



“Somebody’s Knocking”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

May 4, 2005

Acts 12:1-19

Our Scripture lesson comes from the book of Acts 12:1-19. This text occurs after Peter's revelation of last week - that God made no one clean or unclean - and then traveled after the conversion of Cornelius and his house to Jerusalem, where he met the other disciples. Parallel to this time is the story of the thriving young church at Antioch, guided by the leadership of Paul and Barnabas.

“About the time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread). When he had seized him he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, “Fasten your Belt and put on your sandals.” He did so. Then he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting. As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, “You are out of your mind!” But she insisted that it was so. They said, “It is his angel.” Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, “Tell this to James and to the believers.” Then he left and went to another place. When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death. Then Peter went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.”

For all practical purposes it would seem as though the prophecy of Psalm Two had come to pass, “why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed...” For one of the first times, the civil and religious authorities of the day actually agreed upon an issue, that there was something very dangerous about this Jesus movement that had to be stopped.

So Herod killed James, the brother of John, seized and incarcerated Peter. In the Greek it is literally, ‘stretched out his hand to do evil’ against Peter and, one could speculate, intended to deliver the same demise met by his friend in the faith. This was King Herod of Agrippa, just to clarify. Successor of Herod Antipas, who draped Jesus with a beautiful robe after taunting and mocking him, and sent him to Pilot to be tried and crucified, who was successor of Herod the

Great, who ordered every male child to be killed in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth so as to avoid competition for his throne. Quite a namesake, isn't it?

By all accounts, we would have agreed with Peter and the disciples gathered in Mary's home that the situation looked pretty grim. Luke takes pains to intensify the hopelessness—spelling out in meticulous detail that Peter, the disciple who loved Christ passionately, who denied him, who would be the father of his church, was bound with two chains, between two sleeping guards, with more waiting by the door. One would have to be a David Copperfield to get out of here.

The irony is not lost on the reader that this incarceration of Peter should be initiated by Herod to preserve the purity of the Passover feast - a celebration commemorating God's liberation of Israel from captivity in Egypt. Nice work, Herod. But rather than take up arms against a sea of mounting troubles to liberate their captive friend, the disciples gather to pray. It is a logical and faithful response - the only weapon they were given to defend Peter from Herod's treacherous hands, some words whispered to God by a hidden few, words that must somehow break shackles, defeat guards, pick locks, make feet swift and turn eyes in the other direction at just at just the right time - what is prayer, after all, against the power of the world?

Well, turns out it's something. An angel of the Lord is sent to free Peter. I picture something like a heavenly MacGyver coming to the rescue, loosening chains, opening prison doors, and eluding a sophisticated security system with a halo.

And the irony is multiplied as those very individuals who should understand God's power to liberate better than anyone, who have themselves experienced the ultimate liberation, don't believe their eyes and ears when their answered prayer comes knocking at their door. Peter himself, who has certainly seen his share of God's handiwork, is in disbelief for the entire first half of the escape scene. Not until he is out in the street and the angel dismissed does he realize this is not a dream.

And this would not be the first time that a woman in the New Testament would bring unexpected and good news of a life restored from the clutches of the grave only to be told by the disciples that she was out of her mind. It wouldn't be the first time that God had defeated death only to be met by skeptics when we all would have perhaps expected much more of them.

But can't we too, if we're being honest, relate to the unbelieving disciples? Can't we too identify with that little band of Christians who huddled behind closed doors, fearful of the evil hand of Herod and his soldiers, incredulous that any power, even the power of God, could prevail against such a hand?¹ And in our incredulity we dismiss the blessing? I wonder how many times I, at least, have missed the answer to my own prayers because I was too busy praying them.

Famed Buddhist monk and Christian sympathizer Tich Nhat Hanh writes "For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them. He told a story about this. A young widower, who loved his five-year-old son very much, was away on business, and bandits came, burned down his whole village, and took his son away. When the man

¹ William Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, Atlanta, John Knox, 1988, p. 113.

returned, he saw the ruins, and panicked. He took the charred remains of his house thinking that in them was the remains of his own child, and began to pull his hair and beat his chest, crying uncontrollably. He organized a cremation ceremony, collected the ashes and put them in a very beautiful velvet bag. Working sleeping, eating, he always carried the bag of ashes with him. One day his son escaped from the robbers and found his way home. He arrived at his father's new cottage at midnight, and knocked at the door. You can imagine at that time, the young father was still carrying the bag of ashes, and crying. He asked, "Who is there?" And the child answered, "It's me, Father. Open the door, it's your son." In his agitated state of mind the father thought that some miscellaneous boy was making fun of him, and he shouted at the child to go away, and he continued to cry. The boy knocked again and again, but the father refused to let him in. Some time passed and finally the child left. From that time on, father and son never saw one another.

Sometime, somewhere you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will not open it. Have we ourselves not come to expect so little of the power of God? Resigned ourselves to the fact that the world will have its way, offering fervent prayers without believing that an answer could ever really come? And yet we worship the God of Exodus. The Christ of the gospels who proclaims that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, anointed him to preach the gospel to the poor, has sent him to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord. Whose commission is fulfilled in a free man banging on the door of the church to tell the gathered disciples that all the power in the world cannot stop the gospel of Jesus Christ.² This is why they call us a people of hope. Because we refuse to let the situation of the world define or resign our truths, for that is God's work. And his provision is knocking on our door each and every day.

Tomorrow we will gather in this place to celebrate the National Day of Prayer, whose roots trace back to prayers for our nation offered by the Continental Congress in 1775 and we recall that neither height nor depth, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor principalities nor anything else in all of creation will be able to stop God's work in our lives and in this world. That Herod's grip has no hold here. And we will be challenged to believe it.

Today we will return to the table, as we do time and again, to recall the days when death's prison doors were sprung and to thank God that they are being sprung still today. Whether you are feeling amazed and unbelieving, or confounded or defeated by the overwhelming powers around you, around us all, somebody's knocking at your door. And it's up to you to open it.

Amen.

² Ibid.