

Sunday March 23rd, 2025

Lent III

Acts 28:17-28

Series: Lessons from the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Rome"

A man was making his way to the check-in counter at the airport. It was a lengthy wait, but eventually he was received by the desk clerk. The man informed the clerk that he wished to buy a ticket to fly to Miami, with stop overs in Seattle, Denver and Houston. He also wanted his luggage to go to Europe, by way of Singapore. The stunned desk clerk replied. "Sir, I can't book you a ticket with those kinds of destinations?"

To which the man replied, "Why not? That is the trip I received the last time I flew with you." Traveling is always a challenging experience. We experience crowded airplanes, busy airports, lost luggage, customs problems, delayed flights, poor airline food if you get any at all, and it seems traveling by boat, train, or car is not much better. Some people say that the journey is half the fun of any trip. Obviously, these people have never traveled with small children.

Today marks the end of our journey through the early church. We have seen and heard some amazing things, in exotic places like: Jerusalem, Athens and Ephesus. Our journey, while only a few weeks in length, was several years for Paul, and his companions. We also have seen that while our traveling experiences can be fraught with challenges, Paul and his companions face real hardship, sometimes life-threatening hardship, in making their way.

In the interim between Troas and Rome, Paul finally arrived at Jerusalem, against the wishes of the Holy Spirit. For we read in Acts 21:4 that some believers in Tyre in Syria, during a stopover, prophesied that Paul should not go to Jerusalem. In Caesarea a prophet named Agabas also spoke the words of the Holy Spirit that Paul would be arrested and sent to Rome. Yet, Paul defied the Holy Spirit and went to Jerusalem anyway.

In Paul's missionary journeys, he faced being jailed, being flogged, shipwrecks, fierce opposition, and in this chapter today snake bite, and let's not forget those riots. The birth pains of the early church were intense, and this raises a valuable point. I am compelled to point out that anyone who questions the validity of the gospel message, especially about Jesus' death and resurrection, must explain why the apostles, including Paul, would willingly suffer all that they did, if they did not fully believe their message was true.

All of them were martyred, and you do not willingly accept martyrdom for a myth. Today, Luke ends his travel journal, in the center of political power and influence, Rome. Paul had long desired to go to Rome to spread the Gospel, and he says as much in his letter to the Romans, which was written before he got to Rome. Paul was sent to Rome by King Agrippa, and Governor Festus, who heard the Jewish charges against him in Jerusalem.

It is odd that the trip to Rome could have been avoided altogether, because in Acts 26:32, Festus and Agrippa were prepared to let Paul go but could not because Paul had appealed to Caesar. Can you see the intentionality of Paul's actions here? He seems to be going out of his way to be arrested and sent off in chains to Rome. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to appeal any arrest or conviction to Caesar, and this earned him a free ticket by sea.

Sunday March 23rd, 2025
Lent III

This appeal by Paul was kind of like how Canadians can, under certain circumstances, appeal a legal matter to the Supreme Court. So, off Paul goes by sea to Rome as one of 276 people on board, including his armed escort. However, it is wintertime, and a “northeaster” blows in for fourteen straight days making sea travel perilous, and we read that they were shipwrecked on the island of Malta and remained there for three months. The account of the shipwreck is quite harrowing and well worth reading.

Paul rises to the occasion, keeping everyone calm, and even urging them to eat, promising that not one of them would perish. During the time on the island of Malta we read that while making a fire, Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake, but didn’t even swell up from the bite. Finally, after all this, Paul arrives in Rome, and is placed under house arrest, with a guard posted to watch him. Even though he is under house arrest, Paul can still receive visitors, and Paul invites some Jewish leaders to come to see him. This raises an immediate question.

If you will remember from our visit to Corinth, Pricilla and Aquila were expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius because they were Jews. How come these leaders could come and see Paul? Why are they still in Rome? The fact, of the matter, is that it appears the decree of Claudius has over time, seemed to have lapsed. So, Jews returned to Rome, or came out of hiding, to resume their lives, including the administration of a synagogue.

Paul explains to these leaders that he wishes to tell them why he is in chains, and thus he begins his defense. The reason Paul wanted to meet with the synagogue leaders may be more about his upcoming legal trial than evangelism. It is possible Paul wanted to keep the Jewish leadership neutral in his upcoming trial; by explaining he has not harmed Judaism in any way. The tone of the interchange, and the others that follow, tell us that at least some Jewish leaders likely sided with Paul’s enemies.

The explanation Paul gives is necessary, because although Paul claims he has done nothing wrong, he is in chains and under house arrest. Clearly, someone, somewhere, thought he was wrong. It would be akin to us meeting someone on the street wearing an orange prison jump suit, who insists on explaining that they have done nothing wrong. We would be somewhat skeptical, would we not?

It is interesting, I think, that the Jewish leaders report that they know nothing about Paul, and his missionary work. This is an awkward and unbelievable thing to say. Why? Well, the church of Christ was present already in Rome, as we know from Paul’s letter to them. The church in Rome would have included Jews, so the beliefs of the church would have been known to these leaders. Some commentators state they believe these leaders were lying, and they knew much more than they let on, but perhaps they hoped by pleading ignorance they could find out for themselves what Paul was all about.

They report they have received no “official” letters, or reports, detailing the charges against Paul. Now this may be true, but they likely knew plenty, and they can’t help themselves by putting in a little dig at Paul, by stating that the only thing they have heard is that Christians are denounced everywhere. In other words, in Rome, Christians have a bad reputation. Paul goes on to try and set the record straight with these leaders, telling them the truth about his faith and experience.

Sunday March 23rd, 2025
Lent III

Then Luke tells us that for the next two years, Paul receives visitors in his home and takes every opportunity to share the Gospel. Luke says matter-of-factly that some believed, some did not, and many argued with Paul, and amongst themselves, about the Christian faith. With all this recorded, Luke puts down his pen, and that is all we know from the bible about Paul. From historical records, we do know Paul was eventually beheaded in Rome.

He could not be crucified, because it was against Roman law to crucify a citizen. Peter, on the other hand, comes himself to Rome and is crucified, and tradition states he was crucified upside down claiming he was not worthy to die upright like Jesus. There are some scholars who believe Paul eventually went to Spain, but there is no definitive proof he ever made such a journey. To me Rome seems like a more fitting end to this chapter of the church's story. The battleground for the hearts and minds of the known world, in those days, needed to be fought at the very heart of power.

If you win Rome, Paul believed you can win the world. Now we know that off and on for the next three hundred years, the early church suffered terribly for their faith. Not until Constantine becomes emperor, does the intense persecution in Rome come to an end, and the church begins to become institutionalized. However, let's get back to Paul in our passage today and make perhaps one of the most important points of our journey through the early church.

How did Paul keep his sanity intact through all of this? Everything about his travels, from conversion to martyrdom, Paul faces obstacles that would have sent most of us scurrying away. Surely God was with him, and the Holy Spirit gave Paul strength and the ability to preach boldly about Christ. Yet, when we examine his life, and the life of the early followers of Jesus, we learn a valuable and critical lesson about the nature of faith itself.

Faith, that is true faith in Jesus, is bigger than any one of us. The modern, evangelical church, of which we are a part, often stresses the individual, personal nature of faith. The point being that as an individual, we all need to make a personal commitment to Christ and promise to follow him. In some church circles, it is a critical thing to be able to state categorically when you were "saved". This is a subject we can look at another time.

Yes, we all need to make a personal confession of faith, but the personal nature of faith ends there. The moment we accept Christ, is the moment we set aside our own opinions, interests, and agendas to pursue the will of God. This I believe is why Paul could keep going, and why, even while under house arrest, he called people into meeting with him to share the faith. The faith to which we belong is bigger than any one of us.

The faith that is transforming us is also transforming communities, cities, countries and the world. We saw a fuller picture of this when we visited Ephesus just recently. The gospel of Christ, and the faith it prompts, is greater than the failings and faults of people. In Paul's letter to the Philippians written while in prison, Paul talks about the transcending nature of the gospel, he writes as follows...

"Some are preaching out of jealousy and rivalry. But others preach about Christ with pure motives."

Sunday March 23rd, 2025

Lent III

They preach because they love me, for they know the Lord brought me here to defend the Good News. Those others do not have pure motives as they preach about Christ. They preach with selfish ambition, not sincerely, intending to make my chains more painful to me. But whether their motives are pure, the fact remains that the message about Christ is being preached, so I rejoice.” (Phil. 1:15-18)

Wow! Even when people use the Gospel for their own purposes, the message of Christ still penetrates hearts. There are two lessons from this that are encouraging. The first is that we should all take great confidence in the power of the Gospel, and the transcending nature of faith. Even our fumbled attempts to share the love of Christ will not be in vain. The Holy Spirit will still use us, even if we are not great orators.

He can use us even if we are housebound like Paul. It is not about addressing excuses we use to avoid sharing our faith, it never has been. It is about confidence. Confidence in Christ, and what he has done for us and through us. Do we believe the Gospel? Do we believe it is bigger than we are?

The second thing that encourages us, is that no matter the personal challenges we face, we can still be used by God to impact lives. Whether we are ill, physically challenged, poor, rich, older, younger, shipwrecked, and snake bit, God can still use us. I find it amazing that in my frailty, God can do some amazing things. There are several times in my life that I have preached, visited someone, or just talked with someone, and felt I had really blown it.

I mean, really messed up the opportunity. Then surprise, surprise, God blesses me by having someone come and tell me how much God spoke to them through me. It is simply the wonder and sovereignty of God’s grace. As Paul writes, “When I am weak, then I am strong”. How many times have we experienced the feeling that we just can’t do any more for God, only to be obedient and get the job done to find out it is our greatest work for his glory?

How many times have we wondered about the value of attending a service, visiting a sick friend, offering a meal, only to receive back a shower of gratitude? Faith is bigger than anyone of us and all of us combined. And having followed the adventure of Paul through the book of Acts, one may wonder what exactly we are offering to people, from this faith we so lovingly hold onto, and commit our resources to.

One of America’s most prominent preachers, Fred Craddock, enjoyed telling stories to make very profound points. Kind of a man after my own heart. One of his stories is about an uncle of his who rescued a greyhound dog from the racetrack. You see, when the racing days of these dogs is over, the dogs are usually euthanized, unless someone adopts them. Greyhounds make wonderful pets, especially for young families.

Fred Craddock writes, “One day I visited my uncle, and there was that dog he had just adopted, lying in the middle of the floor playing with the kids. The kids were rolling around on the floor, hugging the dog; the dog was licking their faces, and they were all having a grand time.” Fred says, “I looked at the dog and I said, ‘Dog, how come you’re not racing anymore? Have you gotten too old?’”

Sunday March 23rd, 2025

Lent III

He imagined the dog replying, “Nope, I’m a young dog. I’m still young enough to race.” So, Fred says, “Dog, maybe you weren’t winning races anymore. Is that why you aren’t racing?” “Nope,” says the dog, “I can still win races. I’m faster than most dogs out there on the track. I was winning right up until I stop racing.” “Well, maybe you weren’t making enough money for your master.” “Oh, no,” said the dog. “I was making a lot of money for my master.”

“Then why did you stop racing?” asked Fred. And the dog responded, “Because one day I realized that the rabbit I was chasing wasn’t real.” (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p. 164) Isn’t that the story of most people in this world? They are chasing rabbits that are not real, but just like the dog we imagined speaking, these same people don’t realize that their rabbits aren’t real. You and I, if we carry the faith of Christ in us, know what is real. At least I hope so.

I recognize that even if we do possess faith in Christ, we still occasionally can’t help ourselves but gear up to chase a rabbit or two. But like Paul, we need to remember what is truly important, and vital to this world. Hopefully the words Luke used to sum up Paul’s life and work can be said of us. “He welcomed all who visited him, proclaiming the Kingdom of God with all boldness and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him.” (Acts 28:30-31)

May no one stop us either.