

My Beloved Church Family,

Covid-19 is driving some of us crazy. I talked to one person who has been at home alone for far too long. He told me, I was just talking about something with the microwave and the toaster while drinking my coffee, and we all agreed that things are getting bad. I didn't mention any of this to the washing machine, because she puts a different spin on EVERYTHING!! Certainly couldn't share with the fridge, cause he's been acting cold toward me! In the end, the iron straightened me out! She said the situation isn't all that pressing and all the wrinkles will soon get smoothed out! The vacuum, however, was very unsympathetic... told me to just suck it up! But the ceiling fan was VERY optimistic and gave me hope that it will all blow over soon! The toilet looked a bit flushed but didn't say anything when I asked its opinion. Meanwhile, the front door said I was becoming unhinged and the doorknob told me to get a grip!! You can just about guess what the curtains told me: "pull yourself together!"

I hope none of you have been so isolated during this pandemic that you're having such conversations with the things in your house!

We can all agree that isolation is hard. It affects us all differently because we are each different from each other. But regardless of the hardship we face, I would like to look with you at how the Lord is faithfully caring for his people through all sorts of circumstance.

This story of Peter's release from prison is, seriously, one of the most amazing stories in the Bible! Peter wasn't held in jail for a long time. He probably wasn't suffering from isolation. We aren't told exactly how long he was jailed but it appears to be a few days.

Peter is chained up 24/7, with a total of 16 soldiers guarding him. You just know that Herod means business. Herod has recently killed James who was one of Jesus' three closest disciples: Peter, James and John. James and John were brothers and fellow fishermen, like Peter, who were called by Jesus to become fishers of men. When Herod killed James, he earned a **lot** of brownie points with the Jews so now he wants to do the same with Peter. Therefore it's important to Herod that Peter not escape and so he assigns four groups of four soldiers to guard one Christian preacher!

As Luke tells Peter's story here in the book of Acts, the details he shares add light to what's going on and the message Luke wants us to take away. Roman soldiers guard Peter. Roman soldiers are tough guys. Their job has no room for error. If you let your prisoner escape, you might be put to death—when you read the end of this story, you find out that they were!

Luke talks about the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover. The Jews are celebrating the deliverance of Israel from 400 years of bondage in Egypt. And right after that's over, Peter will go to trial. First there's a party week to complete. Then Herod will deal with Peter, have a mock trial, find him guilty of something and put him to death, just like James. That's his plan.

The last day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread is the Passover, the time when you take bread and wine to remember God's deliverance from a human enemy. Jesus celebrated the Passover the night before his crucifixion to show that he was the fulfillment of all Passover promises. And he told us to celebrate his victory over sin and Satan in what we now call "The Lord's Supper." We're going to do that this morning again. So, it seems that Luke is wanting us to see that the God who rescued Israel is the God who redeems his people from sin and Satan through Jesus' victory—his resurrection after his crucifixion. Jesus fulfills the Passover once and for all. And now, the resurrected Lord is going to rescue his enslaved servant Peter from another tyrant. This time instead of Pharaoh, it's Herod. The stage is set.

The amazing thing about this story is that, as things unfold, Peter doesn't even realize what is actually happening. He feels it happening, but it seems like a dream or vision to him until he is fully outside. It's like the final jail door slams closed, the angel departs and Peter goes, "What just happened here?"

How do you think you would have responded? What would be the first words out of your mouth? What would be the first thing you do?

Peter had a giant "Ahha" moment. He shook his head in awareness that he wasn't having a vision. Everything he just experienced was absolutely real even though it felt surreal! Luke tells us in Acts 12:11, Peter said to himself, "*Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches....*"

I want you to notice that the Lord gets the glory for this deliverance. The Lord delivered Israel from Pharaoh 3000 years earlier. He delivers us and millions more by Jesus' victory over sin. And now he delivers Peter—a prominent church leader—from Herod's clutches!

Take note, however, of the one way the church is involved in this deliverance. We cannot give the church glory for this deliverance but we must recognize how the dance of faith occurs and what God is calling us to do in response to knowing that he is a deliverer! It's a small but significant verse in this chapter. Look at v.5:

*<sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

The church did not spring into action, hire a lawyer and try to get Peter out of jail. They didn't pick up swords and try to fight against those 16 Roman soldiers keeping Peter securely locked away. No, Peter was in prison, writes Luke, BUT... here's what the church did: *but the church was earnestly praying to God for Peter.*

I'll admit that prayer is a mystery and that's because God is a mystery to some extent. We don't know the mind of God other than that it is good because he is good. God has different purposes for our lives which we don't always understand and sometimes won't appreciate until we get to heaven.

The mystery with respect to prayer is that the chapter opens with a quick note about the death of James. But now we are looking at the deliverance of Peter.

We are not correct in saying that Peter's life was spared because the church was praying. We are correct, however, when we say that Peter was imprisoned so the church prayed! Luke doesn't tell us, but we can assume that the church also prayed when James was arrested. Presumably, he also spent a day or two in prison before he was put to death—at least a little time for a trial. But he died. Undoubtedly some or all of the same people prayed for James as prayed for Peter. The early church, according to chapter 2 of Acts was a praying church.

I don't want to say that the Peter lived BECAUSE the church prayed. It's always a temptation to think that God will always give us what we want when we pray enough or pray the right way. So many Christians don't pray because we've made it seem so difficult. We discourage others from praying because we tell them they are praying incorrectly when they don't get what they ask for. Or we think that our prayers are useless because we don't get what we prayed for. We need to realize that prayer isn't about getting what we want. So we need to understand that prayer is about connecting with God. It's about bringing him praise as well as bringing our thoughts and desires to him. Prayer builds our faith because we are communing with God. It is not so much about getting what we want as about getting ourselves to rest in God's grace and doing his will, regardless of the outcomes because we trust him. We trust him with our lives and therefore submit ourselves fully to him. That was the heart of the early church—praying for the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ, their Saviour and Lord and ready to serve that cause however the Lord saw fit!

Clearly, the church loved Peter and wanted to see his life spared. So they obviously prayed for that. But the most hilarious part of this story is that when God gives this group of pray-ers what they've been asking for, they don't believe it. Peter comes to the house after being rescued from the prison, he knocks on the door and Rhoda is so excited at the sound of his voice that she forgets to unlock it and let him in. Then everyone accuses her of being out of her mind. Then when they see Peter with their own eyes, they say it's just his angel. So I **wouldn't** assume that the faith of those people was so strong that their prayers were able to get them whatever they wanted.

Instead, I see a church that knows they must stay close to their Lord in every situation, whether that's Peter in jail or something else.

Here we are in 2020, living through a pandemic.  
You don't like this Covid time? Me neither.  
You confused at times about what you should do

or shouldn't do? Me too.

You concerned about how long this might go on? Me too.

One thing we shouldn't do is stop trusting **that** the Lord is in control of our world. Our anger, frustration and fighting at times can indicate that we're not handling it well. We're trying to figure this out our own way instead of bringing our struggle to the Lord and asking him to be glorified in it. We might be seeing the big hand of Satan in this whole situation instead of knowing that God has this world in **his** hands. He's at work in the church in this time of pandemic. He's working in you and me through this time of distancing, isolation and new protocols. He's giving us opportunities to grow in prayer and to develop our spiritual life in some new ways.

He's teaching us all of us patience and perseverance.

He's teaching us all to value and love one another in new ways.

He's teaching us contentment with less or that less is more.

He's helping us to be more creative and resourceful.

He's helping us reset some of our priorities.

He's helping us become more aware of our bad habits and work at improvements.

In short, he's at work in our lives during this pandemic, just as he was at work in the early church during times of increasing persecution. God is never out of control. Whatever we go through, he's always calling us to prayer and other acts of obedience—to faithfully respond to our struggles like we see the church doing in the case of Peter's imprisonment. Our calling is to prayerfully bring our needs and desires before him and rest in his good and perfect plan for us.

You can be sure that the death of James, just like the death of Stephen before him, served to advance the kingdom of God. Ironically, the death of martyrs has always served to advance the gospel. God knows this. So these two martyrs—James and Stephen—completed their God-given task with faith. And their death moved the gospel and the kingdom of God forward. And so did Peter's release from prison. It served to remind the struggling Church that God does do miracles and we should never doubt that the impossible is possible when we have God on our side. He had more work for Peter, plans for this man to help spread the gospel.

Nothing is impossible for our God. He can put 16 soldiers into a deep sleep while he walks Peter out of maximum security. Peter marvelled at what the Lord did! Years earlier, the Lord brought Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego out of Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace without a singed hair or even the smell of smoke on their clothes. And never ever forget that our God walked out of a sealed tomb alive. Even death couldn't hold him as its prisoner.

So why do we allow ourselves to feel trapped by this pandemic, whatever the restrictions might be? God is certainly not imprisoned by this. And he's faithfully at work in our lives through this strange time. He's calling us to be faithful to him and to live by the principles of his kingdom.

Our public worship has been limited right now by the pandemic. Whether our reactions are too much or too little, we can rest in knowing that God is at work in our situation. The question is whether we'll respond in faith or not.

Will we seriously assess how we each worship right now. I agree with Dr. Hinshaw's comment about school: there's no wrong choice. We each have particular issues or concerns to take into account. The same is true for how we worship today. But don't think that this pandemic gives us a license to stay away from worship—whether online or in person. I hate this time as much as the next person, but we've discovered—by the grace of God in this pandemic—that we actually do worship through something as strange as Zoom. We can have meetings and prayer meetings and visits through Zoom as well as in person. It's not ideal, but it works. I think that in-person is the ideal way—even the God-ordained way so we aim for that—but life is not always ideal. But let us continue to be worshipers.

Last Sunday was a really good feeling for me—being back together for worship. This morning is too. It's been so long that we've been prevented from gathering together. It almost feels to me like Peter's release from prison felt to him... I'm not sure if this is real but then you find out it is!

I know a lot of us have felt caged up to some degree since the middle of March. It was so great when Suzie Jorritsma joined us on Zoom after being isolated in her residence at Rehoboth Homes for three months. She giggled with joy at seeing fellow church members again. She told us, "I felt like I was in jail!"

We were created for fellowship. So we've been creative in the past 5 months. We've been forced to be creative. We have parking lot visits, window visits, back yard visits and things like that... all because we love one another and long to be together. That's how God designed it and that's why we strive to maintain fellowship as a body of believers. As a church, we need one another. And in response to God's promises to us and his presence with us, we seek fellowship with one another. Through it, the Lord strengthens our faith!

Even the celebration of the Lord's Supper strengthens our fellowship. It draws us closer to Christ but also to one another. As the grains of wheat are gathered into one loaf and the grapes gathered and squeezed into one cup, so we are being bound together by the Holy Spirit through this sacrament.

And likewise with prayer. Will we pray? We should pray. Always and everywhere and through everything. Pray for God's glory, his kingdom and for our hearts to be humble so that we can be used for his purposes in this situation. Both James and Peter were used by the Lord, but in vastly different ways. In their

situation in Acts 12, the church knows that they can't change Herod's ways. They can't pick up swords and bombard the jail. We need to recognize that they know they are powerless as human beings, particular as an oppressed minority in a Jewish state. But they know who can help them. They know the Lord is on their side. And that's why they pray!

Our world would say that it's ridiculous to think that prayer will help us deal with Covid-19. But, then, the Lord has repeatedly surprised the world as his people rely on him and obey his call to do what he says, whether that's prayer, worship, fellowship or anything else.

Think about the first Passover. If you would have told Pharaoh that smearing blood on the doorposts of your house would save you from the death of the firstborn, he would have laughed in your face. But what happened? The angel of death passed over every house that had blood on the doorposts. God's way was foolishness to the world but to his obedient people it meant life.

When Israel got to the Promised Land and started walking around Jericho, the world laughed and mocked, "Like that's going to do you any good! You haven't got any real weapons. You're going to die. But Israel obeyed the Lord's command to march around the city. And what happened? God knocked those walls down!

Will we pray? We should pray. Always and everywhere and through everything. The world may scoff but we pray for God's glory, his kingdom and for our hearts to be humble so that we can be used for his purposes in this situation. We ask for whatever's on our hearts—for all of our needs and desires—but we rest in knowing that the Lord is on the throne and he will build his church, through thick and thin. He always has and always will. Sometimes the answer looks more like the death of James and sometimes it looks like the release of Peter. But both were used mightily by God. And, don't forget, Peter later died as a martyr too—happy to be used by the Lord in whatever way the Lord saw fit.

I suppose it's possible to look at this pandemic as Satan's ploy to shut down churches. But it is equally possible to see it as God's wake up call to churches. The truth is that we don't know right now exactly what God's larger purposes might be in this situation or others. But we can rest in the certainty that our Lord is in control, he's working out his good plans. And that's why we pray. That's why we worship. That's why we seek greater fellowship with one another as his people. And it's why we come gladly to the Lord's table. We seek his grace and find all we need in him.

Amen