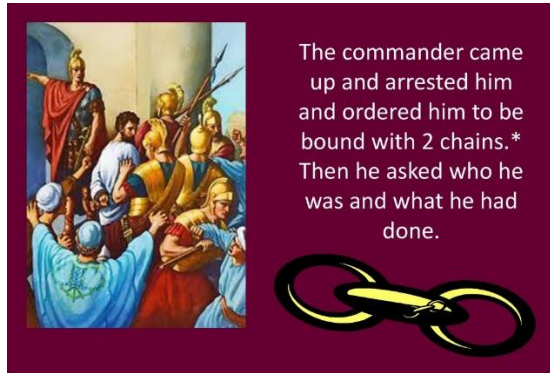


Sermon – July 7, 2024
“Bound him with two chains”
The Rev. John C. Wright



The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with 2 chains.* Then he asked who he was and what he had done.

Text: Acts 21:8-22

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, making them a blessing for your people. Ignite the flames of our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as those sent 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 binds us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning. Thanks to all who are wearing their summer attire and helping us look more festive this morning. I hope that we are continuing to read the book of Acts this summer and as we do, we are growing in our understanding of the focus of those called into the mission of Jesus. Paul is currently headed to Jerusalem. Paul's heart has been stirred by Holy Spirit to move from the mission field among the Gentiles to the great city of God, Jerusalem. As he moves along on the route to Jerusalem, he continues to encounter prophets who share with him prophetic words advising him that in Jerusalem await bondage and persecution. Don't miss the parallel between Jesus and Paul in these chapters. Just as Jesus turned his heart to Jerusalem where for him awaited a cross, death, and resurrection that brought salvation for us all through belief in Jesus, for Paul there await suffering and bondage to share the Good News of the kingdom of God with those to whom he is sent.

Notice that in the first part of our reading Paul encounters the four prophetic daughters of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven selected to wait on tables in the early church and to whom was given the gift of telling others about Jesus. In Caesarea, Paul also encounters a prophet named Agabus. We have met Agabus before as this is the same prophet who years before predicted a worldwide famine that would impact Jerusalem, a famine that did take place as Agabus predicted. He has come down to Caesarea where Paul is staying with prophetic words and actions for Paul. Agabus takes Paul's belt and binds his own hands and feet, telling Paul the owner of this belt will be bound by the Jews and handed over to the Gentiles in Jerusalem. The implication is that the binding, like the binding of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, will lead to the death of the one being bound, in this case Paul. Who of us when confronted with such prophetic words would continue on to Jerusalem? Yet Paul will continue to follow Holy Spirit's direction to journey on to Jerusalem.

Let me remind us of Peter's sermon back in chapter 2 of Acts where he quotes the prophet Joel, telling those drawn to the arrival of Holy Spirit on Pentecost that what they are experiencing is what Joel spoke of: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."ⁱ Peter tells us that with the coming of Holy Spirit, the gift of prophecy will also come. We live now in the time of the last days. Holy Spirit has been poured out and the gift of prophecy is given by Holy Spirit to people in the church to encourage and build up the church. Let me share briefly about the spiritual gift of prophecy and let me remind us that Paul tells followers of Jesus to pray for this gift. Paul wants the people of God to be those who prophesy. For Paul, a prophet is one who speaks to God's people under the inspiration of Holy Spirit. In the examples that Paul gives us, prophetic speech consists of messages that can be understood, are spontaneous, and are orally delivered in a gathered assembly of believers. Prophecy for Paul is for the edification or encouragement of the people of God.ⁱⁱ

Let's think a little more about the idea of a prophet. In the Old Testament, prophets spoke the word of God to people. They gave the messages God spoke to them to people. Much of the prophecy in the Old Testament is God calling Israel back to Him. Isaiah is an example of an Old Testament prophet who calls the southern kingdom of Israel back to God. I should also point out

that the words of prophets are often offensive to those to whom they are sent by God, and at some point, the people will kill the prophet for the message that is being delivered, blaming the prophet for the content of the message.

In the New Testament, one of the key prophets is Jesus. Think of Jesus at the well in Samaria speaking to a woman to whom he tells everything she has ever done. Jesus does not speak to the woman to condemn her or to embarrass her. Jesus speaks a message from God to her so that she might experience God's love. From her reaction, going and sharing what has happened with all of the people of the town of Sychar, we realize that the words of the prophet given to her change her life. She experiences the divine in a personal manner speaking into her life and inviting her into a relationship with God. The woman at the well experiences the God of the universe speaking into her life a personal message. She encounters the love of God through the words of the prophet, Jesus, and is transformed from the woman she once was into the woman God is asking her to become. Jesus gives to the woman at the well a word from God to her. God is speaking a word or phrase to her through someone else who is listening to God. The words of the prophet are to encourage us and to bring us to God.

Paul encounters many prophets on his journey to Jerusalem and with one voice they seem to be telling him that what await him in Jerusalem are persecution and binding. One of the most powerful of these prophetic voices is Agabus. He stands before Paul, takes Paul's belt and binds his hands and feet, telling Paul that the one who owns the belt will also be bound in Jerusalem. Notice that most people when they hear the words these prophets speak about Paul's future decide Paul should not go on to Jerusalem. Paul, however, when he hears the words of the prophet, takes them not as a warning not to proceed but as confirmation of what Holy Spirit has revealed to him that he is to go to Jerusalem to be a witness there. Paul is encouraged by the words of the prophet in that he has confirmation from God through prophets that he is on the right track as he journeys under the guidance of Holy Spirit to Jerusalem to be a witness for Jesus. Paul's heart is open to hear the words of the prophet not as a warning but as God's message to him to move forward and to be prepared to endure what Jesus endured for us on the cross if necessary. Paul is not seeking to bring salvation to all people through his death but to be a faithful witness for Jesus, led by Holy Spirit, even at the cost of his life.

Like the words given to Paul by Agabus, words of a prophet are to be encouragement for us. We need to learn to respond to them in the manner God intends them to be understood, as

words that build up the church. Paul tells the followers of Jesus to pray for this gift, and so, as we learn of the gift of prophecy, as we see how it comes to those on whom the Spirit is poured out, we also should ask for this gift and seek to use it to build up each other.

Some of us may know of Charles Spurgeon, (1834–1892), one of the greatest preachers of all time. It is said of him that one evening while preaching to a very large crowd of several thousand people, he pointed to a man in the room who was a shoemaker and said that the shoemaker had had his shop open the previous Sunday and had charged a person 9 pence of which 4 pence was profit. Now at first hearing, that might sound very accusatory, calling out a man for trying to make a living by working on Sunday. But the words Spurgeon shared that evening, words that were not part of his sermon, hit home. The shoemaker knew he had opened his shop the previous Sunday and that he had made 4 pence profit on a charge of 9 pence. He did not take the words given to him by Spurgeon in the midst of a sermon as offensive, but realized that the God of the universe was speaking to him. He stopped opening his shop on Sunday and began to come and listen to Spurgeon speak and came to believe in Jesus and was saved.ⁱⁱⁱ When the divine speaks to us, we should realize the implications are not to harass us, condemn us, or embarrass us, but to give us a clear message of love. The shoemaker, like the woman at the well, received the prophetic message from God and was changed by that communication. The shoemaker did not get lost in the words of the prophecy but focused instead on the reality that the God of the universe was speaking to him, and he was encouraged by that divine message to move into a relationship with God the Father through Jesus.

I will share with you that I have prayed for this gift and would encourage all of us to do so as well. Yet, for me to receive a prophetic word for someone is rare, and as I learn about the gift of prophecy, I am also learning that I have not shared those prophetic words correctly as they are not meant for a private sharing but for sharing in the midst of an assembly, so that there may be discernment by those present. When Agabus in his Old Testament style of acting out the prophecy shares the prophetic words he has received with Paul, he does so among those who are with Paul, so that the church can be built up by the words from God. When I have experienced this gift, I have gotten a word that comes to my mind and a person it is intended for as well. My response to receiving a word for someone has been to share that word with the person I think it is intended for. But again, let me stress that I have not often experienced this gift. And again, let me encourage us to pray for this gift, the gift of prophecy, so that we might build up the church.

If you are praying for this gift, and I hope you will pray for it if you are not, and are sitting in our worship service and receive what you think is a prophetic word, then let me encourage you to bring that word to me during the last hymn and I will help us discern if it is a word for the body or for a person. If it is something that we discern should be shared in the gathered body of believers, then before the benediction, I will make time for us to share the word God has given. So, let's begin to pray for this gift and be open to taking the risk to share any prophetic words we are given as encouragement for the building up of the church.

Before I end today's sermon, I want to return to Paul and his encounter with Agabus. Paul takes the prophetic words of Agabus as confirmation that he is on the right course, that he is following the guidance of Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. Notice that Agabus does not tell Paul not to go on to Jerusalem, but that being bound and handed over to the Gentiles awaits him in Jerusalem. We should recall that for Jesus, when he is bound, his death on a cross for our salvation is not far away. If we read the rest of Acts chapter 21, we will find that at the end of the chapter, Paul is bound and taken into the Roman barracks in Jerusalem. What Agabus said in his prophecy over Paul comes true. Agabus proves to be a prophet of God. We will witness the bondage and captivity of Paul unfold in the coming weeks as we continue our journey through Acts as Holy Spirit leads Paul on to Rome to be a witness there for Jesus. It is my prayer that as we have begun to learn about the gift of prophecy that some of us will pray for and receive this gift from Holy Spirit to build up the church.

Let me close today with a prayer from a book called "Come, Creator Spirit" by Raniero Cantalamessa. The prayer is a beautiful prayer of Gregory of Narek, an Armenian mystic who lived in the early years of the second millennium, and who has had a major influence on the spiritual life and poetry of his people even to this day:

Pray with me this morning: *I bow as suppliant before your immutable and all-powerful sovereignty, oh mighty Spirit: send down the dew of your gentleness. You, who consecrate the apostles, inspire the prophets, teach the teachers, who make the dumb to speak and open the ears of those that cannot hear, give to me too, sinner though I am, the grace to speak with sureness of the life-giving mystery of the good news of the Gospel.... When I set out to speak your word in the assembly, may your mercy go before me and at the right moment prompt me from within to say what is fitting and helpful and pleasing to you, to the glory and praise of your Godhead and wholly for the edification of the universal Church.^{iv} 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. Pray for the gift of prophecy that we might build up the church as we move into Jesus' mission to all people.

ⁱ Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3259). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Fee, Gordon D.. Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God (p. 171). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Storms, Sam. The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts (p. 113). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition

^{iv} Cantalamessa, Raniero. Come, Creator Spirit: Meditations on the Veni Creator . Liturgical Press. Kindle Edition.