

## **Message for April 18, 2021**

### **Acts 12:1-17**

There is a story about a teenaged boy who was getting ready to go on his first date with a very attractive classmate. He wanted everything to be perfect and decided that giving her a box of chocolates would be a good way to end the evening. With this in mind, he went to the local candy store and asked the man behind the counter for a \$5, \$10, and a \$20 box of chocolates.

The man was curious and asked him why he wanted three boxes and the boy told him about his big date that evening. He said that if the date was just okay and all that the girl would do was shake his hand good night, then he would give her the \$5 box of candy. If the date went better and if she hugged him at the end, then he would give her the \$10 box. And if the date was great and she gave him a passionate goodnight kiss, then he would give her the \$20 box of chocolates. The man behind the counter didn't say a word and just quietly rang in the sale.

That evening when the young man showed up at the girl's house she invited him in for dinner, an invitation that he eagerly accepted. The family was sitting at the table waiting and the father asked the boy if he would please say grace. They all bowed their heads in prayer and the young man offered up a very long, eloquent and sincere prayer. When he was finished, his date leaned over and whispered to him, "I never knew that you were so spiritual" to which he replied "I had no idea that your dad owned the candy store!"

This is an amusing story but it does raise some questions. As the people of God and the disciples of Jesus, we are expected to be a praying people, but why do we pray? Does God answer our prayers and if so, how? Do we always even realize it when he does?

It was during the earliest days of the church and King Herod, a grandson of Herod the Great who was ruler when Jesus was born, sat on the throne. As it happened, Herod was caught between a rock and a hard place. He only ruled because the Romans let him but his subjects on the other hand wanted to get rid of the Romans and despised him as a collaborator. Herod had to walk a fine line

between the two sides but then he had a wonderful idea; persecute the Christians! The Christians after all were disliked by both the Roman and the Jewish authorities! And so the government-sanctioned persecution began. The disciple James was arrested and put to death, while Peter too was arrested and thrown into prison, destined for the same fate. Peter was guarded very securely; he was chained to two soldiers who were on either side of him. There were also two other guards at the door. It appeared that there was no earthly way he could ever escape.

While Peter was in prison awaiting his fate, his fellow believers gathered together and prayed for a miracle because that is what it would take to free him. Then, according to Luke, an angel appeared in Peter's jail cell filling it with light. The angel woke Peter up and then the chains just fell off. The angel told Peter to get dressed and follow him, which he did. They walked past the sleeping guards at the door and then, when they came to the iron gate that barred the prison shut, it miraculously opened on its own accord. Out they went and then the angel disappeared.

For his part Peter wasn't sure what had just happened. His initial reaction was to think that it was all some sort of dream or vision but then, standing out on the street, he realized that it was all for real. Of course Peter also knew that he had to get to safety as fast as possible since the authorities would soon be after him. Accordingly he made his way to the house where he knew his fellow Christians would be gathered, praying for his release.

When he got there, Peter frantically knocked at the door, no doubt glancing up and down the street to see if anyone was after him. A maid named Rhoda came to the door and recognized Peter's voice but instead of letting him in, she rushed back into the house to tell everyone that Peter was at the door. Their reaction was disbelief. "You're mad" they said, "you've seen an angel!" They then proceeded to get into a debate over who was really at the door while Peter continued to stand outside frantically knocking, desperate to get in. When they finally decided to let Peter in they were so excited to see him that he had to tell them to quiet down because they were making so much noise; did they want the whole world to know where he was? Peter told them about his miraculous

escape and then he left, knowing that he had to stay one step ahead of the authorities.

So goes today's scripture passage and it almost sounds like a comedy: Peter frantically knocking on the door begging to be let in while the maid, instead of letting him in, left him outside while she rushed back to tell the others. They in turn, instead of promptly letting him in, proceeded to have a debate as to whether he was really there. The whole episode sounds rather slapstick and yet there is a serious, if not ironical point to it all. There were these Christians gathered together praying with all of their heart, mind and strength for Peter's release but when they were told that their prayer had been answered, their response was stunned disbelief. Truly this is so ironical and one has to wonder; even as they prayed for Peter's release, did they really believe that God could and would grant their request?

The Bible tells us that we are to be a praying people and prayer of course is simply sharing with God whatever is most on our minds. In prayer for example we may tell God about what makes us happy and what makes us sad. And when we pray, we may sometimes make requests too and tell God what we hope may or may not happen. We pray for all sorts of different reasons but the important thing is that regardless of why we are praying, we believe that God is listening and that there is at least the possibility that he will grant our request. This means that we should pray with faith and not be like the people in today's passage, praying so earnestly and yet all the while not really expecting anything to happen. The truth is that God not only hears all prayers but also answers all prayers as well. Of course, as we all well know from first-hand experience, the answer may not always be what we hoped for or even wanted to hear. Prayer then requires faith, faith to pray in the first place and faith to accept the answer. It is like this old and perhaps familiar story.

Once upon a time there was a man who was driving his car far too fast up a winding mountain road. Suddenly he lost control and the car plunged over the cliff. Somehow he managed to get out of the car but was left clinging to a small bush in the cliff's face. He could neither go up nor down; all he could do was hold onto the bush for dear life. "Is anyone there" he repeatedly cried out as the hours passed, but there was no answer. Then, with a mounting sense of

desperation he turned to God: “Are you there God?” he called out. “Yes, my son” came the reply, “what do you want?” “Save me” the man screamed, “I’ll do anything you want! Just save me!” “Then let go” said God, “Just let go”. The man paused for a moment and then called out, “Is there anyone else there?”

This story is humorous but it does contain a very important truth. The man had enough faith to turn to God but then, when the answer was not what he expected or desired, he turned away. But what of us? How often do we pray so-to-speak with our fingers crossed? How often do we pray like those people of long ago, asking God for something but deep down not really expecting our prayer to be granted or even answered? And what if the answer is not the one that we want to hear? What it comes down to of course, as it so oftentimes does, is faith. To return to the members of that congregation in Jerusalem, they had enough faith to pray for Peter’s release in the first place but then reacted with stunned disbelief when their prayer was granted. And perhaps the question for us then is what do we truly expect when we pray? Anything? Something? Everything?

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious God, if we had been able to gather together in person to worship you today, we would have undoubtedly sung “What a Friend we have in Jesus”, a hymn that reminds us that we can and indeed should bring everything to you in prayer.

We thank you that we can do this for it is a privilege to do so. You are God, the Almighty, so holy and removed from us and yet, as great as you are, you still want us to talk to you and share whatever is on our minds, especially at times such as these when we may well feel weak and overburdened, loaded with a load of care.

Grant us faith, so that we can without fear or reservation, put our hope and trust in you, especially during these difficult and challenging times.

As the pandemic continues, we pray for the safety and well-being of all, remembering those on the front lines, those whose jobs are essential, those who are waiting for their vaccinations, those who are in positions of authority. We pray for healing for all who are ill, comfort for all who mourn and reassurance for all who feel overwhelmed by fear and trepidation. Grant us all we pray the courage, strength, and peace that only you can. We ask this in your Son's name.

Amen.