

Acts 28:30-31: Conclusion To Acts

Actual Message:

Preface:

Well, friends. Today's a big day! We started walking through the Book of Acts back at the end of January and today we finish. Nothing from Acts was read to us this morning. There are only a couple of sentences left in the book, and they're as epilogue as two sentences can be. Having told us that Paul arrived in Rome, that he gathered the Jewish religious leaders to him, and then declared to them that the Gentiles would welcome the message they're dithering about, Luke writes this:

30 For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Today's message and next week's are two things at the same time: Both "Conclusion Messages" for our walk through Acts, and also meditations on the Advent theme. Today is Joy, so expect something about that

soon. Let's pray together first.

Prayer:

So again, two small sentences. Hannah asked me if it was a typo when she was putting our bulletin together.

30 For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Giving & Withholding:

Luke gives us so much here. We learn that although Paul is under house arrest, he's paying for the house himself. Luke makes it clear that while Paul is under guard, he has freedoms that no typical prisoner has. And Paul of course is savvy; in his letters he'll point out the chains he has when it is useful to point them out, and will point out his freedoms when it's useful to point them out. We realize that even at the end, here, Paul is more than one kind of person at once.

Throughout Acts we've seen Paul as both a Roman Citizen and a faithful Israelite; and here, he's both free and in chains.

Luke gives us the content of Paul's message, summarizing all the stuff we've seen Paul say in Acts with the simple, double phrase: "the kingdom of God and...the Lord Jesus Christ." Now, we've turned "kingdom" and "Lord" and "Christ" into metaphors and language that's so symbolic it has no concrete meaning for us, and I have spent weeks and weeks in the past trying to unpack all the theological and practical importance in these loaded terms. We can't do it this morning.

But to declare these things in Rome is to declare that the Caesar's Kingdom, his dominion, isn't the most important empire anymore; it's been invaded, and is falling apart. It's to declare that there is, as it was put in Acts 17 "Another Lord, namely Jesus." It's to bridge the two Judean and Gentile worlds, and say Caesar isn't Lord, as he claims, but Jesus is; and Jesus is not just Lord, not just the actual King of the known world, but he's also the Messiah of God, the epitome of Israel's centuries-long exilic hope. God's Dominion is being established; the end of Caesar's, and any would-be ruler's, is declared over.

Luke withholds things we care deeply about, too, and

we'll talk more about this next week, I think: What about appearing before Caesar? What about Paul's death? What happens the day after Paul's "two whole years" come to an end, and what ends them? Luke doesn't end Acts with the epilogue we really want; but we have to assume it is the one God at least needs to make use of.

Giving & Withholding: Double-Truth

Luke is able to say that Paul talks about God's Kingdom and Jesus' kingship and messiahship without hassle or shame. Which is a remarkable thing to say, given the context in which Paul says it, right? Because Paul is still under guard, as far as we can tell from this and other things Paul writes. How can you be under house arrest and still speak without hindrance or shame?

We're left with a double-truth, here; two insights that deeply matter: First, that words really, really matter. Second, that ultimately the only one who can take away our words is ourselves.

Giving & Withholding: Double-Truth & Words' Power

In the first case, what Paul says matters. It has impact.

Paul presents truth about God and God's relationship to humanity and human institutions, and it is in saying this, teaching this, preaching this, over and over and over that, in fact, society itself changes.

What Paul speaks will be spoken; it's repeated over and over in wider and wider areas, and as it's come to be understood, believed, conformed to, history itself changes. It has changed because Paul didn't stop talking. Caesar's hold on history was overcome.

The Church, in its role in speaking about the truth of God, shadows God's own creative power, in which God spoke reality into being. The Church still speaks reality into being.

This is the first of what this epilogue of Luke's reveals.

Giving & Withholding: Double-Truth & Will To Speak

The second is just this: The will to speak is ours alone. We can be cowed into silence only if we allow ourselves to be cowed. We can be silent only if we give away the power to silent us. We can be shamed only if we allow the honor others ascribe to matter more to us than the honor God ascribes.

One realizes that the greatest threat to this Kingdom of God and the Lord and Messiah that Paul preaches isn't the power of the Empire made manifest in the chains and the sword that guard's Paul, its greatest threat is silence.

And we all know this. Why does faith wither? We stop reminding ourselves and others about all God's done. Why does hope fade? We stop speaking about the future we long for. What does peace die, we stop calling for it, and call for revenge instead. Why does love disappear? We don't nurture it with our words. Our words and our hearts have a dynamic relationship; out of the abundance of the latter, the former arises, and yet the former is a fire that can burn even ourselves and our spirits up.

And there's something about joy in this, too. We'll come back to it.

A Sublime Mandate:

We have to see that Luke's epilogue isn't just a nice summary of how Paul spent the next 24 months. It's a sublime mandate, a charge to us: Will we speak about God? Will we proclaim that the powers of this world

are no powers at all, and unmask them through our speech? Will we communicate about Jesus? I know as well as any of us that there are all sorts of ways to do this. And specifically with regard to matters of faith, issues of what is true and in line with God, will we allow shame or hassle to silence us? Have we given up our voice?

Only God knows how well we keep this double-charge. We know, too, I guess. Have we given away our voice and allowed shame or hassle--or anything else--to silence us? Do we use our words to declare truth that unmasks power and its self-serving lies by declaring God's rightful place above the created order, and Jesus' rightful place redeeming us in the middle of its mess?

Can we see that our voices are full of power; power to shape others' understanding of the great truths of the world, and what it means to live well?

Advent is a time to think about what we say or don't say, you know?

Transition To Joy:

And knowing today's Advent Theme, knowing that we were going to talk about Joy, and try to talk about it

well, I've been thinking about how often I allow joy to be silenced in my life. That is, how often I refuse to give voice to the joy I feel.

It's probably more shame than hassle that keeps me from giving voice to the joy I feel, but there is a way of living that treats any purely positive thing as a burden unless it's wrapped in irony and sarcasm, and I can find myself easily persuaded to live that way. Far more often, and just more honestly, I think I'm probably a little embarrassed by joy. I can be bold and public when it comes to all sorts of negative emotions that express themselves in behavior, but when it comes to Joy...bold and public just don't feel right. The problem is that as far as Acts goes--and the Bible's basically univocal when it comes to it--joy is fundamentally public and bold.

Joy in Acts: Joy To Ya!

Acts uses four different words that can legitimately be translated as "joy" when we move from Greek to English, and often are.

One of them we can easily ignore. It's basically a command: "Rejoice!"

But it's not really a command to rejoice; it's just a conventional greeting. A command that's become a way to greet someone. "Hello" actually comes from a word that means something like "Look here!" But we don't mean that when we say "Hello!" to someone. We're just greeting them. Or when we write "Dear so-and-so" at the top of a letter, the person isn't necessarily dear to us. We may want someone to have a Merry Christmas when we say it, but we're really just greeting someone during Christmastime. This "joy" is just a greeting. And in fact, most of our English translations will translate this command to rejoice as "Greetings." Which is about as generic as you can get. In the letter that the Jerusalem Council sends with Paul in Acts 15, or the one that is sent to Governor Felix to talk about what Paul's done in Acts 23, this sort of Joy shows up. If we opened our Bibles now we'd read it translated as "Greetings." There. It's really "Take joy." "Joy to ya!" "Merry Christmas!"

Joy in Acts: Communion Joy

Another word gets translated "joy" in Acts. We see it in a couple of spots. It's early in Acts, when the Church has just started together. We read in 2:46, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with

[joyful] and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.” Later, when Paul and Silas don’t escape jail, but could have, and save their guard’s life on account of it, the guard ends up being so persuaded by their show of integrity that he follows God. We read in Acts 16:34, “The jailer brought [Paul and Silas] into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.” The word translated “joy” in these moments (agalliesei) is a kind of joy that shows up in these religious moments. It’s a joy that shows up when you’re in the middle of remembering what God’s done, and you’re with others remembering what God has done, too, and together know that God will work everything out in the end. It’s the joy of fellowship, of laughing during worship, the joy that happens during communion.

Joy in Acts: God-neglecting Joy

If that word for joy shows up during communion, during worship, there’s one that doesn’t (euphrosyrēs). We see it in Acts, too. Paul, in Acts 14, when he’s trying to help a crowd understand who God is, he says, “[God] has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of

food and fills your hearts with joy.” When Jesus, in Luke’s Gospel, is talking about how foolish a rich farmer is for thinking he can arrange pleasure for himself, Jesus lays out the guy’s self-talk as this: “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” “Be merry” is this “joy” word. Luke uses this word to talk about joy that is authentic, is real, but...doesn’t care about God at all, doesn’t realize anything isn’t necessarily bad--it’s a gift common to humanity--but it’s his word for joy that explicitly doesn’t take into account God or how God will make good on his promises. It’s the word Luke uses when Stephen is talking about the party that happened when the Israelites made the golden calf. It’s his word for joy that doesn’t take into account how God will make good on his promises. It’s common joy, real joy, but joy disinclined to pay any attention to God.

Joy in Acts: Joy Discovering Itself

Luke’s last word for Joy is his most common (kara).

And it’s joy as we think of it. Gladness, happiness, pleasure. It’s the thing people have no words for, so every language has made up ways to talk about: hearts singing and dancing and shouting. It’s a feeling that reveals itself when it discovers itself: manifesting

itself in laughter, in hugs, in gratitude, in...well, joy, right?

It's the absence of self-reflection; you can't be joyful and monitor your joyfulness. You can't laugh from your belly and care about how your teeth look. Joy interrupts our focus on ourselves, which is remarkably because you can only experience joy as yourself; not from a distance or if you're pretending to be someone you aren't. Joy catches you out. You can't wear a mask and wear a grin at the same time.

A couple of Germans in the 60s wrote this about Luke's most common word for joy, and it's so, so perfect...but also just what we'd expect from some German theologians in the 60s. They write: "As a phenomenon, a direct feeling...as self-being in self-transport, joy is uniform, and so are its manifestations even to tears of joy...It is everywhere a culmination of existence: "Joy, beautiful spark divine." It strains beyond itself. As direct feeling it creates no problems."

Joy doesn't care what anyone thinks. Joy just is, freely itself, and it appears whenever we ourselves are freely ourselves with others, freely ourselves before God, and so that means things: It means that we can't

make it up. We can't fake it. We can position ourselves for it, of course.

If we are people who are just locked down--You know?--locked down in anxiety, guilt, anger, or self-protection of some kind, then we can make sure we have around us those who break through us, and make us laugh. If we're people who continually monitor ourselves, we can find places in which and people around whom help us forget ourselves long enough for self-neglecting joy to break in.

And training matters. We can train ourselves to laugh at the absurdity and humanity that we have; we can get up and bow when we trip over our own feet. Giggle when we bonk our heads. We have all trained ourselves to not experience the joy that comes of being alive, because we know that being alive is also very, very hard. A great, great gift is that even in our bleakest moments, our greatest sorrow, if someone steps on a rake and it hits them in their forehead, then a laugh can rise up. To embrace joy in our grief--not on account of our grief, but during it--is maybe the only thing that helps us survive it sometimes. Joy can interrupt anything.

And this is the joy that Luke writes about when Philip is in Samaria and he's just healing everybody, the lame and the sick and we read, "There was great joy in that city!" Well, yeah: It's like being on Oprah, and she's all "You get a car, and you get a car, and you get a car!" It's great! "Errrboddy in the club gettin' healed." You get excited, you know? It's the joy the disciples feel as they're walking around Asia in Acts 13, because good things are happening, and life isn't easy, but it doesn't matter: Joy doesn't depend on life being easy. It's what Barnabas can't help but feel in Acts 11 when he shows up from Jerusalem and sees the Church in Antioch trusting that God loves them.

Transition: To Us:

Joy is fundamentally public and bold in Acts, because Joy always is. Other good things aren't: Certitude and Pleasure and Gratitude can be quiet, private even. Joy is messy and out there, sharing that same space grief shares. And that means, of course, that it's easy to give voice to joy, because it's part of the definition, right?

"If all joy is noisy, and all noises are public, all joy is _____." Fun SAT morning at Smoky Row. That's what people want.

But if giving voice to good things matters, if that's a thing we can take away from Luke's end of Acts today, then what's that mean for Joy, particularly? Especially joy as far as Acts shows it?

I know what we can't do, at least:

How To Give Voice To Joy: Not This Way

Whatever you do, don't interrupt a time of happiness to say, "We're really happy right now, aren't we?" Don't interrupt someone's joyful laughter to say "You're really joyful in this moment, aren't you." To notice Joy is to, oh, drop it out of superposition, to snuff it out.

It's similar to why everyone is just slightly irritated with someone who, instead of laughing, just says "That's so funny!" You don't call out unreflective pleasure; to bring attention to it is to alienate it. We meet Joy on its own terms, like a cat. So how do we give voice to joy, then? Right? Here's how, I think

How To Give Voice To Joy: This Way

We think about it later on.

We think about it later on. And here's what I mean. I'm

going to be so, so specific here.

I think we give voice to joy by recalling it after the fact, and the best way I can think of to recall it after the fact is to engage in what is classically called the “Prayer of Examen,” which is a fancy way of saying “examining prayer.”

It’s an end of the day prayer. We take some time to reflect on our day, and we intentionally consider ourselves in the presence of God. We think about what’s happened, what our responses have been, and as part of this, we can pay specific attention to the joy we experienced: The moments of unexpected laughter, smiles, pleasure. The hugs that we gave and were given. The joy that we didn’t even notice at the time, because to notice it would have been to snuff it out.

We can consider the ways we positioned ourselves for joy and the ways we positioned ourselves against it. Because we can do both, of course. We can look back on our day and see if any of it was spent in the context of the Church gathered together, and see if that fellowship-centered, worship-centered joy showed up at all. If we do this for even a little bit of time, God will

reveal patterns to us: of participation, of positioning, of people and places where Joy discovers us in the middle of our days.

Conclusion:

I was watching a show recently. Someone wanted something. They weren't able to get it. They were telling this to another person, and they said. "No joy." All the speaker meant was "Didn't happen. Couldn't get it done." We may find that in the evening in our Prayer of Examen, find that the day brought no joy for us. There's always tomorrow.

But I don't think we can wake up any morning and go searching for joy; there is something fundamental to getting out of our own search for what we want that helps joy to find us. And I think if Acts has anything to teach us about this virtue, it's that it isn't a virtue at all; it's a gift. A common gift, a surprise gift, one that arrives when we're among other people, one that makes itself scarce when we call it out. And it's one that sustains us: through sorrow, trouble, and hardship until Jesus' return. I'd invite us to make time and space to examine our days, to reflect on where Joy found us, where Joy called us out of ourselves into the bold, public, selfless moment. Because if we can remember

that life has joy in it, our lives have joy in them, we can make it through almost anything. And I know God wants us to make it through our days.