

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Resilient Church

Acts 4:23-31

Last Sunday's return to church was a good opportunity to catch up on what's been happening in one another's lives. Prior to that, you hadn't seen each other since March 15, so you probably swapped stories about the ways that you've occupied your time at home, the end of the school year, or the health of others in your household. A lot can happen in three months, even when we're on lockdown.

In today's text from Acts, Peter and John return to church, not after being locked down but after being locked up. Since the last church gathering, they've spent some time in jail. Don't you know that made for some interesting conversation within the congregation. It can be pretty unsettling to find out that some of the leaders of your fellowship had a run-in with the law. You never know what news may come up during the announcements.

This brush with the authorities occurred after Peter and John had healed a man who had been crippled all his life. It wasn't so much the miracle itself, but the preaching that accompanied it, that aroused the ire of the local religious officials. The apostles' witness to the sovereignty and power of Christ is what got them into trouble and landed them behind bars overnight. After being reprimanded and warned to keep quiet about claims of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Peter and John went back and reported to the congregation on what had happened.

This is a scene that gets repeated at various points in the narrative of Acts. Followers of Jesus, particularly their leaders, run into opposition from the political and religious powers that be. Either the content of the church's message, or the impact of its missionary activity, or both, collide with the laws and structures that are already in place. Preaching and practicing the gospel turns out to be more than just an internal, private matter. Disciples must go public with the news of Jesus' lordship and authority, in a setting where all sorts of other authorities exercise their own power.

This dynamic plays out in our own day and time, including the current pandemic. Take for example some of the battles, especially in late March and early April, over whether churches had the right to gather for worship during a declared state of emergency, when state and county officials were implementing stay-at-home orders. Debates emerged about whether churches should be considered an essential service. Were these government mandates infringing upon the free exercise of religion?

Rodney Howard-Browne, pastor of a megachurch in Florida, was the first to face an arrest warrant for violating a coronavirus order by holding Sunday services. He turned himself in and was charged with a second-degree misdemeanor, which carries a penalty of up to two months in jail and a \$500 fine. That certainly would have been more time than Peter and John got. Pastor Howard-Browne paid his bond and was at home by Monday night. The last I heard he was fighting the charges in court and filing a federal lawsuit claiming the arrest was a violation of his religious liberty.

In recounting the story of the early church, Luke knew plenty about the interface between Christian communities of worship and the governing authorities. In today's text, he tells us that Peter and John went straight from prison time to praying time. When hardship—in this case, persecution—threatened the life of the community of believers, they and their leaders didn't turn to their own resolve and resources. No, they turned to God and looked to him for the courage needed to be faithful in their public witness.

Notice that they didn't focus on praying for safety and divine protection. Instead, they prayed for boldness. They looked to the God who is the creator of the world and all its inhabitants, and asked for divine power to keep testifying to what he had done through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather than praying, "Lord, keep your hand of protection over us," they prayed, "Lord, stretch out your hand and do signs and wonders." This fellowship of disciples wasn't in retreat mode. It was continually in mission mode, especially in the face of trials and troubles.

At this stage in our church's response to the coronavirus, we're devoting a lot of time and attention to safety. Our congregation's leaders and I worked together prayerfully to formulate a plan that not only enabled us to reopen the church, but reopen it safely. Requiring worshipers to wear masks, encouraging social distancing, minimizing the use of printed and hand-held materials, making sure the building is properly cleaned, having enough supplies on hand—all these pieces of the plan are geared toward making sure that your well-being, and the well-being of everyone who comes and goes from this building, is protected.

In the midst of a pandemic, safety is paramount. That applies to life in the church as well. Our guidelines and policies for regathering aren't technicalities that we just tack on to the congregation's primary business. Right now, they're actually an essential part of our business. They're ways that we practice love of God and love of neighbor. They're ways that we look out for one another. They're ways that we care for the congregation. They're ways that we honor and worship God.

Of course worshiping God mainly involves doing what we're doing here this morning. All the measures we've implemented to promote safety also mean that our worship service looks and feels different. We're still making adjustments and working out the kinks. Who sits where. Who speaks when. When to bring the screen down. When to put it back up. How to come in the building. How to go out of the building. All sorts of things that we grew accustomed to got shut down, and now we're in the process of trying to restart them, and where necessary revise them. In that respect, we're trying to get our rhythm back.

A couple of months ago, Ed Stetzer began an article by saying, "Today we are in the midst of a crisis that is forcing the church to learn a new song and dance."¹ He based this statement on a piece in which another writer said that during the early stages of COVID-19, officials used strong measures to flatten the curve of the virus. He called these the Hammer. Eventually there could be a vaccine. The months-long period between the Hammer and a vaccine he called the Dance, because the measures we take will vary from place to place depending on the severity of the outbreaks. As Stetzer summarized it, "It will be incumbent on church leaders to learn this new dance as we gear up to relaunch the church."²

Thanks for your patience as our congregation starts to regain its rhythm and learn some of the moves in this new dance. I myself am not known for my skills on the dance floor, but I pledge to join you in following the pace and movement of the Holy Spirit, who will guide our steps and fill us with power, so that we won't grow fearful or go silent in our witness for Christ.

One thing is for sure, namely, that we need this weekly rhythm of worship in order to be bold witnesses to God's saving work in the world. Nicholas Wolterstorff once wrote:

It seems to me that the Christian life, when properly lived, is a rhythmic alternation between turning toward God in worship and running toward the world in love and with a passion for justice, between congregation and dispersal, liturgy and labor, worship and work, adoration and obedience.³

This is the foundational rhythm of the church, this interplay between worship and witness. This steady alternation between being gathered and being sent. We see it in today's text, and in the scenes leading up to today's text. The community of believers had moved from its time of prayer to its mission in the world where it touched the life of the crippled man. After encountering the authorities and testifying to the power of Christ, the church withdrew again for prayer, where it worshiped and received the power it needed for moving back out into further ministry.

Worship and witness. Worship and witness. Worship and witness. At all times in all circumstances, including a pandemic, that's our congregational rhythm. It sustains us when we're separated. It connects us to the source of our power. It reassures us that the gospel can't be silenced, and that God's redeeming purposes will prevail. The last three months may have knocked us off our rhythm for a while, but the reopening of our church reminds us that God never ceases to gather his people and send his people.

At the end of today's text, Luke tells us that before there was some more sending there was plenty of shaking. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (v. 31). So they had prayed for boldness, and boldness they got. Not their own strength, but the power of the Holy Spirit, filling them with confidence in the gospel and courage to make it known. I like the way that John Chrysostom, one of the early church's greatest preachers, put it when he said, "The place was shaken, and that made them all the more unshaken."⁴

The coronavirus pandemic has shaken us. But it has also given us an opportunity to renew our confidence in God's unshakable purposes. So now is an opportune time to remember that the gospel is unstoppable, that we've been given all the resources we need through the Holy Spirit, and that we have a vocation to testify to the good news through our words and deeds. Whether you're sharing your faith with someone, pursuing social justice, serving the suffering, building up your household, or promoting the kingdom in your community, the word of God, proclaimed in here, gets announced out there.

The ways that we've stayed connected in Christ during the last three months, and the regathering of our congregation beginning last week, are signs that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we're a resilient church. We're just beginning to regain some of our rhythm and direction. We're in a phase where we need to pay attention to safety, without taking on a fortress mentality. That again is where our rhythm of worship and witness, gathering and sending, comes into play. Our church has to be mindful of safety, while at the same time not going into seclusion. Circumstances have changed, but the word of God hasn't. And our commission to testify to the truth revealed in Christ is alive and well.

¹ Ed Stetzer, "What Relaunching the Church Might Look Like Over the Next 3-12 Months." The Exchange website. April 22, 2020. Accessed June 25, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/april/what-relaunching-church-might-look-like-over-next-312-month.html>>.

² Stetzer, "What Relaunching the Church Might Look Like Over the Next 3-12 Months."

³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Reformed Journal* (December 1986). Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 31, No. 11) n.p.

⁴ *The Homilies of John Chrysostom: On the Acts of the Apostles* (Aeterna Press, 2015) n.p.