

May 2021

Act(s)ions Speak Louder than Words



**Readings in Acts 2,
Reflections, Prayers**

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Monday, May 10: Acts 16:1-10

Back in my university days in Vancouver, I wanted to take a year off and do a one-year Bible College programme. I had two options: a Capernwray school in Germany or the Baptist Leadership Training School (BLTS) in Calgary. I was young. Adventurous. Both would cost about the same ... Germany (very cool!) or Calgary (not so cool – just COLD!)? Which would you choose?

As I prayed about it, talked with godly friends about it, and reflected on the different programmes, I KNEW God was leading me to BLTS in Calgary. I frankly was annoyed. I wanted to go to Germany. But, in my heart, I knew my preference for Germany was not from God; I just thought it would be more fun. The programme in Calgary was better suited to me. I would be going for the right reasons: to learn and grow. In hindsight, the programme and the friends I made in Calgary were hugely influential in my spiritual growth.

Paul is seeking God's leading. First, God leads him to Timothy. Timothy is not whom Paul would prefer as a companion. Paul's usual method of church planting and evangelism is to go first to the Jewish synagogue in a city, preach there, and then expand to the non-Jews/Gentiles. But Timothy is half-Greek and half-Jewish; he is not circumcised, which means Timothy cannot go into a synagogue. There is a solution. Timothy could be (and is) circumcised. After Paul's discussion about welcoming Gentiles into the church without circumcision (Acts 15), this may seem inconsistent. However, Paul doesn't see Timothy's circumcision as essential to his salvation. Rather, this simply removes a barrier and opens doors for the good news of Jesus to spread into more and more communities. Timothy can now go into synagogues, too.

Paul, Timothy, Silas (15:40), and Luke ("we" in 16:10) are wandering through the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey), seeking God's leading. Traveling by foot, the journey to the places listed in 16:6-8 would have taken several weeks. Doors seem to be closing right, left, and centre. Paul and his companions want to serve God, but there seem to be no opportunities. Finally, Paul has a dream in which a Macedonian man begs them to come to Greece. The good news about Jesus will come to Europe for the first time.

How does God lead us? Of course, one of the first guidelines we need to follow is Scripture. If something is contrary to the Bible, God is NOT leading us in that direction. Not all our decisions (like which Bible school to attend or with whom to share the good news) is clearly guided by biblical principles. Several options could be good. We can pray. We can speak with godly friends. We can think through the options in logical ways (making lists of pros and cons – God gave us brains!). Sometimes God does give us a strong sense of just KNOWING the best option. Sometimes God does clearly open and close doors; some things just don't work out and other things do.

We may be afraid of making the WRONG decision. We can be paralyzed, making no decision at all. We have to make **A** decision. Ultimately, had I gone to Germany instead of Calgary, the world would not have ended. God could still have worked in my life. If Paul had gone to Bithynia, God still could have done amazing things there, too. A wise mentor once told me, "*After much prayer, just make the best decision you can. Then go forward. Don't look back and second guess yourself.*" Just make that decision. And go for it.

*May the love of the Word-Made-Flesh enfold us,
his joy fill our lives,
his peace be in our hearts;
and the blessing of God be with us this day and always.
Amen*

Celebrating Common Prayer

Tuesday, May 11: Acts 16:11-15

We know we are supposed to share our faith. We know we ought to be "missional." But practically what does that mean? How do we share our faith?

Look what happens outside Philippi. Paul and his companions join a group of people. Someone asks who they are and where they have come from. So, Paul begins to talk. He tells his story: he was a leader in the Jewish community; he persecuted Jesus but now he believes and follows Him; God led them to Macedonia. Now they expect the Spirit will do things in Greece. Undoubtedly his enthusiasm and sincere faith come through. He shares his life and his experience, long before he shares his theology.

One woman, named Lydia, listens intently. *"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."* She hears Paul talking about what God is doing in his life. The **Holy Spirit** impresses upon her heart that this same Jesus wants to be her Saviour. And she believes. She and others who believe are baptized.

All of us have experiences with God. We can share how we came to believe and how God has protected, guided, and cared for us. We can talk about what God means to us today. Like Paul, our natural response to God's grace ought to be to share God's grace in natural, ordinary ways, too.

We may know Jesus and have experiences with God, but we're hesitant to share. Why? What are your reasons? Pray about this. Perhaps we don't know when it's appropriate to share our faith – pray. We don't know who to share our faith with – pray. We don't know what to say – pray. We feel afraid – pray. Is this the right time? – pray. It sounds trite, but prayer really does help. C.S. Lewis says, *"I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time – waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God – it changes me."*

After you have prayed, do it. We can always find reasons not to speak to someone else. But when you find yourself starting to think of excuses ... DON'T. Talking about our faith in Jesus can be difficult at first, but it becomes more natural with time. As you share your experience of God with someone, your words become part of that person's life. They may believe right away, but probably not. You're sowing seeds. Growth may take a long time. That's God's responsibility. You have made an eternal contribution to someone's life.

Your words may make all the difference in the world to one person. And then they tell two people. Who each tell two people. Who each tell two people ... you get the picture. Pray that God would give each of us the wisdom, courage, and opportunity to share His love and grace ...

*Lord, because you have made me, I owe you all of my love.
Because you have redeemed me, I owe you all of myself.
Because you have promised so much, I owe you all of my being.
Lord, please make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge.
Let me know by love what I know by understanding.
I owe you more than my whole self, but all I can give you is all that I am.
Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of love.
I am wholly yours by creation. Make me all yours, too, in love.
Amen.*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Wednesday, May 12: Acts 16:16-40

We want our friends, family members, neighbours, and colleagues to know Jesus. And we try to make a difference, by the way we live, our gracious words, and our prayers. But what is it we're trying to communicate? What is the "good news"? What is the "gospel"? What do people need to believe?

Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the twentieth century (and author of many THICK academic tomes), was visiting the University of Chicago. The eminent scholar was asked, *"Dr. Barth, what is the most profound truth you have learned in your studies?"* Without hesitation, he replied, *"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."* That's the good news right there – *"Jesus loves you."*

During a conference on comparative religions, leading experts debated what, if any, belief was unique to

Christianity. They began eliminating possibilities. Other religions had versions of gods appearing in human form. Other religions believed in life after death. The story goes that C.S. Lewis wandered in, "*What's the rumpus about?*" When he heard their dilemma, Lewis responded, "*Oh, that's easy. It's grace.*" Grace is simply love, free of charge, no strings attached – Jesus loves you, just as you are. That's what's unique about Christianity. That's what Paul shares (Acts 16:31).

It is nice to say that God loves me, but He doesn't really know me, does He? That may have been what the jailer was thinking. Jailers in those days were **not** known for being "good" or "nice" people – rather the opposite. They were rough, tough, bouncers. But Paul has credibility. He knows, firsthand, about God's grace. Paul was one of those responsible for the murder of Stephen. Paul was responsible for Christians being beaten, thrown into prison, and worse. God's grace had come to Paul, with all his violent, intolerant, cruel, and merciless past. Paul could share his experiences of amazing grace with the jailer.

Paul's message to the jailer in Philippi (and our message to the world around us) is that God, in His grace, loves each one of us, no matter our past. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. There is also nothing we can do to make God love us more. This may be difficult for some of us to accept.

We can turn the good news into bad news by adding all sorts of rules and regulations to it: people have to believe specific doctrines or do particular things in order to be saved. AFTER we are saved, the Spirit does challenge us to deal with lots of issues in our lives. These are changes we make in obedience to God's Spirit, AFTER we put our trust in Jesus. The good news is simply this – "*Jesus loves you.*"

Paul writes: "*I used to scoff at the name of Christ. I hunted down his people, harming them in every way I could. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how kind and gracious the Lord was. He filled me completely with faith and the love of Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I was the worst of them all. But that is why God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life*" (1 Timothy 1:13-17). That's good news. God loves you.

God loves _____ (you fill in the blank with someone (or several people) you know). Pray for them.

*Our God, God of all peoples,
God of heaven and earth, seas and rivers,
God of sun and moon, of all the stars,
God of high mountain and lowly valley,
God over heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven.
You are our dwelling in heaven and earth and sea
and in all things that are in them.
You inspire all things.
You quicken all things.
You are over all things.
You support all things.
You make the light of the sun to shine.
You surround the moon and the stars.
You have made wells in the arid earth.
You have placed dry islands in the sea.
You have a Son – who saves us – co-eternal with Yourself
You send the Spirit who lives and breathes in us – co-eternal with Yourself.
All in One and One in All, Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
We praise You. We adore You. Amen.*

Patrick (c.389-461)

Thursday, May 13: Acts 17:1-15

After one (pre-Covid) service, most people politely shook my hand and chatted about the weather. A couple said, "Good sermon, Pastor." But one lady buttonholed me. "I don't believe what you said in your sermon," she blasted, "show me in the Bible where it says that." She was not going to be brushed off lightly. I was ... thrilled. She had been listening. (And, yes, I could show her in the Bible where it did "say that")

Acts 17:11 contains a phrase every pastor wishes were true of every sermon. As Paul taught and preached to folks in **Berea** they "they received the message with great eagerness and **examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.**" I get excited when people listen, think, and ask questions. It means they're awake. They're thinking. They want to learn Scripture. They want to know Jesus.

Previously, Paul and his friends were in **Thessalonica**. On three Sabbath days "he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,' he said." Some people in Thessalonica were convicted the good news was true. Most weren't. People either responded in faith or outright hatred. Few were neutral. Emotions ran high.

In Thessalonica, Paul's opponents didn't have any arguments from Scripture. They simply "were jealous." Had they examined the Scriptures, they might have been persuaded as well. But that would mean thinking and, possibly, changing what they believed. Unlike the Bereans, the Thessalonians didn't want to think. They didn't want to read. They weren't open to learning anything new. They got defensive and angry. They attacked. Sometimes change is threatening, so people react and fight. Am I ever like that?

The Bereans are learning their **Scriptures**. With all sorts of Christian books/videos/speakers/podcasts out there, we can talk ABOUT the Bible. We may hear about/read about/watch videos about Christianity. Do we actually read **the Bible itself** for ourselves? (good for you for doing that each day) When we do read the Bible, sometimes we are surprised what it actually says (or doesn't say). We may have to change, too ...

What surprises you as you read the Bible? What questions do you have? (If they're hard, ask Mark, Troy, or Kyle, but not me ... just kidding, you can ask me tough questions, too!). Search the Scriptures ... Pray for wisdom ... Be open to learn ... Allow the Spirit to teach you, and change you ...

*Lord, may your blessing be on each one of us who profess to follow Jesus.
Help us to love Christ more than we love ourselves.
Help us to be more like him in our way of life.
Help us walk humbly,
prayerfully,
consistently, in the dust of our pilgrimage.
May others not stumble over us, saying,
"They profess only, but they never do anything."
Help us live up to what we profess.
May Jesus shine through each one of us.
Amen*

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

Friday, May 14: Acts 17:16-34

My friend, Hasbullah, came from Sri Lanka. He was nominally Moslem but didn't practice his faith. He knew nothing at all about Jesus or Christianity. We had wonderful conversations about life, the universe, and everything, including Jesus. I had the privilege of planting seeds about Jesus in his life. Sometimes we run across people, like Hasbullah, who don't know a thing about Jesus. They have none of the knowledge we assume people have about Jesus, Bible, God, etc. We start talking about Jesus with these people from a different place than we would with a person who has some Christian background.

Paul finds himself in this situation as he moves from Thessalonica and Berea (in Macedonia, northern Greece) to Athens (southern Greece). In the Macedonian cities, Paul was dealing with Jews and God-fearing Greeks who knew the Scriptures (they checked up on him – Acts 17:11). In Athens, he is speaking with Greeks who, if they have ever even heard of the Jewish Scriptures, do not know them at all.

Most people in Athens are “spiritual.” There are signs of “religion” everywhere. Paul notices they even have an altar dedicated “*To an Unknown God.*” He could lambaste them for not believing in the one true God. But he doesn’t. His starting point is positive; he establishes common ground: “*I’m thrilled to see you believe in a God – let me tell you who I’ve discovered this God really is.*” People want to know more ...

There are similarities between ancient Athens and 21st Century Canada. “Spirituality” is still common. Polls show the majority of Canadians believe in a “God” of some sort. They may not believe in **our** God, but they are “spiritual.” If people know of the Bible, they are not familiar with what it really says (though they may **think** they know what it says).

How do we speak to these people? They don’t need judgment. They don’t need a lecture. They often are open to us sharing our personal experiences with God. When we talk about what we have experienced, they may be intrigued. I’ve also found it’s helpful to build common ground, appreciating their spiritual search. Trying to prove them wrong, or arguing theology because they aren’t yet Christians, is NOT helpful.

For instance, as a geographer, I find many people have a deep appreciation for the world as more than just a cosmic “accident.” It’s just too amazing and finely tuned. They love and value the natural world. Paul explores this theme as common ground (Acts 17:24-27). The Greeks know all sorts of things about the natural world; Paul uses that as a point of contact to share his faith. In our world, people still love and wonder at nature. When we see a gorgeous sunrise, it moves us. When a baby is born, it is a spiritual moment. When someone comes through major surgery it is a “miracle.” These are opportunities to help people ask the question: “*Don’t you ever wonder why ... What does it all mean ...?*”

God has also given human beings the ability to create amazing works of art, literature, music, and insight. Where does that genius come from? Ultimately it comes from God. Paul cites a non-Christian poet to help him speak with the folks in Athens (Acts 17:28). Sometimes we can build bridges with family, friends, or neighbours by seeing opportunities to build bridges through aspect of popular culture, like songs, books, art, movies, quotes, etc.

All the bridges Paul is building with the folks in Athens – their sense of something more, their wonder about creation, their appreciation of genius – are leading to this: ***God has revealed Himself to the world through Jesus Christ.*** Unlike every other religion, we have a clear picture of who God is: Jesus. He loves us: He chose to come to earth for us and He was even willing to die for us, all because of His incredible, unconditional love. We want people to meet Jesus. (We do need to ensure we are introducing them to the Jesus of Scripture, not some of the strange political or “church-y” versions of Jesus out there).

We have good news to share. Continue to pray that God will give you opportunity to share His love ...

*May I become at all times,
both now and forever
a protector for those without protection,
a guide for those who've lost their way,
a ship for those with oceans to cross,
a bridge for those with rivers to traverse,
a sanctuary for those in danger,
a lamp for those without light,
a place of refuge for those who lack shelter,
an encouragement for those who are discouraged,
and a servant to all in need. Amen.*

Saturday, May 15: Acts 18:1-23

Watchman Nee (1903–1972) was a Chinese church leader and Christian teacher. In 1922, he began church meetings in Fuzhou, China, launching the house church movement. Following the Communist Revolution, Nee was persecuted and imprisoned for his faith. He spent the last twenty years of his life in prison. He wrote, *"Alone I cannot serve the Lord effectively, and He will spare no pains to teach me this. He will bring things to an end, allowing doors to close and leaving me ineffectively knocking my head against a wall until I realize that need the help of the Body as well as of the Lord."*

No one is called to follow Jesus on their own. We are invited to follow Jesus in community, in the family of God's people. Yes, we need to accept Him as our Saviour and follow Him as our Lord **personally**. But when we make that commitment, we become part of a **community** of followers of Jesus, the church. We (ideally) love one another, honour one another, encourage one another, help one another, care for one another, correct one another, do not judge one another, instruct one another, serve one another, bear one another's burdens, and do not grumble about one another, forgive one another ... What a great gift.

Paul is a wonderful example of someone who appreciates community. Working with folks like Priscilla, Aquila, Timothy and Silas, Paul is supported emotionally, spiritually, and financially. And, as friends and colleagues, these folks can complement one another by using their unique gifts and abilities so that no one person must "do it all" (Paul, for instance, could give his time to what he does well: teaching and preaching).

As we continue through Covid, how are you connecting with other followers of Jesus? How are you connecting in the church? Do you have friends or a group to support you? To whom you can give support? Even as Covid drags on, we can find ways to love and care for one another.

Over the summer it is easy to get "disconnected" as we scatter – how can you keep connected with other believers? Stay connected personally through calls, email, texts, Facebook, Instagram ... whatever.

How are you doing at using your gifts, talents, and abilities to serve God? Feel free to talk with the staff or others, too, about how you can use your energy, talents, and skills to serve God.

*Father, your Word says you are a Good Father who gives us good gifts.
Thank you for the gift of the church,
a community of your children you have gathered
to worship, serve, pray and love.
Give us strength to live as ambassadors for you in the world.
Jesus, thank you that you are the light of the world,
guiding our steps on your path.
Spirit, bless your church and keep us pure, make your face shine upon us.
Turn your face towards us and give us peace.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.*

Sunday, May 16: Acts 18:24-28

Once in a while, someone says to me, "**Your** church does ..." or "I like **your** church because ..." But First Baptist is not **my** church (or **your** church); it is **God's** church. It just happens to be that one of **Jesus'** churches that the Spirit has led me to. If I think of First Baptist as **my** church (or if others think of it as **Bruce's** church), then whether the church is "going well" or not, whether it is "good" or not, is all up to **Bruce**. The focus is on Bruce because it is "**Bruce's church**." This is VERY frightening for all of us. (The movie, *Bruce Almighty*, shows how terrifying this could be ...)

But when we keep the focus on our church as **Jesus'** church, then our focus is where it ought to be – on **Jesus**: His Kingdom, His glory, His mission, His Way. When we read about the various churches in Paul's

travels (there are all sorts of places mentioned in this reading), notice they are not *Paul's churches* but *Jesus' churches*. Paul may have been instrumental in starting many of them, but a whole host of people are now serving God and building the Kingdom of God through them. And ultimately, their Lord is Jesus.

When I think of First Baptist, I celebrate the incredible diversity of people who are part of our community. Who help in so many ways. Thank you. But this reading is also an ongoing reminder of how the Kingdom of God only grows as all of us contribute our gifts, skills, time, talents, and treasure to His work. Paul could not possibly do it all in Corinth, Ephesus, etc. No minister (or church staff) can possibly do it all, either.

Over this Covid era we have been amazed at how many people have contributed through prayer, music, readings, encouragement, phone calls, cards, small groups, and so much more. In an average online service, alone, we typically have 10-15 volunteers involved with music or readings (not including staff). And we have faithful youth and Sunday School teachers, and others helping each week too. Thank you!

Is God calling you in a new way? Pray about it. Talk about it. No one is too old, too young, too over-qualified, or too under-qualified to serve God. You can always pray. You can call. You can encourage. He created you ... and He needs you.

Joyce Meyer writes, "*We're not like robots. God promises to guide us through the Holy Spirit, but He gives us the freedom to make our own decisions.*" What decisions is the Spirit leading you to make, today?

*Lord, who though you were rich, yet for our sakes you became poor.
You promise in your holy Gospel
that whatever is done for the least of your brothers
you will receive as done to you:
Give us grace, we humbly ask you,
to be always ready and willing to minister to the needs of others,
and to extend the blessings of your kingdom over all the world.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Monday, May 17: Acts 19:1-22

Peter Marshall, one-time chaplain to the U.S. Senate, said, "*Human nature must be changed if we are ever to have an end to war or to correct the wrong situations that make our lives uneasy and our hearts sore. Now Christianity, the power of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit of God, is the only force that can change people for good.*" The Holy Spirit, the power of Jesus, really can change people. Only the Spirit can change people.

This reading highlights some of the exciting things that happen in Ephesus (in western Turkey), one of the largest and most important cities of its day (then estimated to have a population of 500,000+). The first encounter (19:1-7) involves some people who are not yet Christians; they are followers of John the Baptist (Jewish people who had repented of their sins, but did not know about Jesus). As soon as they hear about Jesus, they put their faith in Him, are baptized, and are filled with the Holy Spirit.

- When a person puts their faith in Jesus, their normal response ought to be to be baptized – an outward expression of the inward transformation that has taken place. This is the normal response to Jesus throughout the New Testament. Have you been baptized? Great. If not, why not ...?
- When a person puts their faith in Jesus, Jesus' response is to bless them with a deep experience of the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives.
- The church in Ephesus is a strong one; we assume these people joined with the other believers after meeting with Paul – he certainly would have encouraged them to (and they had learned the hard way that staying separated meant you missed important things – like Jesus and the Holy Spirit.).

The pattern in Scripture is that as a person puts their faith in Jesus, they experience the Holy Spirit, they are

baptized, and they join the church. Speak to a pastor if you have questions ...

Paul spends at least two years in Ephesus, speaking about the Kingdom of God. God does "extraordinary" miracles through Paul (v.11). These unusual events are unique affirmations of Paul's calling as an apostle, specifically in Ephesus. Not even Paul replicates these at other times or places. These are not normal things we can expect anywhere and everywhere (much to the chagrin of some media evangelists). God does His work in unique ways in each place, through each person, to bring each person to faith in Jesus.

God can work through each of us – in unique ways in our unique situations – to bring people to faith in Jesus, too. It won't be OUR power; it will be GOD's power. We never know what He's up to.

God's Kingdom grows in unexpected ways through us (or even despite us). Praise God. Pray for our church, that together we may be a good witness in our community. And pray for yourself (and others) personally, that God may help us to share our faith in Jesus with others ... in His power, not ours.

*Father Almighty, creator of everything is good and satisfying,
help us to be more devoted to you with all we are and all we have.
Forgive my wandering, lustful heart,
that is always looking for something else to quench its insatiable thirst.
What I really desire is to be more devoted to you and your Word.
I have a "God-shaped" hole that can only be filled by you, and you alone.
Let me be wholly set apart from all that pulls me from you.
Please consecrate both my inner and outer life,
my possessions, relationships, and career,
to the cause of Christ and his Kingdom.
I pray that spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer,
good works, solitude, and corporate worship
will be pleasing in your sight, as I go deeper in your love.
Amen.*

James Bell Jr.

Tuesday, May 18: Acts 19:23-41

Ephesus was the home of the stupendous Temple of Artemis. Antipater of Sidon, the ancient Greek poet who established the list of the seven wonders of the world, wrote: *"I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, 'Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand.'"*

The Temple of Artemis was the largest, most glorious temple of its day: 130m long, 70m wide, 18m high, with 127 amazing marble columns. Tourism to the temple was big business. Souvenirs – miniature statues of Artemis and the temple – provided a good income to local craftspeople.

Demetrius and his friends sense Paul's preaching is threatening their livelihoods. They take action. They incite a riot. Long before the existence of police forces, the mob they incite is potentially lethal. Paul and his companions could be lynched (probably exactly what Demetrius and his cronies want).

The city clerk's intervention is fascinating. There is no evidence he is a Christian (he probably worships Artemis; he speaks sincerely about the myth that a statue of Artemis fell from heaven in Ephesus). God uses this man from a different religion to save Paul and his friends. God can "use" all sorts of people to build His Kingdom, even those who don't yet know Him.

God's Holy Spirit is at work in people around you who are followers of Jesus **and** who are not-yet Christians. He is speaking into their souls, pricking their consciences, casting doubts into their minds, softening their

hearts, inspiring them to be compassionate ... Pray for people you know who may not know Jesus yet.

So often we give up on people who have not yet come to faith. Don't. Never give up on anyone. God doesn't. His Spirit continues to speak into people's lives. God encourages us to pray for those around us.

*God of love, we pray that you give us love:
love in our thinking, love in our speaking, love in our doing.
Love in the hidden places of our souls.
Love of our neighbours, near and far.
Love of our friends, old and new.
Love of those who we find it hard to bear.
Love of those who find it hard to bear with us.
Love of those with whom we work and of those with whom we take our ease.
Love in joy, love in sorrow.
Love in life and love in death.
In the end, may we be worthy to dwell with you, who are eternal love –
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – forever and ever.
Amen.*

William Temple (1881-1944)

Wednesday, May 19: Acts 20:1-12

Have you ever been really angry? Afraid? Confused? After the trauma of this riot, I'd be angry, afraid, and confused. What would you do? I'd be stressed. I'd leave town. Quickly.

What does Paul do? Paul stays. He encourages people.

Have you ever noticed that, if you brood on your problems, they become overwhelming? Things seem to get worse and worse. You feel miserable. You lose sleep. You get ulcers. But, if you spend time talking with and encouraging other people, your own problems fade into the background.

We all need a good dose of encouragement now and then. Isn't it incredible how much people appreciate our encouragement? Over the past – very difficult year – we have all appreciated the encouragers in our lives. Isn't it amazing how much a sincere "encouraging word" means to you? If encouragement is so important, why don't we do it more? After all, in southern Alberta we live in "*a home, where the buffalo roam, and the deer and the antelope play ... and the skies are not cloudy all day ...*" Hopefully we can also be a place "*where seldom is heard a discouraging word.*"

I'd like to change the lyrics to "*often is heard an **encouraging** word ...*" What do you think? Why not become an encourager??? Every day, think and pray about a person you could encourage – for anything (as long as it's genuine). Do it. In a world that loves to find faults with people, genuine encouragers can make such a difference. Encouragers build the Kingdom of God.

The story of Eutychus (told to us by Luke, a doctor and eye-witness of the event) describes an evening worship service at Troas. God does an unique, extraordinary miracle to underline His power and the authenticity of Paul's ministry. God works His own miracles in His own time and His own way.

Part of our growth as believers is celebrating when God does incredible things like miracles. But we also gracefully accept when God allows the natural course of events to unfold and doesn't intervene. As maturing Christians, we learn "God is God" even when we do not understand what He is up to ...

Barbara Johnson quips, "*I'm glad God has all the answers, 'cause I barely understand the questions.*"

Who can you encourage today? How can you pray, recognizing that "God is God" and can do amazing things ... or not.

*Lord, I make you a present of myself.
 I do not know what to do with myself.
 So let me make this exchange:
 I will place myself entirely in your hands,
 if you will cover my ugliness with your beauty,
 and tame my unruliness with your love.
 Put out the flames of false passion in my heart.
 Make me always busy in your service.
 Lord, I want no special signs,
 nor am I looking for intense emotions in response to your love.
 I would rather be free of all emotion than to run the danger of falling victim to false passion.
 Let my love for you be pure.
 All I am, I give to you.
 Amen.*

Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510)

Thursday, May 20: Acts 20:13-38

Paul senses his impending arrest and persecution. Note his courage and determination: he is not afraid to suffer for his faith. Honestly, I would struggle to be as courageous as Paul. How about you?

This is the *only* speech in Acts directed to a **Christian** audience; all the rest are evangelistic messages to non-believers or courtroom defense speeches. Today we do well to hear what Paul says to **us** :

- He begins with what "you know" (v.17, 20): things that have been obvious to everyone: the integrity of his life, perseverance, courage, and message (would these be evident in your life?).
- He shares his own heart, "I know" (v.23, 25); things only he has known: his suffering, hardships, loneliness and heartache (being a Christian is NOT easy, sometimes, is it?).
- He gives instruction: the importance (for pastors, and for all God's people) to "keep watch over themselves" (what does that mean for you?) and to "keep watch over the flock" (pastors have special oversight of the church, but there **are** people in your life who are "your flock" – family members, friends, neighbours, relatives, small group members. What does this mean for you?).
- He gives a warning: "wolves" will come. Wolves can be those who teach false doctrine. Or they can be those who are orthodox but stir up conflict/controversy in the church (read Titus, 1 & 2 Timothy, [Revelation 2:1-7](#) [God's letter to **this** church in Ephesus]). Pray for unity in our church. Pray for unity among the churches of Lethbridge. And unity in our denominational family.
- He gives a commission (vs. 32): we have the privilege – and responsibility – to be God's ambassadors, wherever we are. Pray for God's courage and opportunity.
- He gives us encouragement: God will supply all our needs. Praise Him.

We are all God's people. Pray for our church.

We are the church. Pray that God would give us a bigger vision of what it means that His Kingdom and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. How can you live for Jesus, today?

*God, whose I am, have mercy on me.
 Have mercy on me so that, in love and faith, in righteousness and humility,
 I may follow You with self-denial, steadfastness, and courage.
 May I meet with You in the silence.
 Please give me a pure heart that I may see You,
 a humble heart that I may hear You,
 A heart of love so I may serve You,
 and a heart of faith so I may live in You.
 Amen.*

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961)

Friday, May 21: Acts 21:1-16

The past 15 months have been tough. For some of us, they have been the hardest times in our lives. Isolation. Loss of income. No jobs. No time with family or friends. No travel.

Throughout the Bible, there is NO promise that those who follow Jesus will have an easy time of it. We may, indeed, find ourselves in hard places. Difficult things happen. The Spirit leads Paul into tough places. The details of Paul's struggles are different than ours. But we share with Paul (and with Jesus) times when life is trying. We can learn from Paul as, in relationship with Jesus, he works through his stress ...

Paul's journey to Jerusalem is not unlike Jesus'. Like Jesus, Paul sets his face resolutely to go to Jerusalem. Like Jesus, Paul doesn't allow predictions of suffering to deter him. He is "*compelled by the Spirit*" even though the Spirit "*warns me that prison and hardships are facing me*" (Acts 20:22-23). Acts 21:1-16 shows us Paul's determination to follow the hard path down which the Holy Spirit is leading him. Assured of God's presence, Paul is not afraid to face trials. What can we learn?

Sometimes the Spirit allows bad things to happen. He may NOT deliver us from every difficulty or suffering.

Sometimes God actively leads us into stress and difficulty. Can your faith accept that? Jesus knew this. Paul experiences this. Paul's friends can see **NO** good in his journey to Jerusalem: Paul's ministry of encouragement, church planting, and evangelism could end. Couldn't he do so much more if he stayed free? What they cannot anticipate is the influence Paul will have on Roman leaders and the letter-writing ministry he will have in prison (Paul will write Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon in jail). We may not understand what good can come from our trials either. But God does.

When hard times happen, or God actively leads you into stressful circumstances, He is not being petty or cruel. Through those most difficult times, the Holy Spirit can do things **in you** and **through you** that you cannot possibly imagine ...

In all times God is with us: God is with us – especially with us – through the hard events in life.

As Paul walks this hard road, what keeps him going? His resolute faith in God **and** people: friends he travels with and companions he meets along the way. Christian friends – who share our faith, hope, and values – are so important. During tough times, we all need Christian companions to walk with us ... The church community is so important. Who can you encourage – and to be encouraged by – this week?

*Christ Jesus, when all is dark and I feel weak and helpless,
Give me a clear sense of your presence, your love, and your strength.
Help me to trust in your protecting love and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry me.
Help me to live very close to You.
Help me to see your hand, your purpose, and your will through all things.
Amen.*

Irenaeus (130-200)

Saturday, May 22: Acts 21:17-26

How do we handle our differences? In particular, how do we as **Christians** handle our differences?

When Paul (spokesman for the Gentile/non-Jewish Christians) meets with James (leader of the church in Jerusalem/spokesman for the Jewish Christians) the "fur could fly" (remember [Acts 15](#)). Many Jewish Christians felt non-Jewish (Gentile) believers should follow all the Jewish law, including circumcision, observing the feasts, food laws, etc. They were not about to back down. Paul, however, taught salvation by faith alone, not by observing the law. He was not retreating, either. A nasty argument, hard feelings,

and deep schisms (a church split.) **could** have resulted from this meeting.

But the split **didn't** happen. Instead of conflict we see God's grace working in both people. James and Paul both "major on the majors" and "minor on the minors." They choose to agree on the essentials:

- salvation is by grace, through faith, in Christ, and
- Christians are called to obey God's moral and ethical standards (it's not a matter "anything goes".)

Rather than becoming polarized and vicious, Paul and James have the grace to let other things go: if Jewish Christians want to follow the Jewish law, great. But, by God's grace, non-Jewish Christians are not bound by those laws. However, Paul is gracious enough to accept explicit clarification on issues that could easily lead into sin: temptations to idol worship and sexual immorality. Paul has no problem agreeing on these things. We are **ALL** called to love God with all our hearts and to love another through holy living.

In our relationships with other Christians, we can learn from Paul and James:

- **DO be gracious to one another:** don't become polarized. Our society is becoming more and more splintered, politically and religiously. Paul and James do NOT allow their differences to undermine their unity in Jesus. We need to hold onto our unity in Christ, as well.
- **Do choose to love and respect one another:** don't attack people. Paul and James choose to work through their disagreement with respect and integrity, through open-minded discussion and dialogue. Their relationship as followers of Jesus is more important than their differences.
- **DO focus on God's Kingdom and His work:** James and Paul emphasize the essential truths of the faith, not "non-salvation" issues, personal interpretations, or cultural traditions.
- **DO love one another.** Despite their differences, Paul has collected an offering for the desperately poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem – wonderful. James responds to Paul with praise to God.

Note what Paul and James do **NOT** do. They do not fight, back bite, or walk away. We should **NOT**: fight, split, walk away, send nasty emails, talk behind people's backs, gossip, or sulk.

What can we learn from Paul and James? Celebrate the (few) really important things: salvation in Jesus through faith and a desire to love God and love our neighbour. Let other things go. Don't allow differences to polarize, separate us, and destroy our unity as Jesus' church.

Pray for your relationships with others. Pray especially about those with whom you disagree. And pray we may handle our decision-making with grace and a constant focus on God's Kingdom work among us.

*My God, I don't ask You to take me out of this life,
but to prove Your power within it.
I don't ask for tasks more suited to my strength,
but for strength more suited to my tasks.
I pray for a vision that moves me,
strength that endures,
and the grace of Jesus Christ, who walked our earthly life as a conqueror.
Amen.*

William Edwin Orchard (1877-1955)

Sunday, May 23: Acts 21:27-36

How do we handle our differences? You don't have to spend long on social media or watching the news to know that many, many people fight about a lot of things these days. Society seems to be getting more and more polarized. Many people emphasize what divides us rather than what unites us. Outrage, name-calling, and stereotyping are the order of the day. Civility, grace, and love are in short supply.

James and the Jewish Christians graciously welcome Paul. They choose to celebrate what unites them rather than their differences. In contrast, the Jewish *non-Christians* go ballistic when Paul arrives in Jerusalem. Paul does purify himself according to all the Jewish laws. He is as ceremonially "clean" as any of his Jewish peers (21:26) yet they still accuse him of defiling the temple.

Paul is accused of 2 things:

- Teaching "*everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place.*" This is a lie. But accepting the truth Paul teaches would require the Jews to accept Jesus as fulfillment of the promises of the prophets ... something they are not prepared to do. Change??? Never!
- Bringing Greeks into the temple and defiling the holy place. This is another blatant lie (21:29).

When people feel threatened by new ideas or changing realities, one way they may react is by fighting, lying, and making false accusations. Jesus faced lots of attacks and lies from the religious powers-that-be. Stephen was the victim of lies by the same "spiritual" leaders ([Acts 6:11-14](#)). What does it say about our faith when we lie, promote untruths, or get caught up in conspiracy theories?

Paul has anticipated this arrest. How do you think he feels? How could he "*practice his faith*" this day? What would he have prayed? Would he have brought to mind some of God's promises? Which ones? Would he have doubted God's purpose and plan? (Remember how Paul responded in a similar circumstance: [Acts 16:19-25](#))

When difficulties come your way, how do you respond? How do you react to personal attacks? How can you pray in tough times? Can you focus on some of God's promises? Which ones?

How can you know God's peace and presence when times are hard? How can you "*pray and sing hymns to God*" (Acts 16:25) in the midst of pain? Pray for God's Spirit to empower you to know His comfort and presence even when times are very hard.

Maybe you need to memorize some of God's promises of presence and peace? ([Matthew 28:18-20](#), [Philippians 4:13 & 19](#), [Romans 8:28-39](#), [Psalm 23](#), and others ... if you need help, speak with a pastor)

*Lord, I am an empty vessel needing to be filled; my Lord, fill it.
At times I doubt and am unable to trust You.
I am weak in faith; strengthen me.
I am cold in love; warm me and make me passionate,
so my love – your love – may go out to my neighbour.
Amen.*

Martin Luther

Monday, May 24: Acts 21:37-22:22

Alexander Hamilton (1755–1804), subject of the hit musical, *Hamilton*, was an American statesman and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. He said, "*I think the first duty of society is justice.*" Justice – right, dependable, honest, good, equitable, impartial action – is critical to a stable, healthy society. The Romans had developed one of the first comprehensive justice systems. The Roman system is foundational to our own, today (the Roman philosopher, Cicero, wrote, "*For there is but one essential justice which cements society, and one law which establishes this justice. This law is right reason, which is the true rule of all commandments and prohibitions. Whoever neglects this law, whether written or unwritten, is necessarily unjust and wicked*" – 'nuff said).

Paul's first defence (of 5 trials) is before the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias. Claudius Lysias is a just, open-minded man who is prepared to give Paul an honest hearing. The Jewish mob, on the other hand, want Paul lynched; they will lie and cheat to see him dead. Justice is not their concern. To please such a mob, Pontius Pilate had handed Jesus over for flogging and crucifixion. Claudius Lysias doesn't do that with Paul. Lysias is genuinely concerned that justice is done. What is Paul's defence?

- He speaks of his Jewish birth, upbringing, and education.
- He emphasizes his zeal for God and previous persecution of Christians.
- He describes his conversion – all God’s doing, not Paul’s own choice.
- He mentions Ananias – a well-respected Jew (and Christian) – who restored his sight.
- He presents his vision of the Lord in the temple – again, God’s doing, not his own idea.

Paul does NOT argue theology. Instead, he tells his story. How can anyone argue with that? No one can question what you have actually experienced.

When we are asked about our faith, the best thing we can do is simply share our story. What has God done in your life? What is your experience of God? How have you seen God at work in your life or in the lives of people around you? It is very difficult for anyone to argue with that.

Recently I was stopped by a pair of missionaries from another faith: they wanted to argue theology with me. I chose to respond by simply telling my story of faith in Jesus. Then I asked them to tell me their stories. It was a relatively short, one-sided discussion, because they didn’t have any personal stories to share. And they couldn’t argue the experiences of God I had genuinely experienced in my life.

The ultra-Jewish Jews back in Paul’s day could never believe their God would send a Jew to share their God with infidels. Paul’s report that God sent him to the Gentiles (non-Jews) incited a riot. How could the God **of Israel** care about Gentiles? The Jews were God’s chosen people, His ONLY chosen people. Gentiles were “dogs.” Could God possibly love non-Jews? No! (I wonder how Claudius Lysias, a Gentile, felt at this point?) Maybe this experience of ethnic exceptionalism and ugly bigotry helps explain his sympathy for and protection of Paul. Do we think God loves some people more than others? Why would we think that?

Remember God loves each person who crosses your path, today. He doesn’t only love people just like you. He loves the “other” people, just as much ([Galatians 3:26-29](#), [Colossians 3:11](#)).

Pray that God would be very real to you all through this day. And, if opportunity comes, don’t be afraid to tell your story. Pray for others, too – in the church, community, your family – that they would know God’s personal presence and be bold in telling their story when the opportunity arises.

Pray for those “other” people, that you would see them as God’s precious children, as well ...

*Almighty God, the giver of all good things,
without your help all labour is ineffectual.
Without your grace all wisdom is folly.
Fill me with your Holy Spirit,
so that in my understanding and in my undertaking,
I may promote Your glory.
May I share your salvation with others.
Grant this, O Lord, for the sake of Jesus Christ.
Amen. Lord bless me.
So be it.*

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

Tuesday, May 25: Acts 22:23-29

The official oath to become a Canadian citizen is this: *"I swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada, her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfil my duties as a Canadian citizen."* That's it.

If you were born in Canada, like me, you never did have to swear this oath. Would you?

What I find interesting is that the oath does not mention our "rights" as Canadian citizens. It does emphasize our responsibilities: to observe the laws of the land and fulfil our duties as citizens (what do you think that would include?).

Citizenship in ancient Rome was an elite, privileged political and legal status. As a citizen, you had:

- The right and responsibility to vote in the Roman assemblies.
- The right to make legal contracts and to hold property.
- The right of immunity from some taxes and local rules and regulations.
- The right to have a legal trial (to appear before a proper court and to defend oneself).
- A Roman citizen could not be tortured or whipped.
- If accused of treason, a Roman citizen had the right to be tried in Rome, and even if sentenced to death, no Roman citizen could be sentenced to die on the cross.

One of the themes Paul develops in his letters (as does Peter in 1 Peter) is we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. We are dual citizens: citizens of our political nation and citizens of heaven. In the same way that citizens were expected to be loyal to and support Rome/Canada, Paul emphasizes we are responsible to live as loyal citizens of the Kingdom of God, live by God's Kingdom values, and do everything possible to build His Kingdom (Philippians 3:17-21). We are to uphold God's laws and fulfil our duties as His people.

You are a dual citizen as well:

- What does it mean to you that you are citizen of Canada AND a follower of Jesus? How can those come into conflict? How do you balance those demands if they are in competition?
- What does it mean you that your ultimate citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20)?
- What are our "duties" as citizens of the Kingdom of God? What does that mean for me?

*Lord, lift up the light of your countenance upon us.
Let peace rule in our hearts.
Be our strength and our song, throughout our pilgrimage.
We commit ourselves to your care and keeping this day.
Let your grace be mighty in us,
and sufficient for us,
and let it work in us
both to will and to do of your own good pleasure.
Grant us strength for all the duties of the day.
Keep us from sin.
May your Spirit rule over our own spirits,
and keep us from speaking unadvisedly.
May we live together in peace and holy love.
Grant us your blessing, which is eternal life.
Prepare us for all the events of the day,
for we do not know what a day may bring forth.
Give us grace to follow in the steps of our Lord and Master, Jesus.
Amen.*

Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

Wednesday, May 26: Acts 22:30-23:11

How do you handle it when life seems to be just one stress after another?

Paul faces a second trial, this time before the Jewish Sanhedrin. The high priest's anger seems to be directed at Paul's assertion that he has been a faithful Jew right through to this day (23:1); the priest, knowing Paul's Christian conviction, considers this blasphemy.

Paul's instigation of a controversy between the Pharisees (who believed in the resurrection of the dead) and the Sadducees (who did not) may have simply been a smokescreen to cause confusion and dissension in the Jewish ranks. Or (more likely) Paul did want to have this debate. Resurrection is an essential concept in Christianity (if Jesus has not been raised, our faith is useless [[1 Corinthians 15:12-34](#)]).

Paul is trying to help the Pharisees understand Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfillment of all their hopes and dreams. If Jesus has risen from the dead, the Pharisees' beliefs have been proven true. He is inviting them to consider the evidence. To some extent Paul's argument works: the Pharisees defend Paul – a bit.

Paul valiantly tries to share the good news with the Jewish leaders. Surely God could miraculously intervene and give them a vision as dramatic as Paul's when he was actively persecuting Christians (Acts 9). Wouldn't that be perfect? To have the key Jewish leaders converted to faith in Jesus? But God does not intervene; no handkerchiefs made people well (Acts 19:11-12), no resurrected Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12), no conversions. Why does God do a miracle one time in one place and not another? We don't know.

The Romans must intervene again. Then, in God's grace, the Lord appears to Paul that night with a wonderful word of encouragement (Acts 23:11).

How does your Bible translate the Lord's words in Acts 23:11? The New Living Translation says, "*That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, "Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you **have been a witness** to me here in Jerusalem, you must **preach the Good News** in Rome as well."*" The Greek text does say Paul "has been a witness" in Jerusalem (Greek "martyr-") but also that Paul must "be a witness" ("martyr-") in Rome. The Greek word for "witness," in both places, is where we get the word "martyr" in English. The reality was that many who were "witnesses" about Jesus were killed for their faith, including Paul.

Even when God lets the events of life overwhelm us, even when things don't go as we would want them to, even when we face stress after stress, Jesus is beside us saying, "*Take courage.*" Repeatedly in Scripture, God says, "*Do not be afraid ...*" Can you hear His word of encouragement today? Even if we are called to suffer as we are witnesses for Jesus, God is with us.

Do you know someone going through a very tough time? Come alongside them. Encourage them with the truth of God's presence – take courage.

*My soul's desire is to see the face of God
and to rest in his house.
My soul's desire is to study the Scriptures
and to learn the ways of God.
My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness
and to share Christ's risen life.
My soul's desire is to imitate my king
and to sing his praise always.
My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven
and to gaze upon the light that shines forever.
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires
and you alone can satisfy those desires.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Thursday, May 27: Acts 23:12-22

Be careful what you promise ...

I wonder if the 40 men who made an oath not to eat or drink until they killed Paul followed through on their vow. If you read on, you know that the plot to kill Paul fails. Did they actually die of thirst or starvation?

Isn't it interesting these men are so concerned about God's honour they are prepared to lie and murder (breaking two of the Ten Commandments) out of "devotion" to God.

- Do people ever do evil things or compromise integrity out of "devotion" to God, today?
- In God's eyes, does the end ever justify the means?

God does not need us to defend His honour. He has proven time and again His Word will stand without our zealous attempts to defend it. His church will stand despite us. We are never asked to compromise or use dishonourable means to defend Him. When I see Christians insulting people who do not share their political options, I am grieved. When I see Christians viciously attack other believers because they are "defending" what they believe is, I'm sad. Some Christians are downright cruel to others – Christians and non-Christians – out of "devotion" to God. It's evil. God can take care of Himself and His honour very well.

We are called, of course, to be aware of false teachers ('wolves') – people who teach inaccurately about God, ethics, values, etc. But the best way to protect ourselves – and others – is to make sure we know and teach God's truth. When we know God's Word we will not be led astray.

One challenge is Scripture does not speak definitively on every issue. Sometimes we must do what we think is best, recognizing that others may come to different conclusions. Can we live with that ambiguity?

If you are unsure about some doctrinal issue, moral position, or point of view, search the Scriptures. If you need help, ask a Christian friend or one of the church staff. Knowing God's truth, where it clearly exists, will help you make right choices. Note it is **God's** truth and **God's** Word we teach ... We can construct lots of other "truths" based on cultural things and personal opinions that are not actually clearly taught in Scripture. Sometimes we just have to make the best choice we can. We always need to be careful to discern what **God's** truth and wisdom really are, and what **our** biases, interpretations, preferences, and opinions are.

Pray that God would help you to continue to learn His truth more and more:

- helping you know Jesus more completely and fully;
- helping you be filled with His Spirit as you allow the Spirit to take control of every part of your life and mind (what parts of your life/thoughts are you holding back from God's control?);
- helping you make right moral choices (are there things in your life you need to confess and repent about? Just do it);
- helping you read and understand His Word;
- helping you share His truth honestly and humbly with others.

*My God, I believe you watch over all who hope in you.
We need nothing when we rely upon you in all things.
I am resolved to cast all my cares upon you.
People may deprive me of worldly goods and status.
Sickness may take my strength and my means of serving you.
I may even jeopardize our relationship by sin.
But my trust in you shall never leave me.
I will preserve my faith to the last moment of my life,
and even the powers of hell cannot grab it from me.
Let others seek happiness in their wealth and talents.
Let them trust in the purity of their lives,
the severity of their sacrifices,
the number of their good works,
and the enthusiasm of their prayers.
For me, my confidence in **you**, my Saviour, fills me with hope.
For you, my divine protector, alone give me life. Amen.*

Claude de la Colombiere (1641-1682)

Friday, May 28: Acts 23:23-35

Martin Luther King Jr. said, *"There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right."* In a more folksy way, Mark Twain says, *"Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest."*

Claudius Lysias does what is right, even though most people are angry with him. He is an honest, brave, upstanding politician. What a great role model for politicians today. What a great role model for all of us today. It takes a lot of courage to do what is right when the majority opinion is against you.

Despite pressure to compromise, Lysias does what's right. He risks a violent rebellion that could cost him a reprimand or his command. His superior, Felix, probably felt, *"Just give the people what they want and keep the peace"* (like Pilate). He risks losing a promotion if not earning a demotion.

Claudius Lysias is not a follower of Jesus. Nor is he Jewish. Sometimes we make simplistic connections: "Christian" person = good person. "Non-Christian (or other-religious)" person = bad person. We may be surprised. In this case, this "non-Christian (or other-religious)" Roman commander is the good person. The "people of God" – the Jews – are the ones trying to assassinate Paul. Have you ever seen not-Christian people behave more "Christianly" than Christian people? Isn't that embarrassing?

Pray that God would give each of us the courage to do what is right, even when it's not a popular option. May we behave consistently "Christianly." May we always do right.

Lord, give us the integrity to follow your truth even when there is personal risk or personal cost.

*Heavenly Father,
the struggles and difficulties of life seem to be swirling all around me,
like a misty fog in the blackness of night.
At times I just don't know which way to turn.
When I feel like giving up and walking away from everything,
I know that "giving-up" is not an option.
Give me courage and strength to face the future with You.
Help me trust You to walk with me every step of the way,
for I know the Bible tells me that You are with me every moment of the day.
Give me the courage to take my eyes off the difficulties of life,
and to anchor my faith in You.
And Lord, from this day forward, as I step out into the unknown future,
may I have the courage to put my hand into Your hand and not to fear,
knowing that You will never fail me nor forsake me.
Thank You, in Jesus' name,
Amen.*

Saturday, May 29: Acts 24:1-21

The good news of Jesus has been described as a message that "comforts the disturbed" and "disturbs the comfortable." Certainly, that is true in Jesus' ministry as He cares for the outcasts, ill, foreigners, poor, and lonely; meanwhile He calls out the Jewish leaders for their hypocrisy, selfishness, and greed. Similarly, Paul provides wonderful comfort for the struggling in his letters, but also takes on evil, corruption, and sin.

Paul's third trial is before Felix, Roman Procurator of Judea from 52-58 AD. Ancient writers, like Josephus and Tacitus, describe Felix as a dreadful governor; he is cruel, unjust, indecisive, and incompetent. Tertullus, prosecuting lawyer from the Jewish establishment, begins with brazen flattery (24:2-3). Tertullus accuses Paul of inciting political unrest, disloyalty to Rome, and, of course, religious heresy. He accuses Paul of the same crimes as Barabbas was guilty of – "insurrection" ([Luke 23:19](#)).

Paul replies he is not a troublemaker or revolutionary; he is a true follower of God. Paul argues that "the Way" (Christianity) is the logical fulfillment of all the Jewish hopes and dreams (at least the Pharisees' hopes and dreams; they believed in resurrection: *'It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'* [Acts 24:21]). Jesus' resurrection is central to Christian faith and the fulfillment of the Pharisees' hopes.

In our era, Judaism and Christianity are considered separate religions. But in Paul's day, most believers considered themselves Jews who understood the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Jewish Messiah in Jesus. They didn't see themselves starting a new religion but living the fulfillment of Judaism. Paul is emphasizing unity among those who love God. He invites other Jews to discover their Messiah in Jesus.

Unity. Today there are many different Christian churches and denominations. Some love to emphasize their uniqueness and distinctiveness (only they have the "truth"); they denigrate other churches. Polarization, outrage, and judgment are becoming more and more issues between churches and between believers.

We can push back against this divisiveness as we celebrate what unites us. It is good to emphasize basic, common essentials that bind Christians together in the Kingdom of God. These fundamental truths transcend geography, time, and denominations. What does Paul list as the essentials?

- Faith in God (24:14)
- Confidence in God's Word (24:14)
- Belief in the resurrection (including the resurrection and, thus, the divinity, of Jesus) (24:15)
- Obedience to God's moral and ethical commands and will (24:16)

Pray for the "larger church": other Christian churches in our city and around the world. Pray for the church closest to where you live (whatever it's denomination). Pray for unity among the people of God.

*Lord, make me see your glory in every place.
If mortal beauty sets my heart to glow,
help me see your grace shining even brighter.
If natural wonders stop me in awe,
may your Majesty cause me to worship you even more.
You have given me on earth this spiritual soul,
a prisoner behind these weak walls of flesh;
how can that soul break free?
How can my spirit find its true life?
Dear Lord, I cry to you for help.
Your Spirit alone can save me.
May your Spirit flow through my will and my senses.
Redeem what is sinful, empowering and inspiring what is good.
All goodness, Lord, must fail without your Spirit:
for you alone have the power and glory.
Amen.*

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

Sunday, May 30: Acts 24:22-27

[Nellie McClung](#), (1873-1951) was one of the "Famous Five" who won the right for women in Canada to be "qualified persons." She was a Canadian author, social activist, suffragette, and Alberta MLA. She wrote, *"It was the people who did not like to be disturbed who crucified Christ – the worst fault they had to find with Him was that He annoyed them – He rebuked their sinful minds – and so they crucified Him – and went back to sleep. The sin of the world has ever been indifference and slothfulness, more than real active wickedness. Life, the real abundant life of one who has a vision of what a human soul may aspire to, is*

warfare – not one set of human beings warring upon other human beings – but war waged against ignorance, selfishness, darkness, prejudice and cruelty, beginning always with the roots of evil which we find in our own hearts.”

Unlike Claudius Lysias, Felix is not concerned about doing what is right and just. Nor is he decisive. He will not make a decision at all. Instead he delays (hoping for a bribe, perhaps?). He keeps Paul under house arrest for two years. He does speak with him more: *“he (Paul) spoke about faith in Christ Jesus ... righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come ...”* (Acts 24:24-25). But Felix cannot or will not make a decision about Paul – or about his personal faith in Jesus.

Poor Felix. Felix is willing to listen, and listen, and listen. He cannot make a decision. He will not step out in faith. He never actually puts his life into Jesus’ hands. What a pity. From his desire to hear more from Paul, I think he wants to believe. But he is afraid (Acts 24:25). Afraid of what? What ought Felix ought to have done? What would have been the result?

We may still be in Covid, but we don’t have to be indifferent, slothful, or asleep. C.S. Lewis once said, next to Jesus Himself, your Christian neighbor is the holiest object ever presented to your sight, because in him or her the living Christ is truly present ([Matthew 25:31-46](#)). We can still encourage people. We can thank people. We can challenge evil and injustice. We can pray – for our church, for neighbours, for family, for strangers, and for those on the front lines, locally and globally (our mission field staff around the world: the Soucys, Huttons, Lisa Ratzlaff, and others). We can support the Food Bank, Soup Kitchen, Days for Girls, and sponsor refugees.

We can find meaning and purpose, even during Covid – by being the people of the risen Jesus. How is Jesus encouraging and speaking to you, today?

*Lord God, you have called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Lutheran Book of Worship

Monday, May 31: Acts 25:1-12

Henry Ford said, *“Don’t find fault, find a remedy; anybody can complain ... Most people spend more time and energy going around problems than in trying to solve them.”*

Henry Ford would have liked Procius Festus, the man who succeeds Felix as Procurator of Judea. Festus is a man of action. Josephus, a first century Jewish writer, describes Festus as a noble leader who restored law and order after Felix’s inept, corrupt, indecisive governorship. Within three days of taking office, Festus is taking charge of Paul’s case. Festus quickly sees through the Jewish leaders’ plot to kill Paul on the trip to Jerusalem. Committed to justice, Festus ensures there will be a trial in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea, where Paul is imprisoned.

Again, the Jewish leaders *“brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them.”* Paul is aware of the Jewish plot, too. He appeals, as every Roman citizen has the right to do, to Caesar himself for justice. Festus, following due process, honours Paul’s request. Procius Festus, a non-believer, models justice at its best. May we NEVER short-change justice. May we be people who insist on justice, too.

As God's people, may we never bear false testimony against anyone, never make a charge we cannot prove, and never pass on hearsay. If we do hear rumours or gossip, it should stop with us. If we hear something unflattering about someone, we should NEVER pass it on. If we are concerned about an individual's situation, we ought to go to them and ascertain the whole truth: if there is a genuine issue, commit to praying with and for that person. Don't spread it. **NEVER, EVER, pass on gossip.**

"Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goals," says Henry Ford. Festus' goal is truth and justice. We get the impression no obstacles are going to distract him from that.

Who can you encourage, today? *Lord, help us to be people of integrity, truth and justice. May we always build others up and NEVER tear others down.*

*Lord our God, teach us, we pray,
to ask you in the right way for the right blessings.
Please steer the ship of our lives towards yourself,
the tranquil haven of all storm-tossed souls.
Show us the course in which we should go.
Renew a willing spirit within us.
Let your Spirit curb our wayward senses.
Guide us toward that which is our true good.
Help us keep your laws.
Help us rejoice always in your glorious and gladdening presence.
For yours is the glory, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Tuesday, June 1: Acts 25:13-22

C.S. Lewis was an outspoken critic of Christianity through his early 30's. He writes of his conversion to faith in Jesus (due in large part to his good friend, J.R.R. Tolkien), *"You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen College, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."*

King Agrippa II, the Roman appointed "king" of Galilee, arrives in Caesarea to pay his respects to Festus, the new Roman governor. Agrippa II had little political power, but, by symbolically representing the faded glory of kings of Israel like David and Solomon, his presence appeased the Jewish authorities. He also had responsibility to care for the Temple and appoint the High Priest. By birth, he was a "Herod" (just as Queen Elizabeth II is a "Windsor"). The Herods were not even ethnically Jewish, but Edomite converts to Judaism.

- Herod the Great (reigned 37-4 BC), Agrippa II's great grandfather, was king when Jesus was born (he was the one who massacred the children in Bethlehem [Matthew 2])
- Herod Antipas (reigned 4 BC - 39 AD), Agrippa II's great uncle, was king during Jesus' adulthood (he had John the Baptist beheaded and questioned Jesus before His crucifixion [Luke 23:6-13]).
- Agrippa I (reigned 39-44 AD), Agrippa II's father, executed James the son of Zebedee (John's brother, NOT James, Jesus' brother, who was the head of the church in Jerusalem, whom Paul just met), imprisoned Peter, and subsequently dies a horrible death (Acts 12:1-23).

Agrippa II knew all about "the Way" – Christians – from his family experiences with them. His father's nasty death is described as divine punishment for not giving praise to God and for persecuting Jesus' followers ([Acts 12:23](#)). I wonder what is going on in his mind as he meets Paul, one of the leaders of "the Way"?

Agrippa II comes from a line of bitter persecutors of followers of Jesus. Could God actually soften the heart

of a Herod? What do you think? Do you know people who have been staunch critics of Jesus? Who are dogmatically anti-Christian? Can God actually change their hearts?

Yes, God can change the hardest hearts. Some of those who present themselves as the greatest skeptics are also those in whom God is doing the greatest work. Their intense reaction against Jesus may be evidence the person is fighting the Holy Spirit's conviction tooth and nail.

Pray for those you know who give you the hardest time ... who seem furthest from faith ... the Holy Spirit does still do miracles.

Pray for people you know who actively oppose Jesus. Pray for those who more passively just ignore Jesus. Pray that His Spirit would open hearts to see Jesus for who He is ...

*You are holy, Lord, the only God, and your deeds are wonderful.
You are strong. You are great.
You are the Most High. You are Almighty.
You, holy Father, are King of Heaven and Earth.
You are three and one, Lord God.
You are good, all good, supreme good, Lord God, living and true.
You are love. You are wisdom.
You are humility. You are endurance.
You are rest. You are peace.
You are joy and gladness. You are justice and moderation.
You are all our riches, and you suffice for us.
You are beauty. You are gentleness.
You are our protector. You are our guardian and defender.
You are our courage. You are our haven and our hope.
You are our faith, our great consolation.
You are our eternal life, great and wonderful Lord,
God Almighty, merciful Savior.
Amen.*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Wednesday, June 2: Acts 25:23-Acts 26:32

[Francis Collins](#) is an American physician-geneticist who discovered the genes associated with a number of diseases, led the Human Genome Project, and is now director of the National Institutes of Health in the U.S. Through his university years, Collins considered himself an avid atheist, arguing against God's existence. However, a conversation with a hospital patient led him to question his lack of faith, and he investigated various religions. He familiarized himself with the evidence for and against God in cosmology, and, on the recommendation of a Methodist minister, read C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*.

Collins comments on the influence this book had on him: *"The idea that you would arrive at faith because it made sense, because it was rational, because it was the most appropriate choice when presented with the data, that was a new concept. And yet, reading through the pages of Lewis's book, I came to that conclusion over the course of several very painful weeks. I didn't want this conclusion. I was very happy with the idea that God didn't exist and had no interest in me. And yet at the same time, I could not turn away. I had to keep turning those pages. I had to keep trying to understand this. I had to see where it led. But I still didn't want to make that decision to believe."*

"I was on a trip to the Pacific Northwest, and on a beautiful afternoon hiking in the Cascade Mountains, where the remarkable beauty of the creation around me was so overwhelming, I felt, 'I cannot resist this another moment. This is something I have really longed for all my life without realizing it, and now I've got the chance to say yes.' So I said yes. I was 27. I've never turned back. That was the most significant

moment in my life."

Paul's 4th trial was before Festus ([Acts 25:1-12](#)); his 5th trial is before Festus, Agrippa II, his sister Bernice, and other political and social leaders. Paul tells his story, again. Festus, as a Roman ignorant of Jewish faith and beliefs, thinks Paul is insane (26:24). But Agrippa II is not so sure – in fact I sense that he, like Felix, is close to faith: *"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"* (26:28)

Paul's response is wonderful: *"Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am (a Christian), except for these chains."* Agrippa II is so sympathetic to Paul and his message he would love to see Paul released.

Yes, God can soften the hearts of even the most determined opponents of faith. People like

- C.S. Lewis – a skeptical professor whose academic research convinced him of Christian truth (author of *Mere Christianity, Miracles, The Problem of Pain, The Chronicles of Narnia*, etc.).
- Francis Collins – an atheist doctor who is now an outspoken advocate for Jesus (author of *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief, Belief: Readings on the Reason for Faith, The Language of Science* and *Faith: Straight Answers to Genuine Questions*).
- Josh MacDowell – a lawyer who sought to disprove Christianity and came to faith (author of *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* and other books that argue, convincingly, for Jesus).
- Lee Strobel – a hard-nosed investigative reporter who also set out to attack Christianity and came to faith (author of *The Case for Faith, The Case for Christ, The Case for the Creator*, and more).

Encourage those you know, who do not believe, to risk considering the evidence. The books listed above are good resources ... pray that the one you care about would be open to considering the possibilities ...

Do you have doubts, questions, concerns? Don't hesitate to look for answers. There ARE answers. The books above are good places to start. Don't be afraid to ask the staff or a Christian friend, too. Every question is a good question.

Pray that God would help you grow stronger in your faith.

*My God, I do not know what may happen to me today.
I only know nothing will happen to me you haven't foreseen from all eternity.
That is sufficient, my God, to keep me in peace.
I adore your eternal designs.
I submit to them with all my heart.
I desire them all and accept them all.
I make a sacrifice of everything.
I unite this sacrifice to that of your dear Son, my Savior,
begging you for patience in troubles.
Grant me perfect submission in all that you will for me.
Amen.*

Elizabeth of France, written in prison awaiting the guillotine (1764-1794)

Thursday, June 3: Acts 27:1-12

Henri Nouwen writes, *"When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares."*

Luke accompanies Paul on this voyage to Rome ("we" in 27:1). Luke, writing the Book of Acts, gives us an amazingly detailed, firsthand account of a first century boat trip. What a voyage! The journey was begun in good weather, but the necessity of changing ships and headwinds holds them back.

After "the Fast"/Day of Atonement/Yom Kippur (October 5 in 59 AD) sailing is becoming more and more perilous. Back then, sailing on the Mediterranean normally ended by the end of October due to violent and unpredictable winter weather. Reaching Rome is likely impossible that Fall: Paul (who had sailed a lot in recent years) advocates staying put, but the centurion, pilot, and boat owner want to go further. In our modern age, we forget how "if-y" travel used to be (although for refugees it is still perilous today).

I appreciate the centurion, Julius (Luke even gives us his name, which is very rare; centurions were not that important. I get the impression Luke likes him, too). In Sidon, Julius lets Paul stay with his friends.

As we have seen throughout Acts, friends – Christian friends, the church – are an important support. Paul is always getting together with friends, mentioning friends in his letters ... Even when we struggle to connect in person, don't cut yourself off from Christian friends and family, in church, or other places.

Christian friends are incredible sources of wisdom, inspiration, and encouragement. Do you feel "un-friended"? Ask God to bring a Christian friend or two into your life. Maybe someone is just waiting for you? Ask the staff about a small group you can connect with.

Winnie-the-Pooh has great advice for us: "*You can't stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.*" If you want a friend, start by being a friend.

*My God, why have you given me this hectic busy life,
so I have so little time to enjoy your presence?
Throughout the day people are waiting to speak with me.
Even at meals I have to talk with people about their needs and problems.
During sleep itself, I am thinking about all the concerns that surround me.
To me, my present pattern of life is a torment.
Yet I do all this, not for my sake, but for yours, don't I?
I say, "It is a sacrifice of love,"
but maybe I do it more for myself than for you?
I know you are constantly beside me, yet I'm usually so busy I ignore you.
Is that worship?
Stop me from being so busy!
Please force me to think about and love you in the midst of my hectic activity.
Release me from my busyness!
Show me how others can take over my responsibilities.
Help me to remember that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hand but ours, no feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes that see the needs of the world.
Ours are the hands with which he blesses everyone.
Ours are the feet with which he goes about doing good.
But he does not call me to forfeit my soul to serve him.
Help me never to forget you in my busyness to serve you.
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Friday, June 4: Acts 27:13-44

Since 2014, more than 20,000 migrants and refugees have died at sea while trying to reach Europe from Africa (including many African Christians, persecuted for their faith in North Africa). More than 17,000 have died on the Central Mediterranean, which is described by the UN as the most dangerous migration route in

the world. The journey for refugees – after years of suffering and torture in their country of origin, during travel, and in Libya – starts with leaving in the middle of the night, often on overcrowded, unseaworthy boats without food and water. Questionable life jackets are only for those who can afford them. In addition to the casualty figures, there are those forcibly returned to Libya, described as “hell” by those who survived the ordeal. Since February 2017, at least 36,000 people have been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard and returned to the North African country. The European Union has spent more than 90 million euros (\$140m CAD) in funding the Libyan coastguard to stop refugees reaching Europe.

Back in Paul’s day, 276 people are on this boat on the stormy Central Mediterranean (27:36). Quite a load for a small ship. When the storm hits, panic ensues. Luke gives a detailed first-hand description of events. In the days before life jackets, coast guards, electronic communications, SOS calls, and other safety measures, this is a life and death struggle. Imagine the terror.

Our challenges may not be crossing the Mediterranean Sea, then or now. But we all have storms in our lives, and, like Luke, Paul and the other 274 people on this tiny boat, we don’t know what the future holds.

Paul doesn’t know what will happen, but he tells everyone, “*Don’t be afraid*”(27:22-26). He has confidence God will accomplish His will, regardless of the weather.

Do you know what? Nothing can stop God’s will for our lives. We may not understand what He is doing, but we can be sure He will be glorified through it. Despite the “weather” we’re going through.

- “*Don’t run for it*” (27:30-32). When we’re in trouble, it’s tempting to run. It’s natural to panic and find our own solution. To wait for God is very difficult. But when we do trust in God rather than our own street smarts, we inevitably end up making better choices with better results.
- “*Don’t go hungry*”(27:33-38). Paul doesn’t just say “trust in God” – he has practical wisdom, too. If they’re going to make land, they need their strength. When you’re under stress, don’t neglect your health. Eat well. Exercise. Get your sleep. All those good things your doctor tells you to do – do them. They will help you through.
- *God is with you*. Keep praying. Keep in community with other believers. Encourage one another.

What is God saying to you?

*My God, I believe in you. Please strengthen my faith.
All my hopes are in you. Please protect them.
I love you. Teach me to love you more and more dearly.
I am sorry that I've offended you. Please increase my repentance.
I adore you as my first beginning. I aspire after you as my last end.
I give you thanks as my constant benefactor.
I call upon you as my supreme protector.*

*Please conduct me by your wisdom and control me by your justice.
Please comfort me by your mercy and defend me by your power.
I desire to consecrate to you all my thoughts, words, actions, and sufferings.
I want to think of you, speak of you, and offer all my actions to your glory.
May I suffer willingly whatever you shall bring into my life.
Lord, I desire that in all things your will may be done –
because it is your will, and your will is perfectly good.
I beg you to enlighten my understanding, to inflame my will,
to purify my body, and to sanctify my soul.
Amen.*

Richard Challoner (1691-1781)

Saturday, June 5: Acts 28:1-10

My friend, Irene, lived in an assisted-living community. She suffered from Crohn's disease, arthritis, and numerous other ailments. She always noticed when one of the other residents went into hospital. As soon as that resident returned, she was the first person at her neighbour's door, with her walker, and a bowl of hot soup. *"I can't do much,"* Irene would say, *"but I can do something. There's always someone a little worse off than me."*

Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost For His Highest*, writes: *"God's grace produces men and women with a strong family likeness to Jesus Christ, not pampered, spoiled weaklings."* That's worth reflecting on.

In Acts 27, *"everyone reached land in safety"* (27:44). Once ashore, God continues to protect Paul through the incident with a poisonous snake and the healing of Publius' father. Some people have taken the snake story to ridiculous extremes, believing it teaches we should handle poisonous snakes to prove our faith. For instance, George Went Hensley (1880–1955) traveled the Southeast USA promoting the practice, starting churches that required snake handling as evidence of salvation. If believers truly had the Holy Spirit within them, Hensley argued, they should be able to handle rattlesnakes and other venomous snakes. They should also be able to drink poison and suffer no harm whatsoever. In July 1955, Hensley died following a snakebite received during a service he was conducting in Florida. Oops.

Jesus, of course, dismisses such fanciful attempts to force God's hand: *"The Scriptures say, 'You must not test the LORD your God.'"* (Matthew 4:7).

Paul is still a prisoner, under Julius' watchful eye. Throughout the journey, and here on Malta, Paul rises above his "poor-me-I'm-a-prisoner" status to look out for the welfare of everyone. His warning and advice likely saved all 276 on the boat (27:30-31, 33-38). He goes on to care for the ill on Malta.

Even when we feel like our situation is desperate, we can still be a blessing to others. Like Irene, we can be encouragers. We can pray for people. Perhaps we can even provide practical help.

To whom can you be a blessing, today? We all have our own problems. But pray that God would help you see someone to whom you can be a blessing ... You will have a tremendous impact on the other person as you encourage them (however you do that). And it will also be blessing to your soul. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Pray and reflect on the truth of that statement ...

*Use me, my Saviour, for whatever purpose,
and in whatever way you may require.
Here is my poor heart, an empty vessel;
fill it with your grace.
Amen*

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

Sunday, June 6: Acts 28:11-31

New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, comments, *"When I was very young I used to sing, and sometimes I still do: 'Wounded for me, wounded for me; there on the cross he was wounded for me; Gone my transgressions, and now I am free; all because Jesus was wounded for me.'*

"But that freedom has a purpose. We are ransomed to be the royal priesthood. We now have a debt of love, and only love can repay it. There are tasks waiting to be done. Jesus has set us free so that, by the Spirit, we can begin them. Tasks of healing, and justice, and hope. Tasks of love and joy and peace. We learn the true story through which we are set free for those tasks; tasks that may perhaps include far, far better things to do than we have ever done."

Paul finally does get to Rome. He had hoped to travel to Rome on his own as a free man ([Romans 1:11-13, 15:23-33](#)). Those plans had not worked out. He arrives in Rome as a prisoner, many years after he intended. He has had five trials, a shipwreck, been bitten by a snake, and much more. Life has not worked out as he hoped. Amazingly, though, God accomplishes His plan, in His own time, in His own way.

What do you think Paul learned over recent months? Five trials? Threats to his life? Two years of prison in Caesarea? A wild sea journey? A shipwreck? A poisonous snake attack? Another sea voyage? House arrest in Rome?

When Paul shares the good news about Jesus with the Jewish leaders in Rome, most of them reject him. Does Paul give up? No. *"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ – with all boldness and without hindrance."* (Acts 28:30-31). Paul persists. He keeps the faith. He never gives up. He does share his faith with people in Rome. And he also writes the amazing letters we know as Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon

If Paul were to share his insights with you into who God is and how God works through life's circumstances, what do you think he would say?

Clara Barton (1821-1912), a self-taught nurse who cared for soldiers during the American Civil War, and founder of the American Red Cross, spent her life doing humanitarian work and civil rights advocacy. During the horrors of the U.S. Civil War, she said, *"I may be compelled to face danger, but never fear it, and while our soldiers can stand and fight, I can stand and feed and nurse them."* I think Paul could have identified with her sentiment. Though he faced danger, he never feared it. He kept on serving God. He kept finding opportunities to bring healing, justice, hope, love, joy, and peace.

In our circumstances, we can take on tasks of healing, justice, hope, love, joy, and peace, as well. If nothing else, we can stand and feed and care for those closest to us and those who are in need.

How can Paul's experiences and words be an encouragement to you?

*Here we are in front of you, Holy Spirit.
We feel the weight of our differences,
but we are united together in your name.
Come to us, help us, enter into our hearts.
Teach us what we should do, what path we should follow.
Do for us what you ask us to do.
Be the only one to offer and guide our decisions,
because only you – with the Father and the Son –
have a glorious and holy name.
Do not allow us to miss out on doing what is right,
O Spirit who loves order and peace.
Don't let ignorance lead us away from you.
Don't let human sympathy bias us.
Don't let people or positions influence us.
Keep us intimately close to you, using the gift of your grace,
so that we may be as one with you.
May nothing separate us from your love and from one another.
Amen.*

Isidore of Seville (560-636)