

Sermon – August 4, 2024
“I appeal to the emperor”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 25:8-12

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 and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words. Make these words a blessing for your people. May these words ignite 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 brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Let's ask ourselves this morning, "Where is Paul?" And there is a second question that may even be more important: "Where is God moving Paul for the work of the kingdom?" Or "Where does God need Paul and how is He working through circumstances to get him there?" In Luke's Gospel following the passing of Cronus, our calendar time is sometimes difficult. Paul, we might recall, has been languishing in a Roman prison in Caesarea for over two years. The high priest, Annanias, whom Paul insulted by calling him a whitewashed wall is now gone. Felix, the ruler of the province that includes Caesarea and Jerusalem who would not release Paul,

is also gone, having been replaced by Festus. There is a new sheriff in town, one who does not let moss grow under his feet. He has only been on the job three days when he heads to Jerusalem to meet the leadership there. That would be the Sanhedrin, the rulers of Israel under Roman occupation. Even though the high priest is gone, the Sanhedrin has not forgotten about Paul and they ask the new guy for a favor, to bring Paul back to Jerusalem. They have made another plot to kill Paul during the trip, and while it is not clear that Festus is aware of their plans, and even though Festus is the new guy, he is politically astute enough not to fall for their request but instead invites them to Caesarea to bring their charges against Paul. After a very few days in Jerusalem, Festus returns to Caesarea and the day after his arrival, he has Paul brought out of prison and he listens to the charges they bring. They are the same charges they used two years before, and they still cannot prove any of them. Festus is not sure what they are actually talking about as he is not as familiar with the Jewish religion as his predecessor was. Festus asks Paul if he is willing to go to Jerusalem to be tried there before him on these charges. Paul considers what a return to Jerusalem might mean for him and he recalls the vision of Jesus where he was told he would testify for Jesus in Rome. Paul then chooses to force Festus' hand and appeals to Rome to be tried before the emperor. Paul exercises his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his case to be tried before the emperor. All Festus can do is send him on. Like Jesus before Pilate, Paul could have been set free as the charges against him were false, but the pressure from the Jews is again driving the decision. Paul's request will send him on to Rome to have his case tried there. All that remains is for Festus to determine what Paul is charged with that merits the emperor's court.

I want to remind us of Matthew 10:18, where Jesus teaches his followers that "you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles."ⁱ Jesus tells his followers that we will be brought before governors and kings to testify to them. The idea of being dragged means we are not doing work to get there on our own but as followers of Jesus, we will see this occur through circumstances in our lives. Before we look more at Paul's movements, let's take a minute and ask ourselves where we are being dragged that we might testify for Jesus. Paul is headed for Rome but has more work to do as Jesus' witness before he goes there. The question for us becomes, "Where is God moving us that we might be His witness?" Think about where we are going here in the Northern Neck. Do we have doctor's appointments that we are going to in order to keep our bodies moving? Maybe we have a desire

to live on the water and boat and fish. That desire could be God dragging us to people in those places for whom we are to be witnesses for Jesus. Maybe we woke up one morning with a desire to go shopping or to look for treasures at a yard sale. Does God place people where we shop for whom we are to be Jesus' witnesses? God can and does stir our hearts to get us to the places where we are to be his witnesses.

Paul has already testified to one governor, Felix, with whom he shared about the resurrection of Jesus. Maybe we find ourselves either spending time with our kids or grandkids or even great-grandkids. Are we to be a witness for Jesus in those places to those who are there? Maybe the house we are living in now has new neighbors or old ones whom God has moved us next to so that we can be a witness for Him to them. Maybe on our next trip to the hardware store or to Walmart we will find ourselves with an opportunity to be a witness in word or deed to someone. God has moved us to those places not only to meet people but to do small things in great love for Jesus for them. Where is God stirring our hearts to move? Perhaps to visit with our family members who do not yet know the love of Jesus or have forgotten his love? Maybe we have a stirring to hold a worship service at a waterside location and share Jesus with people who come. Maybe there is a foreign country which we have long had a desire to visit that is really Jesus getting ready to move us there so that we might be his witnesses to people in that country. Where are we going today and tomorrow and even next year that we need to be open to being Jesus' witness? We might remember that in Paul's case, he obeyed the guidance of Holy Spirit and went to Jerusalem. Since he followed that guidance from Holy Spirit, he has not moved himself but the Romans have begun to drag him where God wants Paul to be so that he might be Jesus' witness. We come here to worship the risen Lord, who died for us so that we might be set free from our sins and reconciled to God the Father for all time. We leave this place each week to go out into the world to follow Jesus into his mission to all people. This week as we go to the many places we go, pay attention to where Jesus is leading us or is dragging us and who we meet in those places. And take the risk when we find ourselves there to share the Good News we carry.

When Paul tells Festus in response to the Jew's unfounded charges that he wants to go to Rome for his trial, he creates a new dilemma for Festus. Festus does not have in depth knowledge of the Jewish religion and so now is uncertain what to write in a letter that he must send with Paul to explain the reason he has sent this prisoner to Rome for a trial there instead of

taking care of it himself. And into that moment of need comes Agrippa and Bernice who have come to welcome Festus as the new governor. Agrippa is a descendant of Herod the Great and is now king of a small province to the north but also has been given the task by Rome of appointing new high priests for Israel. He has knowledge about the Jewish religion as he is Jewish. Agrippa is accompanied by Bernice. Now for all of my years of reading Acts, I always thought that Bernice was Agrippa's wife and queen by marriage. I learned this week that she is not married to Agrippa. Bernice is Agrippa's sister, a daughter of Herod and also a sister to Drucilla who was married to the former governor, Felix. Festus tell these two rulers his dilemma, sharing that the disagreement between Paul and the Jews includes "... certain points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive."ⁱⁱⁱ From the discussion with Agrippa, we learn that Festus understands Jesus not as a real man who died and is alive but as a point of disagreement between arguing religious parties. Festus' term as governor will be a short two years, and he will die in office. But before Paul is dragged on to Rome by God to testify to rulers there, Paul will get an opportunity to testify about Jesus to the new governor and to Agrippa and his sister. When Festus shares with Agrippa what his struggle is with Paul, Agrippa's response is that he would like to hear Paul speak. Festus has not dug into the details of who Jesus is or what he has done. He does not show any curiosity about Jesus, only diligence to his duties as governor. Agrippa though is curious and would like to hear about Jesus. We can see God at work in the hearts of those in the world, dragging them towards a divine moment as well. Paul is about to testify to his first king as Jesus told his followers they would do. Paul, who not long ago was walking the streets of Gentile cities healing the sick, now has a chance to witness to a king and to share lifesaving, life-transforming Good News with him and all who will listen. God is moving Paul on to Rome to be His witness there, but before Paul is dragged there, he has more work as a witness for Jesus before governors and kings where he has been waiting for the last two years. Paul, the forgotten prisoner, the small unknown player in Rome's world who has been waiting for God to move him to a place to testify for Him, now will speak to a governor, king, and all of the Roman leadership of the providence of Israel about Jesus. A small unknown and forgotten prisoner will stand before governors and kings and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. He will share with them about a dead man whom Paul holds is alive. We also have this same charge, to wait and work where we are for Jesus in any way we can and see where God is moving us to be His witness to those He brings

into our lives. We are to pay attention to what is happening in our lives and where we seem to be going that we had not planned to go. When we discover that Jesus is moving us either through our desires or by having us dragged somewhere, we too should be ready to testify to the steadfast love we have received from Jesus. We may not be dragged off to stand before great leaders of our time, but Jesus is at work to bring about his kingdom and we as his followers are who he is seeking to work through. So, let us pay attention to where we are being dragged and share the love of Jesus using words if we have to and share the Good News of Jesus in all the places we can, with all the people we can, with all of the time we have been given.

Pray with me. Jesus, we confess that we have been sitting in the prison of our comfortable places waiting for you to come and be a witness where we are. Jesus, send Holy Spirit to empower us and wake us up that we might see with fresh eyes those you are dragging us to in order to share the Good News of the in breaking kingdom of God. Holy Spirit, guide our hearts and fill us with courage and strength that we might speak to Gentiles about the great love Jesus has for us. 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. Go forth into Jesus' mission to all people wherever he drags us to be his witnesses. Amen

ⁱ Matt 10:18 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 2978). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Acts 25:19 Ibid