

Acts 12:1-25: Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth IV: Peter In and Out of Prison

Introduction:

Today's passage, more than some we've seen, reveals Luke, oh, marking time. Narrating world events that do deeply matter for the Church, but aren't as interesting to many of us, who read with a deeply personal, sometimes congregational, lens, rather than, say, a historical one. Most of us don't think to ourselves, "Whatever happened to Herod?" But for the early Church, what happened to Herod was a huge deal. We'll see that today. First let's pray.

Prayer:

On Reading Thoughtfully:

When we read Luke, here, we'll read "The Jews" a lot.

And, look: I honestly think a better translation would be "Judeans" because it would locate us in the historical moment Luke's writing about. Christendom has done a terrible, terrible job protecting Jewish minorities. Instead, the Church has generally created them, oppressed them, and in Jesus' name, killed them. That's just not great. It's sin, and evil. And we

can talk about, oh, ways the Church has resisted this in history, and moments when evil people have manipulated Christians into treating Jewish people as enemies.

All of that's relevant. But I can't help, not only this side of the Holocaust, but also in a moment when every objective measurer is noting the rise of anti-Jewish, white supremacist movements worldwide, and in America, too, I can't help feel a little squirmy reading as Luke talks about "the Jews," because he is turning a word that is morally-neutral, an ethno-geographic term, into a term for an antagonist. An enemy. Peter was Jewish, James was Jewish. But they are not, as far as Luke is concerned, the "Jews" that he feels free to deride.

We always should be sensitive to moments when a morally-neutral term for another person, a descriptive term, is turned into a bad word. And we don't get to go back in time and make a word morally-neutral after society has used it pejoratively. We don't have that power. We have to roll with language as it changes. So I really am uncomfortable with the way Luke uses "the Jews" to describe "bad people." I kind of think we all ought to be.

And I'm dismayed that I have to remind us that the specific "Jews" Luke talks about here are the "Judeans" who are in Jerusalem who are antagonizing the Church, not our neighbors, coworkers, people around who happen to have Jewish lineage.

A Herod-based Outline:

Among these, most significantly in today's passage, is Herod.

Herod was a nasty piece of work, frankly. A self-interested, murderous dictator, who himself was just a puppet of Rome, which seems to have only made him more sneaky and evil. I've given us an insert about Herod if we want to read about him. But Herod is basic to today's passage.

Stories about Herod, what he does and doesn't or can't do, they bookend the chapter. More or less the chapter is about Herod's failure.

Today's passage is easy to outline. There's a beginning, a middle, and an end.

vv1-4: Herod Acts Against the Church

vv5-18: God Rescues Peter From Herod
vv19-24: God Acts Against Herod

I mean, if you're looking for a moral, there it is, embedded in the structure of Acts 12: Don't act against the Church, because God will help it, and you'll be punished.

Beginning:

We heard how today's passage starts already:

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. 3 When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 4 After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

We've lost another of the original twelve Apostles, now. Judas had killed himself; James, John's brother, one of the "Sons of Thunder," has been killed by

Herod. And Herod's base loved it! So he snagged another Apostle, this time Peter. And he does this during Passover, one of those three important pilgrimage feasts in Judaism. Peter's thrown into prison. Herod's going to have him killed as sort of a Passover bonus, a "gimme" to these most faithful Jewish believers, the ones who've traveled to Jerusalem on their own dime, and who follow their priests and elders who've been equating faithfulness with stamping out this growing Church. Everyone will love it! Ratings will soar. He's going for it.

Middle: Rush

6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

I have no idea why the Angel makes Peter rush, here. Can't the Angel just, you know, slow down time or something? Make everyone fall asleep? And actually,

the Angel does just that. But there's something about forcing Peter to respond that matters, I think. We learn that Peter actually thinks he's having a vision, like the vision we talked about earlier. I think the Angel makes him hustle because I think Peter would just sort of...watch stuff, barely participate otherwise.

8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. 9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

Middle: Monologuing

I love that Peter “came to himself.” He’s outside the jail. The Angel’s gone. This wasn’t a vision, this was real...and he realizes it. And so he monologues, which is a possible response one can have, I guess: “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.” Peter always seems to declare what he’s just learned about God in Acts. I don’t know why. He’s a verbal processor.

What we realize is that Peter realizes his belief about God is different, this side of Jesus, than it was. Religiously, he’s no longer Jewish. Culturally he is. And how to be culturally Jewish, while religiously Christian...well, it comes up.

Peter goes to Mary, the mother of John Mark’s house. Mary was a popular name; this is the first and last time we meet this one. John Mark we’ll learn about soon. The Church is meeting there, praying. And Rhoda, a servant, clearly also a Christian, answers the door. She recognizes Peter, and is super excited. She runs back in the room, interrupts prayer, declares Peter’s out there:

15 “You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

Middle: “It must be his angel.”

What it means when they say “It must be his angel” is hard to talk about well. By the time Jesus and the early Church existed there were, oh, theologies about angels. Grades and groups and kinds. There was a whole angelic construct, you know? We typically don’t know it, and the New Testament gives some voice and insight into it, because the earliest Church inherited it from their Jewish roots. But it’s generally not treated as deeply central to Christian faith and life, especially in the more pragmatic branches of Protestantism, which is where we basically fall. There are fascinating things to say about the angelic world, things I deeply appreciate, and yet...you know, in my experience, those who have been really, really into angel studies, fascinated by angels, tend to be a little...unusual. Weird in the way anyone passionate about a niche thing is weird. We all have our Christian interests and obsessions, I guess.

Here, what the Church is most likely giving voice to is the idea that Peter has what we'd think of as a guardian angel, a divine creature whose job is, more or less, to protect Peter in some way, be perhaps some sort of advocate on Peter's behalf in the unseen spiritual dimension of life. And it would be natural, in their way of considering this, that Peter's angel would look like Peter. Be almost a spiritual avatar of sorts. (cf. Wall 2002 180, note 452). And they'd most likely suspect Peter's angel was there to communicate that Peter had died. They'd had some sort of collective vision; Rhoda had been the one to see the Angel. If that sound far-fetched, it's because it's more far-fetched that Peter escaped from Herod.

But the knocking doesn't stop.

16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

Spread the word. God saved me!

End: Understatement

But there's still Herod, right?

18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 19 After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

A violent person could read this and say, "Well. This is what happens when you collaborate with evil. The guards got their just desserts." But that's not Luke's point, which is that Herod's the bad guy here. What Luke wants us to focus on here is just how ruthless Herod is.

End: Herod's Death

And Herod leaves Judea. Geopolitical things take place. Judea is in conflict with Tyre and Sidon, but their ambassadors submit to him, because they're already in famine. They need the Empire to supplement their food. Herod has an alliance with a guy who has influence with the Roman Emperor and can keep the food flowing. So Herod's on top, you know? He's

playing politics and winning. He's gone to Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast to arrange all this. He gets out in front of the crowd. And this is what we read:

End: End

21 On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. 22 They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." 23 Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

24 But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

If this were one of those scary old-fashioned German bedtime stories, we'd close the book and say, "And *liebling*, that is why we don't let people worship us." And one way to end this message would be talk about what it means to be humble before the Lord, and remember that we're creatures, not self-created, even if everything's coming up aces for us, we have the right alliances, and people think we're amazeballs.

Measuring Time:

Given that we just don't have much time this morning to explore all we could, What I'd like to do instead is this: I'd like us to see the way Luke uses Peter's miraculous release here.

Luke uses Peter's escape to mark time. He uses it to show that God can't stop Herod. And so when Herod allows people to claim he's divine, is equal to god and worse, part of the Roman pantheon of pagan gods, we know it's as about as bad as a monotheistic Jewish king can go, even if we ignore the killing that Herod does here, and has done before.

Luke marks time in today's passage with murder and with miracles. With murder and with miracles. This is how we measure Herod's time after Jesus. He kills people, but God interrupts his plans, and ultimately interrupts his life.

Evil and Good make up today's scene. We see evil in the killing, in the silencing of those we disagree with, in treating others as entertainment, in using others so that we can gather honor to ourselves, and in playing God. We see good in this, particularly: Responding to God as quickly as we can when God intervenes in our

lives.

And it is in Peter's quick response that his freedom is revealed, his release is actualized. He doesn't hesitate, he doesn't even know if what's going on is real. But the one who he recognized was from God, he listened to, trusting God was behind the moment, no matter how unreal it felt.

If we wanted to frame today's passage another way, we could frame it in this way: Are you responsive to God? Herod wasn't anymore. He had so given himself over to meeting his own needs, protecting his own power, that he had lost his capacity to respond to God in any positive way. He could respond, I suppose, but only as an antagonist. Peter did as God as asked even when he didn't think it was real. That's how ready he was to do what God wanted. He rolled with it, went with the flow, because he thought God was the one in charge of the current. Both of these two characters have given themselves over to a certain kind of caricature Herod, negatively, a self-made player, hustling alliances, getting his way, Peter, positively, always ready to do whatever God might ask of him. We're usually somewhere in between. In the middle of whatever plot-line we think is running through our lives.

The thing about marking time with murder and miracles, about keeping plot moving with tragedy and with providence is that we still do it. We still mark our lives, measure and record and remember our own stories, with tragedy and with providence. And just like in today's story, it is sometimes the case that providence follows tragedy, but not always.

Reflection For the Sake of Knowing Our Own Stories:

So, I'm going to ask us to consider: What are the tragedies, now, that we're marking time with. What tragedies are we measuring our days by? And where are we seeing the providence, even the miraculousness, of God?

And I ask us to consider these things for a few reasons.

First, life has a way of distracting ourselves from ourselves. That is, we forget to attend to the things that are most critically shaping us and our responses to life. It's in remembering the tragedies we've faced, and the providence of God we've experienced, and looking at how we've responded to these, that we

discover who we really are, not the idealized version of ourselves that we so often pretend to be. And unless we are who we are, there will be aspects of our lives that we keep hidden from God, from ourselves, from mercy and redemption and

Secondly, if we really have questions about what's next for us, then we have to remember what's behind us. We create a sense of plot, a story, of our lives. It's how we make meaning of all the things that have happened to us. We do this before God, with others, but we'll have a much more difficult time considering our future, if we're neglecting the past we've lived through, which has brought us to this present moment.

Lastly, I think it's up to us, somehow, as a "kingdom of priests," as those who intercede on behalf of one another, and who speak for those who have no voices, I think it's somehow important for us to grieve tragedy, our own and others, and celebrate providence, our own and others. If we don't, I think we give up a rare gift that God's given us, which is to sit with the world as if it's in hospice, or as if we're at the end of a long birthday party, a quiet vacation evening or the moment of a wake. That is, we give up being present with those who need our presence in tragedy

or in providence.

Let's consider these things, if we can.