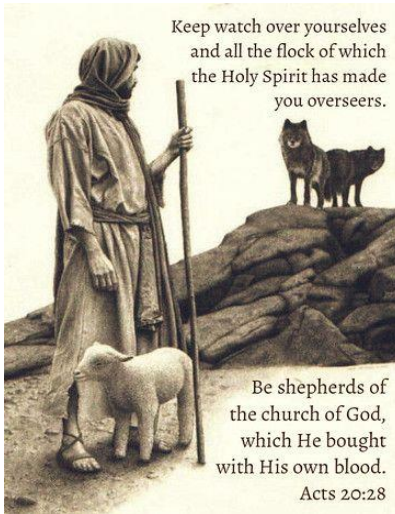


Sermon – June 30, 2024
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 20:25-35

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. May your word 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! I hope that we are continuing to read through the book of Acts this summer, and as we read, are developing a deeper appreciation of the first century church, its struggles, and how the early Christians lived out their faith in Jesus.

In case you are not aware, I will share that it is officially summer and we should be starting to wear our Hawaiian attire. So, starting next week, let's see if we can brighten up our sanctuary a bit with colorful attire. In the summer, many of us will go to a beach and spend time there relaxing and enjoying the wind, waves, sand, and sun. Our scripture today points us to a beach. There are no sunbathers relaxing on this beach, but men, and probably a few women, gathered there early in the day. Standing among the crowd is an older man who is speaking to those gathered. He is giving last instructions to those present. When he finishes, he kneels down and prays with those on the beach who are weeping, and then they in turn embrace the old man

and kiss him. When he has embraced the last person, he turns and makes his way to a sailboat in the deeper water where his traveling companions await. The old man is Paul, or we might remember him as Saul. He is Saul at whose feet the cloaks of those who stoned Steven for his witness to Christ were placed for safekeeping. He is Saul who was filled with anger at the followers of Jesus and hunted them down first in Jerusalem and then wherever he could find them. When he discovered Jews who were following Jesus, he bound them and took them back to Jerusalem to be put into prison and stand trial. Saul was on his way to Damascus with letters in hand from the chief priest so that he could arrest any Jewish followers of the Way that he found there. Saul was a serious persecutor of those who followed Jesus. He was a personal Jewish Jihad, seeking to get rid of those who dared to follow Jesus. His presence brought fear to Jewish believers. Even the mention of his name would bring fear to the hearts of Jesus' followers. Remember Ananias, a Jewish follower of Christ in Damascus, who was told by Jesus to go to Saul and pray for him to receive his sight? Before Ananias obeyed, he reminded Jesus who Saul was. Saul was one bad dude. The old man on the beach is Saul who once spoke murderous threats to those in the church of Jesus Christ. We have to ask ourselves, "What happened in Saul's life that brought such a transformation, from one who was feared to one who is loved by those who follow Jesus?" The crowd on the beach are the elders from the church in Ephesus. They have come at Saul's request so that he can encourage them and say goodbye. Saul, now Paul, is headed for Jerusalem, and as he leaves, he is encouraging the leaders and people of the churches he has started. Turn to someone this morning and tell him or her, "Paul is encouraging the followers of Jesus." We are to be like Paul and encourage each other. Throughout the coming week, let us seek to contact people we find on our hearts, people who come to our mind, especially those we have not seen for some time. If you find yourself thinking about some people this week, call them or visit them. Reach out in some way and encourage them. Let Holy Spirit stir our hearts to be encouragers of each other.

If we are reading Acts this summer, we know that in every city where Paul has gone in Asia to be a witness for Jesus, the Jews have persecuted him or tried to, stirring up the crowds and driving him out with sometimes violent protests. Yet, despite the danger, as Paul goes back through the region on his way to Jerusalem, he takes time to visit the churches he has started and to encourage the churches and their leaders. Pray that we might be like Paul and be encouragers of each other this week.

One of the stops Paul makes on his way to Jerusalem is in the city of Troas where there is a church. Luke gives us extra details about Paul's visit there, details that give us insight into Paul's actions when he visits a church, details that may help us to learn to encourage other believers. Troas is a place where Paul stays for seven days and on the first day of the week, that would be the sabbath, he meets with the church to break bread. Think Communion. During the first day of the week, Paul holds a discussion with the members of the church, a last discussion where he reminds them of his teaching about Jesus and cautions them that when he is gone, wolves will come into their flock and seek to destroy it. He tells them they must guard against those who will distort the truth of the Gospel that Paul has shared with them. Let me point out that their church service continues until midnight. They are gathered in an upstairs room, three stories up with many oil lamps burning to provide light, and there is a young man sitting in a window listening to Paul's teaching. The young man's name is Eutychus and around midnight, he falls asleep. Now don't judge Eutychus as he is a young man, or boy, and there is a chance that he has been listening to Paul teach since early morning or maybe since the end of the workday at 6 pm or maybe since sundown. That is at least six hours of teaching. I will point out that this is the only thing I might do better than Paul as I can put people to sleep in the first twenty minutes of a sermon. For Paul it takes hours, till late at night, till midnight. The scripture reads, "A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead."¹ Not only does Paul teach at Troas, but when Eutychus falls out of the window and dies, Paul goes downstairs and takes the boy in his arms and brings him back to life. Paul is a Holy Spirit-filled follower of Jesus who is continuing Jesus' mission, doing what Jesus did when he was on earth. The resuscitation of Eutychus is astounding. Eutychus was dead, and Paul, in the power of Holy Spirit, brought him back to life. Paul seems to take the miracle as a normal part of worship. He gives the boy to his parents and then goes back upstairs, breaks bread (Communion), and continues speaking until dawn. Can we imagine an all-night church service interrupted by having a dead child brought back to life? For anyone who might be searching the scriptures to learn how long a Sunday worship service should last, I will point out that for Paul they last at least twelve hours, from the setting of the sun till its rising.

As wonderful as the healing of Eutychus is, I want to point us to another miracle that is present in the text this morning, a miracle, I think, that is greater than the raising of the child

from the dead. We have already begun to talk about that miracle. Remember the old man on the beach being embraced by the elders of the church at Ephesus? That man is Paul, one of the most feared persecutors of the early church. Paul was also the one Jesus confronted on the road to Damascus and transformed from a persecutor to an encourager, filling him with power from on high, making him an apostle, one who plants churches, and a teacher, one who teaches day and night and from house to house the truth of Jesus Christ. Paul is transformed from church killer to church planter, from one who discourages the worship of Jesus to one who teaches about Jesus from the setting of the sun to its rising. Paul is headed to Jerusalem, as Jesus once was, to face imprisonment and persecution that awaits him there. In our opening scene by the water is this same Saul, now called Paul, giving final instructions to the believers of Ephesus who have come to tell him goodbye. There on the beach, years after Saul's transformation, the elders of the church in Ephesus embrace and kiss him, grieving especially because of what he has said, that they would not see him again. Can we see the radical change that has occurred in Paul's life? Can we catch a glimpse in Paul of the transforming power of Holy Spirit working in his life? Can we see this transformation? Can we grasp the miracle of not just a life restored after a tragic fall but of one radically transformed from being a persecutor of the church to a church planter who teaches night and day and from house to house, one who is warning all who follow Jesus in tears night and day as we have seen at Troas? The elders from Ephesus stand around Paul, hearing his last instructions, hearing Paul's warning that they are to keep watch over themselves and over all of the flock as shepherds of the church of God. He tells them that once he is gone, there will come teachers who distort the truth and will lead them from the Gospel and its teaching that Paul has given them. Paul's words are a challenge to the church about to undergo a struggle with wolves. It is also a warning to churches throughout the ages to keep watch over ourselves and over all the flock, to shepherd the church of God that He obtained with the blood of His own Son.ⁱⁱ

The miracle of Eutychus is wonderful and we should expect those filled with Holy Spirit to be workers of miracles, as was Jesus. But the greater miracle is that of lives transformed by Holy Spirit from those who are lost to those now in the flock of Jesus, in the kingdom of God. They have been transformed and moved from being persecutors, those outside the kingdom of God, doubters of God's love, to those who have experienced the steadfast love of God and been transformed by it and want to share it with everyone. Those who come to say goodbye to Paul do

not come in fear; they come weeping at Paul's leaving, kissing him, hugging him, and clinging to him. I hope we can see the tenderness of this moment on the beach, and above all, I hope we can see the transformation in Paul through Holy Spirit that has made it possible.

Let me ask us a few questions that we should take time to ponder in light of Paul's transformation. Can we find the same transformation in our own lives? If we look back across the years of our lives, can we find a time or times when we encountered Jesus through Holy Spirit and were transformed from one who stood outside the church to one who is seeking to encourage others to be transformed into followers of Jesus, one who encourages others and is loved by God and the church? Think about our lives and our own transformation story. Do we have our own Holy Spirit transformation story that we can share? If we do, then let me encourage us to write it down and share it with each other as encouragement. But, if we find that we don't have a memory of being transformed, let me assure us it is not too late. If we cannot find a time of transformation in our lives, then let us turn to the Lord, open our hearts, and be filled with the transforming power of Jesus Christ through Holy Spirit. The fundamental work of Holy Spirit is the work of transformation.ⁱⁱⁱ Holy Spirit is here in this place ready, waiting, and willing to transform our lives, to pick us up off the ground as dead people, wrap arms of love around us, and bring us into life everlasting. It doesn't just happen to Saul on the road to Damascus. It doesn't just happen to other people across the ages; it can happen to us. When Holy Spirit comes into our lives, he pushes sin out and restores us to life eternal. We may not be used by Jesus to heal a dead child who has fallen out of a window, but Jesus is ready to fill us with the power of Holy Spirit and transform us from those who are outside the kingdom of God and are dead in our sins, to those who are in the kingdom of God and now have everlasting life and are witnesses and encouragers for the kingdom of God. Holy Spirit comes and gives us power, and those who have received power from on high are to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

If we can't find a moment of transformation in our lives, then today is the day for that to happen. This is the place and now is the time. If your heart is stirred and desires to be free to be transformed and experience the love of Christ, then let me encourage you to meet me in the back of the sanctuary after the service. If you get to the parking lot and your heart is stirred, come back inside and let's talk, pray, and let Holy Spirit transform you from death to life. If you are at home this afternoon and find yourself thinking you have never experienced the transforming love

of Jesus in your heart and find that today is the day you want this transformation, but think you missed your chance, don't let that stirring in your heart simply fade. Take action. Reach out, pick up your phone, and call me and let's talk. Don't quench the stirring of your heart by Holy Spirit for the love of Jesus. Don't let a desire for power from on high to transform you be quenched by your fears. Act on what God places on your heart.

Pray with me. Jesus, you are present with us today and all hearts are open and known to you. Jesus, you know our lives, our weaknesses, our struggles, our challenges, and our brokenness. Jesus, send Holy Spirit to transform us into shepherds who are encouraging the flock and seeking the lost. Holy Spirit, clothe us with power from on high. 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. Amen

ⁱ Acts 20:9b NRSV Kindle version

ⁱⁱ Acts 20:28 NRSV Kindle version

ⁱⁱⁱ JD Walt, Pastors gathering June 24th