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Riverside Covenant Church
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Kick Against the Goads – Acts 26:9-18

Our passage this morning is about Paul and particularly what happened to him when he was arrested for preaching about the resurrection of Jesus and that Jesus was the Messiah that the Jewish people had been waiting for.

Paul has really upset the Jewish authorities of his day and they are doing whatever they can do to stop him from talking about Jesus. In Acts 21 a mob of people attempted to lynch Paul. They were responding to suggestions that Paul was attacking the fundamental symbols of Jewish national solidarity, the people, the law and the temple. **One follower of Christ, Stephen, has already been stoned to death in Acts 7 . . . and Paul is now being treated the same way.**

The mob is particularly upset that Paul may have brought Gentiles (non-Jews) into the temple, thereby making it unclean according to their laws. They were looking for reasons to accuse him because they did not like a lot he was saying. In Acts 21, it says that some Jews had seen had seen Paul hanging out with a guy named Trophimus and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple. **And for the Jews, the temple rules were a big deal and there were certain parts of the temple that only Jews were to have access to.**

The temple in Jerusalem was divided into several rectangular courts. Non-Jews were allowed into the outermost “court of the Gentiles,” but they were prevented from proceeding further into the “court of the women” or the “court of Israel,” by a low barrier which carried notices in Greek and Latin saying, **“no foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”**

So taking a Gentile into the temple was a serious offense and that is the charge that they were trumping up against Paul. There is not much evidence he did it, but that was their primary accusation at this time.

A mob of devout Jews came after Paul to kill him while he was in the temple and created quite a scene. Fairly quickly the Roman police showed up and the mob backed off of Paul before killing him. Since Paul

was the source of the conflict though, he was arrested and led off. The mob persuaded him shouting various ideas as to Paul's identity but also violently calling for the Romans to **“get rid of him.”**

The next few chapters are about Paul's various trials before both Jewish and Roman authorities. Paul is bounced around before one authority after another, yet no one knows what to do with him. **The Jewish authorities want to kill Paul, but according to the Romans he had not committed any crime warranting death.** Plus Paul was a Roman citizen and the Roman authorities were not really prepared to let him die because of some religious differences.

Eventually Paul is brought before a guy named Festus, who was the Roman governor over Judea. The chief priests and the Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented their charges against Paul. Basically, they wanted Festus to send Paul to Jerusalem without a Roman trial so they could kill him. Festus refused to do this, but instead wanted a trial.

When the trial came both sides presented their cases, and Festus asked Paul if he was willing to go to Jerusalem to stand trial, but he refused because he had done nothing wrong. Paul instead appealed to Caesar. And Festus said, alright, “you have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go.”

But then in Acts 25 it says that a guy named King Agrippa and his sister Bernice show up to hang out with Festus. I love the name King Agrippa . . . he sounds like a Nintendo character. King Agrippa was another one of the many Herods in the Bible and the last of the line . . . and ruled over many neighboring Roman territories. **Agrippa was for all practical purposes a Jew.** He took care of the temple in Jerusalem and thus was responsible for some oversight of the temple's functioning.

So while Agrippa is visiting, Festus begins to tell him about Paul and his case. About how the Jewish officials had brought charges against him and wanted him condemned. In verses 18-21 of Acts 25 Festus tells Agrippa what happened.

“When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if

he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. When Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar."

Agrippa basically says, "I have to hear this myself." And Festus sets it up . . . another hearing for Paul. The next day they have another hearing and there is great "pomp." It is a fancy royal affair with royally dressed military and so on.

Festus has one primary concern that he is hoping that Agrippa might be able to help him with. When someone is sent on to Caesar from one of the governors for trial, **a letter is sent** with them describing the situation. **Festus is in a pickle**, because the evidence seems to show that Paul has done nothing wrong, but he does not simply want to let him free because this will anger the Jews. But he also doesn't want to look bad to Caesar if he sends Paul to him without any serious allegations.

Festus is hoping that since Agrippa knows more about the Jews that he will be able to help Festus sort everything out. Paul is led before everyone and especially King Agrippa again and Paul tells his story again. **Paul's case here is significant and I want to spend the bulk of our time this morning focusing on one portion of Paul's defense, verses 9-18 of Acts chapter 26.**

Read Acts 26:9-18.

Paul could have testified any way that he wanted. He could have appealed strictly to reason and definitely does some of that by explaining that what he believes about Jesus is not insane, but really a fulfillment of everything that the Jews believe. **But what Paul decides to focus on is his story.** And he has done this repeatedly. Paul shares his testimony, his story of how he began to believe in Jesus time and time again. Story is powerful.

Let point out though that Paul's story does not work here in the legal sense, because Paul doesn't get set free, but Paul had bigger motives . . . to proclaim God's truth, and Paul did this through story.

When I was working at the law firm in Chicago, I did a lot of various hearings in court and often I covered the hearings that others could not make at the last minute. Our office was downtown in Chicago and just a block from the Daley Center, which is the courthouse. As often happened, I got to the office in the

morning and saw a note next to a file saying I needed to cover a hearing for a client in an hour. I always loved this because I usually knew nothing about the case and thus had to furiously learn the file and go make an argument . . . plus I had to try to figure out who my client was once I got to the courthouse. One particular day I was arguing on behalf of a mother against her ex-husband that needed more child-support and spousal support. I had her financial statements, pay stubs and a bunch of other evidence and was feeling good about the case.

I showed up at the courthouse, find the client and sit in the courtroom. As we are sitting there and I am confirming some things with her I start to notice some things. She had a fur coat on, a diamond filled watch, and was carrying a coach purse that looked more like a suitcase.

I was now prepared to lose. I still had to make my case, but I was prepared to lose. **The story my client told by her demeanor and clothing was far too powerful for all the evidence I could show the judge we lost and rightfully so.**

Our stories, whether good or bad, are the most powerful things we can share with others.

The amazing part about what Paul does as he stands before King Agrippa and Festus and presents his defense is that his goal does not appear to be to argue for his innocence as much as to get King Agrippa and Festus to wrestle with what they believe about Jesus Christ.

Paul and the Jews and the Roman authorities could argue all day about the facts of Christianity and Judaism and what actually happened with Jesus and who was on God's side, but it was really hard to argue with Paul's conversion story.

Paul's conversion story is powerful and no matter which line you fell on with regard to Christianity, **everyone knew that Paul had radically changed.**

Our passage begins with Paul sharing that he was not exactly friendly to Christians. In fact Paul was a chief persecutor of Christians. He was involved in violence against Christians and was instrumental in the death of Stephen, who was the first Christian to be killed for his faith in the book of Acts.

Paul was a zealous Jew. He was a Pharisee who strictly adhered to the Old Testament laws and believed that Jesus and Christians were a dangerous threat to God and the Jewish faith. **He saw his treatment of Christians as an effort to protect the faith.** Paul was harsh and he regularly tried to get Christians to blaspheme their faith. In our passage, he describes himself as **obsessed with persecuting Christians.**

But then he had a profound encounter with God. He was actually on his way to Damascus to persecute more Christians when a bright light shined from heaven and Paul heard a voice say, **“Why do you persecute me?”** And Paul asks, **“who are you?”** And the voice responds, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”**

Uh oh. Have you ever had a moment like that where you are caught red handed?

When I was in college and back in Mt. Sterling for the summer, my best friend was the manager of the local swimming pool and we used to hang out at the pool quite a bit, especially after it was closed. There were no lights at the pool or anything so after dark a lot of times we would just hang out at the pool and swim. And my friend always assured us that there was no chance that anyone would catch us or care if they did. Well one night we were swimming and we heard some cars pull up. We couldn't see who it was because we were inside the pool walls, so we just kept very quiet and still. Then we saw some heads and eyes peaking past the walls at us. And then someone yelling at us and sure enough it was the police believing that we had just broken into the pool.

So there we were swimming in the dark, believing that no one would ever notice and we were caught, sopping wet with absolutely no room for argument.

Luckily, the small town cops are pretty understanding and agreed not to tell my friend's boss, but they gave us a hefty scolding and told us not to do it again.

When Paul has his encounter with God, he is caught red handed. He is on his way to persecute Christians because he does not believe Jesus is the Messiah, and he does not believe that he died and rose again, and he definitely does not believe he is heaven with God. But then guess who comes down from heaven . . . Jesus.

And you can imagine the flood of emotions that rushed through Paul as he asked who the voice was and the voice replied, Jesus.

This is the third time in the book of Acts that Paul has shared his testimony. And each time he tells it, he shares the same facts but emphasizes something slightly different. In this instance, after Jesus asks Paul why he persecutes him, he says, **“it is hard for you to kick against the goads.”**

Not only does it just sound funny, but this is a Greek proverb that simply means “to go against the grain” or do what you know you should do, but it is too hard for you. Jesus’ point is a simple one. God created Paul for a purpose and Paul has been resisting that purpose for far too long. **He is struggling against his destiny.**

The comment by Jesus seems to allude to the possibility that even before this encounter with God on the road to Damascus that Paul was wondering if he was on the right side. **It is pure speculation, but one wonders that as Paul saw the deep faith of Stephen and others, even amidst his persecution of them . . . that he wondered whether Jesus truly was who they said he was.**

Nonetheless, in this moment as Jesus spoke to him, **it all became strikingly clear.** Jesus must be who the Christians say that he is if Jesus is speaking to him from heaven.

And as Paul believes for the first time, God makes his mission clear to him. Jesus says that he is appointing Paul “as a servant and a witness of what you have seen and will see of me.”

Paul then becomes one of God’s greatest witnesses. Much of what we have in the Bible is Paul’s letters to the early Christians helping them to understand God and the Christian life more clearly. Paul preached with conviction and power. All the energy that Paul had put into persecuting Christians now became the driving force behind his desire to open the eyes of others.

In this short section from Acts 26, I think there are some really powerful truths about God.

First, God can and will use anyone. Paul was a bad guy in Christian circles. After the first telling of Paul’s conversion in Acts 9, the text says that Paul **“tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him,**

not believing that he really was a disciple.” Because Paul had treated the disciples and other Christians so poorly, they were skeptical to believe that his conversion was real and sincere. Time proved that it indeed was.

No one is ever too sinful to accept God’s grace. Anyone that truly admits that Jesus is Lord, will be saved and employed for God’s mission in the world. **God and the church are never to give up on anyone.**

A second thing I think we see from Paul’s story is that personal story is the most powerful evidence of God at work in our world. Remember that Paul’s speech here is taking place in the context of a public hearing before Roman officials. He wants to convince them that he has not done anything warranting death. He does not waste his time with pure argument though. Paul simply tells his story of which no one can refute.

Our stories of God’s work are powerful. They are the most powerful evangelistic tool we have. As I share my testimony and particularly about how God took me from the legal life to the ministry life, people are not sure what to do with me. There is little rational explanation for it. Your stories are the same. **One day you are living for yourself and your own wants and desires and the next you are seeking to listen and follow God . . . which is self-less, and servant like, and humble . . . and wholly different than our former lives.**

This is what calls people to wrestle with the truth of the Gospel.

A third thing, we see in Paul’s story is that God gives us a vision and a mission. In fact, from the moment we were conceived God has a purpose for us. And we all resist this at various times in our lives. This is what Jesus names when he says to Paul, “it is hard for you to kick against the goads.” This is why Paul is persecuting Jesus to begin with. It is hard to give up what you have built a life around, to say everything you have believed is wrong, and to change.

Have you ever tried to create a whirlpool in a round swimming pool? If you get a bunch of people to help and you all start moving quickly around and around the pool in the same direction you will create a serious current. Sometimes our world creates a current like this. And if we do nothing, if you just pick up your feet then we are carried quickly along with it. It is easy work. But God calls us to go the other

way and this is hard. But notice that once Paul agrees to turn and go the other way, Jesus tells him that he **“will rescue [him] from [his] own people and from the Gentiles.”** God will enable him to move against the current and convince others to do the same through the sharing of his story.

Paul finally accepts the purpose and vision that God has for him.

So in Paul’s life as in ours we see a pattern. A natural disobedience. A tendency to push God away. But then a powerful encounter with God either through a friend, or studying the Bible with an open heart for the first time, or a life-changing event . . . whatever it is we see God differently. And then we begin to change. God helps us to see our new life. Our new priorities. Our new mission. The purpose for which we were born. To share our stories and to be witnesses to God’s eternal power.

That is how the Gospel works.

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