

I

On September 9, 1965, a US Navy fighter jet was shot down over North Vietnam. The pilot managed to eject, but he was severely injured and quickly captured and brought to the infamous prisoner of war camp known as the Hanoi Hilton.

While held prisoner, he was repeatedly interrogated, severely beaten, and denied even basic medical attention – for nearly eight years. Throughout his entire captivity, he was afforded none of the prisoner’s rights set forth in the Geneva Convention, had no set release date, and lived each day with no guarantee that he would ever see his family again.

He was finally released on February 12, 1973, and for his extraordinary courage and leadership, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1976. He went on to become a scholar, a university president, and candidate for the Vice Presidency of the United States. He died in 2005 at the age of 81. His name was Rear Admiral Jim Stockdale.

Author Jim Collins recounts once meeting Admiral Stockdale and asking him about how he endured such a brutal season of life. Admiral Stockdale replied, “I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the

experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

After a long pause, Collins asked Stockdale about his fellow prisoners who did not make it out.

“Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “The optimists. They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

After another long pause, Stockdale said this, “This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”¹

II

Friends, I don’t have to tell you that we have no shortage of brutal facts in our current reality. I can’t remember the last time when we had what I would consider a slow news day, can you?

The question for us as we gather here this morning is this: Do we have faith in the end of the story? And if we

¹

<https://www.jimcollins.com/concepts/Stockdale-Concept.html>, accessed August 31, 2021.

do, on what grounds to we make those claims?

Those are the kinds of questions that are before us in our reading from Acts this morning.

III

This spring and summer, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Book of Acts, and as we've said all along, Acts can really be read as the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Luke tells the story of the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and Acts tells the story with the ascension of Jesus, the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the commissioning of the church to be Christ's witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem and then spreading out to the ends of the earth.

Today we come to the final story in the book, and once again, our story is centered on a man named Paul. Paul was once the chief persecutor and prosecutor of the church, but God has this habit of taking the most unlikely people and turning them into the chief agents of God's mission, and such has become the case with Paul. Paul has now become the most important missionary, evangelist, and theologian of the first century.

Paul was someone who might be said to have held dual citizenship. Paul was born and raised as a faithful first-century Jew, and he was formally educated in Jerusalem. Paul was an expert in Jewish law and practice. But Paul also was a Roman citizen, which

afforded him legal rights and protections that were not available to just anyone.

Last week, we heard about how Paul had returned from one of his many missionary journeys to Jerusalem, and while he was worshipping in the Temple, some of his enemies began to accuse him of all kinds of false things. Seeing that a riot was about to break out, the Roman security forces arrested Paul, and when they discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen, they escorted him under heavy guard out of Jerusalem to the Roman provincial capital of Caesarea Maritima.

Last week, we listened in as Paul made his defense before the Roman governor named Felix, and when we left off the story, Felix had decided to leave Paul in prison for two more years, even though Paul had done nothing deserving of punishment.

Felix was replaced by a governor named Festus, and Festus, too, questioned Paul. Paul's enemies continued to try to persuade Festus that Paul should be executed, and so Paul played his Roman citizenship card and appealed to Festus that his case should be heard by Emperor Caesar himself in Rome.

Paul's journey from Caesarea Maritima to Rome was not an easy one. He was taken in chains aboard ship, but the ship was blown off course by a severe storm and the passengers, prisoners, and crew were lost at sea and without food for two weeks. The ship

finally wrecked upon some rocks off the island of Malta, and while some people swam to shore, other passengers and prisoners were forced to float to dry land on planks and pieces of the broken ship. Once on dry land, while Paul was gathering brush to make a fire, a viper bit his hand, and the native people thought it was a sign that Paul was cursed. But when Paul suffered no ill effects, they changed his mind and thought Paul was a god.

Paul and his traveling companions stayed on Malta for three months before finally boarding another ship, and after great difficulty, they finally made it to the Italian peninsula and traveled overland to the city of Rome.

And so that's where we pick up our story today. Paul has arrived in Rome, and while he awaits his trial date with the Emperor, Paul has called together the Jewish leaders living in the city of Rome to share the good news about Jesus with them.

So listen now for a Word from God from Acts 28:17-31.

After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. So they disagreed with each other; and as they

were leaving, Paul made one further statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

'Go to this people and say,

You will indeed listen, but never understand,

and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

For this people's heart has grown dull,

and their ears are hard of hearing,

and they have shut their eyes;

so that they might not look with their eyes,

and listen with their ears,

and understand with their heart and turn—

and I would heal them.'

Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."

He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This is where the story of Acts ends. This is where the credits for both Luke and Acts roll. The saga ends with Paul living in Rome for two more years, preaching and teaching about Jesus to

anyone who will listen while awaiting his trial date with the Emperor.

We don't know if Paul ever got to have that audience. It's something of a cliffhanger ending. But the final two words in the text are "without hindrance," or, put another way, "unhindered."

That's the final word in the story – in the two-volumes we have as the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles. After all is said and done, the final word for Luke is unhindered.

As Luke sat down to write the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, he wasn't writing a history book. He wasn't writing a travelogue or a legal thriller. He was writing gospel news to a small, frightened community facing some brutal facts and fighting for its life.

Throughout the Book of Acts, Luke pulls no punches about the struggles of the early church. There were brutal facts to be faced, inside and out. There were internal problems like disagreements about finances and decisions to be made about roles and responsibilities and hard conversations about the community's boundaries and norms. But the gospel went on unhindered.

There were external threats, too – persecutions and pressure and outright violence. Arrests on false charges. Imprisonments. Beatings. Starvation. Shipwreck. Snakebites. But the gospel went on, unhindered.

Luke confronts the brutal facts. He pulls no punches, and some of it is very hard to read. And yet, despite all the dysfunction and infighting, despite all the brokenness and sin, despite all the threats and violence and the attempts by the fallen powers and principalities of this world to squelch it and squash it, the final word is unhindered.

IV

My friend, perhaps there are some brutal, unpleasant facts about your present reality. Maybe those brutal facts have nothing to do with all of the things in the headlines, but that doesn't make them any less brutal.

And oh, how I wish I could fix it for you. How I wish I had a magic wand that could make it all go away. How I wish I could guarantee you a date to circle on your calendar and tell you, if you can just hang on until then, everything will turn out alright.

But I can't offer you any of that, my friend. All I can offer you is this. I've read the last page in the book. I know how the story of God and God's people ultimately ends. And so I have faith that you will prevail.

You will prevail, my friend, not because of your ability to pull yourself up by your bootstraps or gut it out. You will prevail not because of the power of technology or because the right candidate got elected to office or because of any human endeavor.

You will prevail because of how the gospel story ends. You will prevail because the gospel story says us that the worst possible thing that can happen to you, as brutal as it may be, is not the final thing. You will prevail because you are a child of the Most High God, and God loves you not because of anything you've said or not said, not because of anything you've done or not done, not because of your ability to change the facts before you or your ability to gut it out. God loves you because you belong to God. Full stop.

The gospel remains unhindered, and so I have faith in how your story will end. Because of the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus, whether your immediate facts change soon or whether they don't, in the end, you will prevail.

V

As we live out our discipleship in Jesus together here at First Presbyterian Church, in our common life together, we are faced with some unpleasant facts. As recently as the Fourth of July, I thought the pandemic was mostly behind us. The statewide and local emergency orders were lifted, and the sadness and fear and uncertainty that loomed over everything seemed to be a thing of the past.

But August brought a different story. And here we are on the first Sunday of September. And plans that were carefully made by elders and staff are being reworked yet again. We are uncertain about what the rest of the Fall

will look like, and there are a variety of opinions about the best way forward.

We are all tired of the present reality. We are all uncertain about the future, and our last remaining nerves were clipped long ago.

Nevertheless, we will prevail. Not because of the ingenuity of the leadership. Not because past performance is a guarantee of future results. Not because of any human effort.

We will prevail because we know how the gospel story ends. We will prevail because we've read the last page of the book.

Someone once said that within the biblical story, you and I find ourselves living between the end of Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation.

And even now, even in this season, the work of the gospel goes on.

In every church around the world, including this one, the story continues to be told.

Women and men and children bear witness to the risen Christ.

They continue to devote themselves to prayer and fellowship and the breaking of the bread.

There are challenges inside and out. There are brutal facts that must be faced head on.

But while we wait for Christ's return, we welcome all who come.

We proclaim the kingdom of God.

We teach about the Lord Jesus
Christ with all boldness.

And the good news about Jesus
remains to this very day,

Unhindered.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.