

Faithful to the Vision from Heaven
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
June 13, 2021-AM Service
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Acts 26:12-32

Before we read it, let's set the scene for this passage. Paul is a prisoner in Caesarea. He's been a prisoner for two years already. He was arrested in Jerusalem for disturbing the peace. He'd gone to the temple to pray, and while he was there he was recognized by some of the enemies he made on his missionary journeys. They started a riot and managed to get Paul taken into custody. To keep the peace and to appease the Jews, the Romans arrested Paul and brought him to Caesarea. He'd been stuck there ever since, sitting in prison without a trial for 2 years. But now a new governor has been appointed, governor Festus. The new governor is moving things along. Paul's Jewish accusers have come to Festus and renewed their call for Paul's execution. In response Paul has appealed his case to the highest court, he has appealed to Caesar. His case will be judged in Rome.

About this time governor Festus receives an important visitor. King Agrippa, a regional ruler appointed by the emperor, has come to town to give greetings to the new governor. Agrippa was interested Jewish theology and Jewish history, so when he heard that Festus had Paul in prison, he wanted to hear from the prisoner. Festus is okay with that because he needs to write a report detailing the charges before he sends Paul off to Rome, so hearing Paul speak will help him write that report. Paul is invited for an audience with Festus and Agrippa. This is an opportunity for him! These incredibly powerful men could put in a good word for him with the emperor.

Based on Acts 25, we can picture the scene something like this: We are in the great hall of Festus the governor. The hall is full of people, and not just any people. All the prominent men of the city are there. They are seated on either side of the center aisle. It's a 'who's who' of Caesarea. Business leaders, high-ranking military officers. They're all there and they're all dressed up. Armani togas. Power ties. Dress uniforms. Up at the front of the hall, raised on the dais are three gilded chairs. A trumpet blows a fanfare. All the prominent people rise and turn toward the back of the hall. With the trumpets still playing, down the center of the hall comes the guest of honor—King Agrippa and his sister Bernice walk slowly past the gallery. They're wearing their royal robes. Just behind them walks Festus. As they pass by the leaders of the city bow to the king. They pay him homage. With the trumpets still playing, the king and his sister and governor take their seats. The governor gestures and the courtiers sit down.

"Bring in the prisoner!" commands Festus. Paul shuffles into the courtroom. He shuffles because his legs are bound by two enormous chains. On each side of him strides a Roman soldier in gleaming armor. Their faces are a mask of authority. Paul's face is thin. Two years in prison hasn't done anything for his complexion. He's wearing his grey prison uniform. The soldiers bring him to the middle of the great hall. He looks small under the vaulted stone ceiling. He's a clay jar in a room full of gilded vessels.

Agrippa breaks the silence in the room. "You have permission to speak for yourself," says the king. Paul motions with his hand in the way classical orators did, and he begins his defense. He starts by explaining that he was a zealous Jew, a strict Pharisee. In fact, he was so zealous for his people that he persecuted Christians, and even had them put to death. But then something changed. Here's where we pick up Paul's speech.

I love what Festus says to Paul. It's one of my favorite lines from the book of Acts. "You are out of your mind Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane." I love it because it feels like a bit of what I've felt when I'm immersed in some really dense parts of Paul's writing—Romans 9 or maybe 1 Corinthians 11. Sometimes I get frustrated when I try to understand Paul, so when I see Festus get frustrated at least I know I'm not the only one struggling here. I also love it because of its raw emotion. I love his line because of the drama of the moment. The room must have been electric when Festus shouted these words. And that's what he does—he doesn't speak the words, he shouts them. "Paul! What are you talking about! Are you out of your ever-lovin' mind?!"

In fact, the emotion in the moment and the drama of the moment begs a question. Why is Festus so worked up? Why does he shout? It can't just be a misunderstanding. If a person says something bizarre and confusing, you don't shout at them. You might ask for clarification, but you don't get angry. Why does Festus flip out? Some commentators think Festus reacts to Paul's resurrection reference. The idea of a person being physically resurrected from the dead was ridiculous to Greeks, so maybe Festus thought the resurrection talk was crazy. But I think if we want to understand what brings Festus out of his chair and makes him shout, we should look at Paul's references to his mission to the Gentiles.

Here's what provokes Festus: Paul tells these powerful people the story of his conversion, and then he tells them that Jesus called him to preach to the Gentiles, and not just to preach to them, but to call them to repent because they are in the power of Satan and darkness. Paul starts in general terms: 'I'm here to call Gentiles out of darkness and sin and into the light of Jesus.' But then he goes on to call the specific Gentiles right in front of him to repentance. "I stand here to testify to small and great alike," he says. "I stand before you people and I call you to repent. I invite you out of darkness and into the light of Jesus." Paul looks Agrippa in the eye, he looks Festus in the eye, he looks all the prominent citizens of Caesarea in the eye and he says, "I'm here to convert you. I call you to give your life to the true king. King Agrippa, you are in darkness. I have come to proclaim to you the light of Christ." Not only do I think that's what Paul is trying to do, Agrippa thinks that's what Paul is trying to do. "Paul, are you seriously trying to convert me right now?!" he says.

That's why Festus comes out of his seat. That's why he thinks Paul has lost his mind. The impertinence of this man! The insolence! Paul is on trial! Paul is the one who's supposed to be on the defensive here. He's been in jail for two years and this is his chance to make his case before powerful people, to earn their favor, to have them put in a good word with the emperor. Instead he calls them to repent. He's very polite about it. Paul doesn't growl at them, he doesn't preach fire and brimstone, but make no mistake, he's challenging everyone in that room. Festus starts shouting because Paul is preaching the gospel to him. And honestly, it's getting to him. It's cutting him to the heart.

Can we just stop and admire Paul's boldness here? He's been in jail two years and his life is on the line. Any other prisoner would be obsequious and deferential. Not Paul. He preaches the hope of Jesus. In fact, Paul's boldness changes the balance of power in the room. At the beginning of the scene, he was the small clay jar in this sea of gilded power. Now he's got the king and the governor on their heels. It's a stunning reversal of power.

Where does Paul get that boldness? Where does he find the courage and the audacity? And maybe more important, where can we find this boldness? Where can we find this courage?

Paul tells us where he gets the courage. He gets it from the throne room of God. Paul can speak boldly in this courtroom full of powerful people, because he has seen a different

courtroom. Paul can stand up to the splendor of King Agrippa, because he belongs to King Jesus. Paul can change the balance of power in that room because the power and authority of King Jesus is in him. Look at verse 19. Paul tells you where he gets his boldness. “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.” He’s talking about the Damascus road, and the heavenly vision he saw there. If we had Paul in this room and asked him, “Hey Paul, how did you have the guts to say what you did to king Agrippa and all those important people, he would say, “It wasn’t so hard. On the Damascus road I saw the radiant face of King Jesus and I heard the voice of King Jesus. After seeing his face, Agrippa and Festus and all those prominent people are no big deal.” Paul’s earthly boldness came from the heavenly vision.

In fact, the Damascus road wasn’t the first time Paul saw the boldness that comes from having your heart and mind anchored on that vision of the ascended King. Do you remember the first time Paul experienced earthly boldness that came from a heavenly vision? It was with Stephen. Paul watched and cheered as Stephen was stoned to death by an angry mob. Do you remember what Stephen said right before he died? “I see the heavens opening up and I see the Son of man standing at the right and of God!” His accusers shout at him and start throwing stones, and Luke tells us that Stephen’s face was like that of an angel. Earthly boldness from a heavenly vision.

This brings us to a major theme in the book of Acts, a theme I want to lift up before you today. Acts is a book about the clash of throne rooms. Throughout the book of Acts, you have scenes where the power of earthly authorities is contrasted with the power of the ascended King. Throughout book of Acts, ordinary disciples stand in front of earthly powers and do bold things because they belong to King Jesus and their eyes are focused on his court room. I went through Acts and counted a dozen such scenes this week. Here’s just three more examples (I already mentioned Stephen) and notice in each example the believers are up against a different kind of authority.

In Acts 4 and 5, Peter and John stand up to the Sanhedrin—that’s religious authority. The Sanhedrin tells them to stop talking about Jesus and they say, “No, we’re not going to stop preaching Jesus even if you threaten us, because which is right in God’s eyes, to listen to you or to listen to him! (Acts 4:19).” Earthly boldness that comes from a heavenly vision. In Acts 17 Paul stands before the intellectual powers and authorities in Athens, on the Areopagus. Paul quotes the philosophers, but he proclaims Jesus. Earthly boldness from a heavenly vision. In Acts 16 he stands up to Roman power. The Philippian magistrate has him flogged and thrown in jail and from the middle of the dungeon Paul sings. Earthly boldness from a heavenly vision. Again and again, Acts shows us these pictures of ordinary Christians doing bold, transformative things, standing up to earthly powers because they belong to the heavenly king.

Of course this isn’t just Acts, this is the story of Christians throughout history. Men and women of small power, men and women armed only with the promises of God, men and women going before kings and emperors and governors and speaking the truth of Jesus and the justice of Jesus and the gospel of Jesus to the powers of the world. Watching Paul before Agrippa and we think of Moses before Pharaoh, Daniel Before Nebuchadnezzar, Esther before Xerxes, David before Goliath, Jesus before Pilate, Luther before the Pope, Bonhoeffer before Hitler, MLK before Bull Connor, the Hebrew midwives before Pharaoh. The story repeats itself in every generation, ordinary men and women without political power, ordinary men and women armed only with faith, hope, love, and the authority of their King. And yet they stand up in courtrooms and city streets, in palaces and parliaments, in jails and judgment halls, and live the gospel of the King. In so doing, they turn the world upside down.

This is your story too. You won't be standing before anyone like Agrippa this week. You won't be in a grand hall surrounded by prominent citizens of the city. But you will be in a place where doing the right things will feel hard and scary. A place where doing and saying the right thing might cost you, or make you look a little crazy. Maybe you'll be at a meeting where someone will come up with a way to make a lot of money for your company, but you are worried that it might not be the most ethical thing to do and it might hurt some people. Which room will shape your action at that moment? The earthly room where the momentum is all, "Let's do this!" Or the heavenly room pushing you to ask some questions?

Maybe you are planning an outing with some of your middle school friends. Going to the lake, to grandma's cottage and you're inviting some of your friends and you're trying to decide whether to invite that one kid who's complicated. She's not really good at relationships, it always gets complicated when she's around and it would be so easy to leave her out, which everyone does. Less drama. It's always easier with the healthy people. And some of your friends will be mad if you invite her. Which court determines your decision? The court of your friend's opinions or the heavenly court?

Or maybe the power you will face is death-that dark and fearful king. His rule is a reign of terror. Death has a powerful court. He likes you think that his power is unassailable and his verdicts are final. And, honestly, when he stands up and starts shouting in his throne room, it's hard to hear anything else. But we know better. Because we've heard a different voice. We've seen the King whose face shines like the sun and who's voice is like the sound of rushing waters. And we've hear him say. "I am the first and the last and the living one. I have conquered sin and death. And I hold the keys to death and hades." So good people as you go out into the world, go in confidence. Because you are beloved children of your King.

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