervently, constantly, and passionately praying for awakening, for revival, in repentance. Acts calls us to pray. Will we answer that call? Will we become temples filled with Holy Spirit power found in a posture of fervent prayer? Will we become houses of prayer? Will we come together and pray for those bound by sin in our community as the early church came together and prayed for Peter's release from Herod? I don't think we should expect to be transformed into a church of prayer in a single moment or from a single sermon. I don't think that we will be transformed into a house of prayer by praying all night for the release of those in the cruelest of bondage and facing eternal death. But we can make a beginning. We can take a step to becoming a church known as a house of prayer. As we move into Advent, during the Wednesdays of Advent, I am going to come to the churches at noon on Wednesdays for prayer. Will you commit to praying with me on some or all of those days as the gathered body of Christ for the salvation of those in our community who are in the prison of sin and are facing certain trial and eternal separation from God? Let's come together for a season and begin to pray fervently for the lost in our community and listen and watch for God's reply.

Pray with me. Father God, we repent that we have not come to you in prayer as we should. We ask for your forgiveness and ask that you would guide us into times of fervent prayer in this place. We ask, Jesus, that you would transform this place into a house of prayer and that you would transform our bodies into temples of prayer. Guide us to fervently pray for our

*neighbors who are in the bondage of sin. We ask in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Linger before God in this place, wait for power from Jesus, and then go out as one sent to walk the Long Road.

Go forth into Jesus' mission to all people. Amen

ⁱ Acts 12:5 NRSV.

ⁱⁱ Luke 23:44 NRSV.