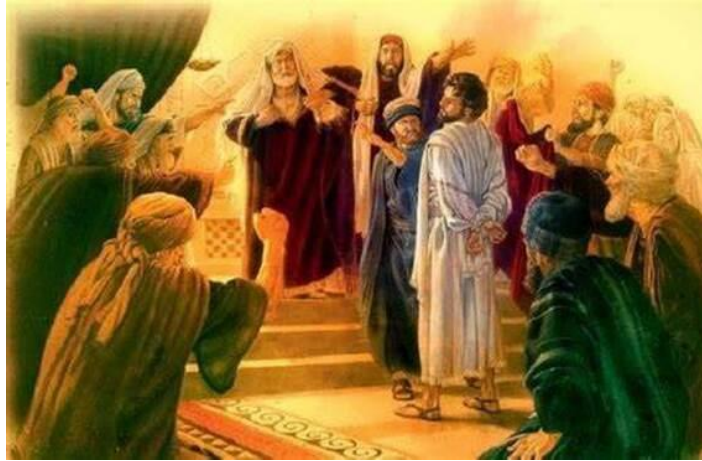


Sermon – July 21, 2024
“Keep up your courage”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 23:1-11

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 anew, and anoint the sharing of these words, blessing your people through them. Fan into flame our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as we go into 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 and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning. You all look great. I want to thank everyone for their help and prayers with our 5-Day Club last week. We had a few kids and were blessed to be able to share Jesus with them and spend time with them in the word.

Paul is still in a Roman barracks in the temple square in Jerusalem. He may no longer be chained to two guards as he has told the tribune, the commander of the soldiers in Jerusalem, that he is a Roman citizen. Paul has not been freed, as the tribune is trying to understand what Paul has done that would bring his conviction if he were tried in a Roman court. So far, the tribune has only seen the anger of the crowd of Jews but has found nothing he could use as a charge that would convict Paul in a Roman trial. The tribune decides the way forward is to have Paul stand in front of the Sanhedrin and let them identify charges that will stand up in a Roman court.

The tribune summons the Sanhedrin, 71 men who are the religious and political leaders of Israel. Paul is taken to the council and stands in their midst. Evidently, the council members are seated in a rising set of seats in a semicircle. Paul is taken to the center and begins to defend himself. Keep in mind that Jewish law, like our own legal system, holds that you are innocent until proven guilty. Paul looks around at the members of the Sanhedrin. He sees who is present. Maybe some of them also sat at the feet of Paul's teacher when he was a student. Some may have persecuted Christians with him in Jerusalem. Paul is considering who is present before he speaks and tries to defend himself. Paul has given his testimony the previous day from the steps of the Roman barracks. Today, after looking over the council, he begins to speak. He starts by sharing that in all he has done in his life his conscience is clear before God. Even when he has lived among the Gentile Christians, Paul holds that he was still a devout Jew. The sharing of his clear conscience is as far as Paul gets in his defense, as the high priest, Ananias, orders those standing near Paul to slap him on the face. While those near Paul seem to ignore the order, Paul responds by calling the one who gave this command a whitewashed wall, a reference to a wall that is crumbling and falling apart but that has been painted over to cover up its faults. Paul also tells the one who ordered him to be struck that God will strike him. Those close by Paul quickly point out that he has addressed the high priest and Paul immediately identifies the law (Exodus 22:28b) that tells us not to speak ill of those in leadership. We would do well to recall that this law applies to believers today and keep our own words in check especially in an election season. The high priest Paul is speaking to is Ananias who will be killed by Jewish nationalists in about six years. According to historians, he was a corrupt high priest and the disregard for the Law he demonstrated with Paul was not uncommon. Paul does not offer any more defense for charges that have not been made and may sense that he will not be able to win many on the council to his defense. He looks around the council and realizes there are Pharisees and Sadducees on the council. Not only does Paul know the Law, but he also knows the political issues and make-up of the council. He makes it clear that he is a Pharisee and then changes his approach from presenting his testimony about Jesus to making the claim that he is on trial because of the resurrection of the dead. Paul's claim is truer than it may seem as he understands Jesus as the first born of the dead, and it is because of Jesus, who has been resurrected from the dead, that Paul is before the council. While Paul may be very familiar with the political and religious beliefs of the council, we are not. The Sadducees were more aligned with Rome and Greece and

tried to move Israel towards those more modern centers. They did not believe in a resurrection, angels, or the spirit. The Pharisees believed in all three and held a more Hebrew approach to politics. They tended to be more independent in their understanding of Israel's place among the nations. The difference in beliefs meant a Sadducee would have to change his theological understanding to follow Jesus, while a Pharisee could continue to hold to his beliefs, keep the Law, and follow Jesus, at least during the early years of first century Christianity. As the two groups interact on these topics, their exchange becomes violent, Paul is caught in the crossfire and is in danger so again the tribune sends troops to rescue Paul as he does not want to report the death of a Roman citizen on his command. The soldiers escort Paul back to the barracks.

Back at the barracks, Paul has time to reflect on what has happened. He is in trouble. Many of the Jews want him dead. He has corrected the high priest in front of the council and the high priest does not take well to shaming. He is not known for his kindness but for being a ruthless leader. Paul is uncertain about his future. He is willing to die in Jerusalem for Jesus and it looks like his mission will end with his death there. And then Paul does what he does and what we should do when we are struggling in life. He prays, asking Jesus what he is to do. Luke shares with us what Paul must have shared with him about this night of prayer. The Lord stood near Paul and said, "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome." At Paul's low point, when his life seems to be over, Jesus stands near him and tells him to keep up his courage. There is still more kingdom work for Paul; he is to be a witness in Rome as he has been in Jerusalem. Paul has stood at the top of the steps going to the Roman barracks and told the Jews about Jesus and what Jesus had instructed Paul to do, take the Good News of Jesus to the Gentiles. When Paul shared this with the Jews, there was not a great movement of God that swept thousands into the kingdom of God, but Paul has done what he was sent to Jerusalem to do for Jesus. Now Jesus comes to Paul, stands close to him, encourages him, and tells him he is to go to Rome to be Jesus' witness. In Paul's time of great need, Jesus has come near and told him to be courageous and that there is more witnessing he is to do in Rome.

Paul is in Jerusalem in a Roman barracks and not free to leave. He is a long way from Rome, but once again, in Paul's time of need, in answer to Paul's prayers, Jesus has come near. First, Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and now Jesus comes and stands near

Paul. We have to ask ourselves, “Is Jesus near to us? Are we hearing from Jesus? Would we like to hear from Jesus?”

Let me remind us of a promise Jesus made to his followers. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ last words to his followers are the Great Commission found in Matthew 28, starting with verse 18: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”ⁱ

Recall that we are in the age of Holy Spirit and the end of the age is when Jesus returns in power. During the age of Holy Spirit, Jesus is with us and will never leave us. Jesus is as close as the breath we breathe. Jesus is with each of us in the Spirit. Jesus died on the cross for our sins that we might be reconciled to the Father. Jesus, when he was on earth, could only be in one place at a time. With his resurrection and ascension to heaven, Jesus sends us Holy Spirit so that he might be everywhere all the time. Jesus went from earth to heaven so that he could be everywhere, through Holy Spirit. Wherever we are, Jesus is there standing close by, listening, and speaking to us. We believers often say Jesus is in our hearts; he is close. But are we hearing from him? How do we hear from Jesus? Paul prays and at some point, hears Jesus speaking to him as if he is not far away but at Paul’s side, standing with him in the midst of his trials and his anxiety over what is occurring in his life. We tend to pray our petitions, great prayers of request for what is on our hearts and for what we desire. At some point, though, our prayers of petition end and instead of stopping our time of prayer when the petition is complete, we should learn to get quiet, calm our minds, and listen to Jesus who is near and waiting for us to stop speaking and listen so that he can speak to us. As we learn to quiet our minds and listen, we will become those who can hear Jesus speak. Listening for Jesus is not listening for audible words but paying attention to what comes into our minds after we have quieted ourselves and are before Jesus. When we are quiet and our minds are still, then we can hear Jesus speak.

Now, I have to be honest and say that too often when I try to listen, if I am not careful and especially if I am warm and sitting down, when I get quiet, I go to sleep. We should try developing not only spoken or thought prayers, speaking our petitions, desires, and needs to Jesus, but we need to also develop into those who are listening for Jesus to speak to us. Learning to listen to Jesus speak may take some practice as it can be difficult for us to quiet our minds and

learn to hear the voice of our master calling our names and speaking to us. Don't expect to begin to hear Jesus speak to us the very first second we try to listen. We have to learn to wait on the Lord and listen for his voice. Let me suggest that we set a timer for five minutes and try stilling our minds and listening for that amount of time. We will need to stop all of the thinking and anxious thoughts running through our minds and just listen for a voice close to us. I suggest we use a timer as that will wake us up if you are like me and doze off. Pay attention to the thoughts that come into our minds as we listen, note any images we may see, and scriptures that come to our minds. As we are able to consistently listen for five minutes, we can increase the time until we are listening to ten or fifteen minutes or more.

Another way we may hear Jesus speak is to read the word with the expectation that Holy Spirit will quicken words that are messages for us in the time that we are reading scripture. When a phrase or word is interesting to us, or we see something that we have never seen before as we read, pay attention and note what you have found. Underline the word or words in your Bible. Think about how that word or phrase might apply to your situations and prayers. In a like manner we can dwell on a few lines of scripture for many weeks or months. We can speak them, commit them to memory, and let Holy Spirit guide us into a deeper understanding of how they apply to our lives.

Another method of hearing Jesus speak is to put our desire about a topic and our willingness to hear from him into a prayer and then see what communications related to that topic come to us or what ideas come to us as material to guide our study and learning. Several weeks ago, I felt a nudge from Holy Spirit to preach a sermon on a topic that I have never preached about, and I took that topic and formed it into a prayer request for additional theological material, what the Bible holds on that topic, to help me learn and prepare. I have to share that I have begun to receive some exceptional material from unexpected sources as well as ideas for additional people I know to reach out to and seek material. My simple prayer has already begun to guide me to new sources of material that are helping me to prepare for a sermon or sermons on this topic. I will also caution us that sometimes our ideas lead us to actions that are not fruitful. We need to recognize when we are not hearing Jesus but are acting in our own strength and initiative. One of the ideas I had for finding material for my sermon was to use a Google search and see what material was there. What I found from that search was material that did not seem to be a faithful interpretation of the Bible. So yes, we have to discern what we are

receiving when we listen and not accept everything that comes to us as a word from the Lord, but listen for those things that are consistent with the biblical image of Christ.

The last way I will share this morning about hearing from Jesus is that we should seek those who have had long, faithful life walks with Jesus and put our requests before them. When we seek to listen in this manner, we are asking them how and what they have heard from Jesus on the matters that are on our hearts and then listen to what their own experiences have been. These can also be rich conversations but will again need some discernment with what we know about Jesus. Let me note that when we listen in any of these ways, if what we think we hear Jesus telling us is not consistent with scripture, then we are not hearing from Jesus. We will always want to use the word of God as our guide as we seek to listen for Jesus' guidance in our lives. Let me encourage us to give listening to Jesus a try and as we do, we shouldn't get frustrated and abandon this practice after a few attempts. Don't get frustrated with silence or what we think is no response. Continue to seek to be one who is listening to and hearing the Lord who is standing near to us. Let me encourage us to make even a small step this week and find time to begin to listen to Jesus. Think of him as standing beside us waiting for us to get quiet and speak to us, to guide us in his mission to all people. Then we can spend a few minutes quieting our minds, listening, and trying to hear Jesus' words. Don't get frustrated if we don't hear from Jesus the first time we attempt to listen. The key is to keep trying, asking, learning to quiet our minds, listening, and seeking to hear Jesus' voice as he speaks into our hearts.

Pray with me. Jesus, we know you are always close, standing right beside us, waiting to speak to us. Jesus, teach us to listen, to recognize the sound of your voice as you speak into our desperate desire to hear you. Speak, Lord Jesus, your servants are listening. We pray 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 Matthew 28:18-20 Bibles, Harper. NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 3032-3033). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.