

Actual Message: Acts 25

Catching Up:

People of God!

We left last week with Paul himself left in Jail. Proconsul Felix has moved on; a new Proconsul named Festus has arrived. Felix, for all his interest in what Paul had to say, leaves him under house-arrest--palace arrest, really--in Caesarea, the coastal capital of the Judean Province.

We're in the end of Acts. God's moving Paul from Jerusalem and Judea to the center of the Gentile world, Rome, and the seat of the Empire. Today's passage continues that journey.

Honestly, we'll see more of what we've seen already. That's okay. We won't linger much in that stuff, but I'll mention again why it matters. Today's passage is a turning point in Paul's journey though, one he cannot go back from. We'll talk about this more than we do other things. I'm looking forward to it!

Let's pray.

Prayer:

Paul, Festus, & Agrippa:

There are three main actors in today's passage. Paul, Festus, and Agrippa. Caesar hovers in the background. The

Chief Priests and elders hover around, making noise. Bernice is there, and we can't forget her: She's Agrippa's sister, and will go on to almost become the Empress of the entire Roman Empire. But the action, the action and reaction comes mostly from these three.

Echoes: Ugh. Again?!

And today's plot-line isn't much different from what we saw in Acts 24, which wasn't much different from what we saw in Acts 23. Things are starting to bleed together, you know? There's a "Didn't we hear this already?" vibe with today's passage especially, because, you know, it's the third time this whole thing's gone down. Paul is accused by Jerusalem's and Judaism's religious leaders, and defends himself by telling the same story of his calling and his convictions that we've heard before.

And it's all very meta why this matters. Maybe we should, as readers, begin to feel a little indifferent to what happens today. Paul again being charged, again being a political pawn, again making his defense, again. It can be frustrating to have to basically re-read something. And yet: it's not tedious for Paul, right? It's like Paul's stuck in a reoccurring dream, doing the same things over and over to no avail. We get tired of having to hear it, or tune it out entirely; Paul couldn't escape what he was stuck in the middle of. One thing to take from this repetition is just how over it we are, how quick we are to detach from something that doesn't stimulate us, isn't novel or disarming. Our frustration with

having to hear this whole thing again is nothing compared to the frustration Paul is having as he experiences it for years on end.

Applying: Ugh!

Now, how we apply that: I don't know. If we need to feel a little guilty about our need for stimulation, feel guilty about it, I guess. If we need a chance to reflect on why and when we disengage, reflect on it. If we need reminded that we don't have it that bad, that's never bad. If this is all irrelevant, then that's fine, too; I'm okay with it. But there's something that echoes between Paul's frustration and our own, and the source of ours is weak sauce compared to Paul's.

Echoes: Legitimizing Paul & Scripture

And there's something that echoes between Paul's experience and the early Church's experience, here, too. All these trials function to legitimize Paul, to prove his consistency, his integrity, his witness to Jesus. They detract from those who had made Paul their enemy.

And just as these moments in Paul's life legitimize him and reveal the bankruptcy of his detractors, recording them all--instead of just, say, one--legitimizes Scripture's accuracy, and reveals the bankruptcy of its detractors. Just as these moments in Paul's life legitimize him and reveal the bankruptcy of his detractors, recording them all--instead of just, say, one--legitimizes Scripture's accuracy, and reveals

the bankruptcy of its detractors. That's probably not impressive to us; we're in the room, after all.

But it was really, really, really helpful, really, really, really important, to those who were coming together in the Spirit and discerning what was trustworthy and inspired enough to be considered Scripture and what wasn't.

Applying: Legitimizing:

Multiple witnesses matter. When we see character consistently displayed, and integrity shown over and over and over, it will always legitimize things for us. When we see the opposite, as we do with these Roman political leaders and Judean religious leaders, it does the same thing in the opposite direction: It solidifies for us what we can expect from them, helps us realize that that whatever they might say or do in the future, they're without character. When we're deciding what to trust--whether it's people like Paul, or things like Scripture--we should look at what's being repeated, what we see again and again in that thing or person we're trying to trust.

Appeal!

So--again--Festus has become Proconsul. He's only there for three days before the Judean leaders come up and try to get Festus to send Paul to Jerusalem for a trial, because--surprise--they want to ambush and kill Paul. Festus doesn't, although he does agree to another trial in Caesarea. The Jerusalem antagonists bring a bunch of unprovable charges

against Paul, which we've heard already, and Paul again defends himself. He says **"I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar."** But Festus, who just like Felix "wants to do the Jews a favor" asks **"Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?"** It's a dummy question, because why should Paul want this? But Paul...Paul's had enough of this. Two years he spent talking theology, ethics, and warning with Felix only to be left to the mercy of this Festus. He knows that if he's sent to Jerusalem, he'll just be killed--ambushed or otherwise. We read:

10 Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. 11 If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"

12 After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

And this is a big deal. It was the right of every Roman citizen to have his or her case heard by Caesar if he or she--and really, this is basically he, because Rome was as

patriarchal as it could be--so it was his right to make a case before Caesar if he felt as if he was being unjustly tried. What Caesar decides will be the decision.

Appeal: Making Sense Of This

We can say that God uses this, that God makes good out of this appeal, and Luke clearly presents the events here in that way. Just as clear is Paul's frustration with these Proconsuls and the way in which they are beholden to Jerusalem's leaders. Their desires for favors have corrupted them. They're meant to act as judges, but their judgments aren't driven by truth or mercy, they're driven by self-interest. Paul doesn't say, here, that Caesar is just so wonderful and impartial. He doesn't even imply it. What he does point out, though, is that these provincial judges are clearly not. And Paul perceives this escalation, this demand that his case be taken before Caesar. What comes of that will come of that; all Paul knows is that he is not experiencing the justice that the Empire has said is his right.

I wonder all sorts of things about this. The Church has always somehow made this personal, about Paul only, rather than notice that Paul is in this moment a participant in a legal system, and affected by and relying upon that legal system. We refuse, so often, to see the way the legal system can act evilly; after all, Paul has been held without bail and charges for two years, now. That's not just; but the system allows it, and so we read past it. We often see past,

both in Scripture and in our societies, the way evil and sin are wrapped up in legal, political, religious systems. I wonder why the Church can celebrate Paul when he demands his rights, but we don't celebrate those in our society who demand theirs, but don't get them? When it comes to issues of prejudice--from race to gender to any other thing--the Church has so often found itself questioning those who demand their rights in society, rather than acting in solidarity with them. That's...weird, at least; a failure, at best.

And we have to be careful. Simply because Paul claims his rights here, and appeals to Caesar, Paul is not automatically implying that the way his world works is the best or right one. He's not saying appealing to autocrats and emperors is a Christian virtue. He's making the best choice he can make in the context he is in. He's making the best choice in the context he is in.

To be sent back to Jerusalem is to be murdered. We have seen God free people from prison before; there is no miraculous intervention now. So Paul plays the card he can play, which will protect him from the capriciousness and illegality of these Proconsuls. He appeals to Caesar, knowing as he does so that God has all along wanted him in Rome, where Caesar is.

Paul makes the only choice he can make, but he makes it knowing it will move him to the place where God wants him.

Applying: Appeal

And we could consider what choices we're being asked to make right now. Paul can't choose much; his options are limited. We could consider what our options are, and what is limiting them, and test these against what we believe God wants from us.

Do we have a sense of what God wants from our future? Do we have a sense of how our limited choices line us up or distract us from God's desires for us?

We could also consider, if we wanted to go beyond ourselves, why we always see right past the systems that our society uses to move people around, deal with trouble, make things better. Our society has a legal and political system, just like Judean Province had one, and there is sin in it, just like there was in theirs. Where is the sin? Who is our society failing?

Agrippa & Bernice:

Agrippa, who's the king now that Herod is dead, will come to Caesarea with his sister Bernice a couple of days after this appeal. They rule Judea together, but they do it as clients of Rome, puppet-rulers. Rome doesn't truly acknowledge Judea as a sovereign state and Agrippa and Bernice have to acknowledge this at Rome's designated capital city.

Paul comes up in their conversations. Festus has ordered Paul held until Paul can be sent to Caesar. He tells Agrippa how Paul's accusers "had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive." And we get the hint here of just how un-religious Agrippa was. In fact, in about 6 years his own people will throw him out when they try to shake off Roman rule, and he'll fight with Rome against the Judeans. Both Agrippa and Bernice go on to have long political careers in the Empire. Bernice almost becomes the Empress of the Empire.

Agrippa is interested in hearing what Paul has to say, so Festus brings him around. But he brings Paul before them because Festus needs help. As it stands, Paul has appealed to Caesar...but he hasn't actually been charged with anything. Understatedly, Festus says, "I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him." And it is. You don't bother Caesar for no reason.

As Luke writes this chapter and the next, we see Agrippa and Festus growing closer, their future political careers intertwining around the shared task of coming up with some legitimate charge. They bond politically through Paul's trial in a way similar to how Herod and Pilate become "friends" through Jesus' trial. Luke's got a dual point in this, of course: Paul is both like Jesus in this unjust moment, and he's at the mercy of leaders who care more about themselves than

justice.

We'll see next week how this moment before Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus plays out.

Today, though, we're left with these things:

Conclusion: God-oriented Choice-making When We Have Limited Options

Paul doesn't legitimize the legal or political system he's stuck in. But he does point us to the basic truth that even when our choices are limited, we can choose in a way that furthers God's plan for us. If we are being forced to choose things right now, let's do so in a way that furthers God's plan for us. Paul knew Rome was in his future; his appeal to Caesar both keeps him alive, and keeps him moving there.

Conclusion: Repetition as a Character-Witness

Today's passage reminds us that when people do the same things over and over, it's not a fluke, it's an insight into their character. Luke gives witness multiples times to the same story, and he does it to help us see that Paul is trustworthy, his antagonists are not: Paul has this sort of character, his antagonists have that sort of character. The early Church valued all this tedious repetition because it legitimized Scripture's own trustworthiness and consistency. Let's consider ourselves: What character do our repetitive behaviors reveal? What testimony are we giving about ourselves? What should we be trusted with by the others

who might notice these things?

Conclusion: Our Compelling Personal Experiences Don't Negate Others' Troubles

If you think Today's passage is boring because it's more of the same, wait till next week's, which is...more of the same. For us, it can feel like one more repetitive story, for Paul, though, it was life or death. Our own experiences will always have more power to move us, no matter how many times we hear about the troubles another person faces. It's a sign of personal health that we don't get lost in other people's traumatic situations. Our own experiences will always have more power to move us, to get our attention, than other people's experiences, no matter how many times they're repeated. Most of us in this room will be more emotionally moved and ready to act by our cell phone breaking than the slow-moving kurdish genocide that's happening as I speak.

What's important for us is to acknowledge this. From there we can be grateful that our problems are, perhaps, not as bad as other peoples--just like being frustrated at having to hear about Paul's repetitive story is not as bad as living it. We can ask God to make us more sympathetic, more attentive to those who face troubles around us, more compassionate, ready to act for people who need it. We can ask God for a little perspective, and that we might be humbled. Our problems will always be our problems, our

self-interest can't disappear unless we lose ourselves, but today's passage reminds us that we're made for more than ourselves, and we are meant to meet more than our own needs and solve our own emotional troubles.

Conclusion

Today Paul makes a decision that sets his life on a course he will not be able to both retreat from, and stay faithful to God in. He makes a choice today that changes the course of his life. He won't give up God, and because of it, all sorts of options and opportunities are closed to him from here on out. His future is in Rome, whatever might happen there.

Life doesn't bring many of those sort of choices our way. I don't expect us to face many of them this week. But if we keep God in mind, we can trust that our choices will work out for our God, even if it's difficult to discover what shape that good takes. Let's acknowledge our own self-interest, even as we act compassionately for others. Let's notice the character that we reveal in our repetitive behavior, even as we learn who to trust and follow by watching and listening to them closely. And in the large or small choices we make, consider what God wants from you as you make them. I think we'll be blessed if we can.