

## What is God Up To?

*Acts 5:17-42 ~ April 23, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

Our sermon text for today, from the Book of Acts, tells an engaging story. But it is also puzzling. It is puzzling because the twists in the story leave us wondering what God is up to in the lives of the earliest Christians. When we think about the early church we want to see miracles, explosive growth, and the quick dominance of Christianity throughout the world. We have our own ideas about how life should go. But there is a reason that Isaiah's prophecy reads, ***"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord."*** We see some of what we expect in this story, but other things leave us wondering. Let's take a closer look to see how this is so.

The verses that lead up to today's text tell us about a Jerusalem congregation that was thriving. The poor were being fed. The sick were being healed. People all over Jerusalem were learning about Jesus. In these events, we see the formation of the world's first Christian mega-church. Massive donations came in to help with mission. The church programs for teaching and preaching were thriving. Twelve pastors were fully engaged in the work of the Word. The excitement about the growth and development of this earliest Christian church can be felt right through the pages of Acts by every reader throughout Christian history. Every Christian congregation that has ever existed has been compared unfavorably to the explosive growth and wellbeing of that first Jerusalem church.

But in today's sermon text we read that not everything was perfect. Not everyone in Jerusalem was happy about the phenomenal growth of Christianity's first congregation. The Scriptures inform us:

***But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.***

It is hard for Americans to connect to what happened politically in Jerusalem. We live in a land which not only practices religious toleration, but forbids government from adopting any kind of religious perspective at all. In Jerusalem, the Sadducees were the political party in power. Religion and political power were brought together in the person called the high priest. Whatever offended the Sadducees was illegal. They could prosecute anyone who failed to abide by their religious laws. So, they arrested all the

pastors in that newly forming Christian congregation. They had to do this carefully, because the Christians had become popular with the people in general. But arresting the leadership of the earliest Christian congregation was the logical first step for dealing with what the Sadducees understood as false teaching.

The Bible suggests that part of their motivation was jealousy. And we all know about that. When one congregation grows causing another to shrink, it is easy for us to become jealous too. I shudder to think what might happen if the power given to the Sadducees were available today. Fortunately, our country's forefathers anticipated the damage petty jealousies can do to religious communities and put the separation of church and state in place to prevent what happened in today's sermon text. But God started the Christian Church in the Jewish homeland under the religious rule of the Sadducees. We can question what God was up to in doing that until we are blue in the face, but it will not accomplish anything. So, the Apostles end up in prison for preaching about Jesus.

***But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.***

God allowed the Apostles to be thrown in Jail and then sent an Angel to get them out. There is no act of power against the Sadducees. They never did figure out how the Apostles escaped. There was no repentant Jailer. There was nothing that would bring a lasting solution to the conflict. It was just a reset. It was like the Sadducees had never gotten mad and thrown the apostles in jail in the first place. They were just out preaching and teaching like always.

The next day the Sadducees drew a deep breath and sent the temple guard again. Their instructions were more cautious. They brought the apostles, with some courtesy, to talk to the council. The council started by reminding them of the warning they had given to Peter and John.

***We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.***

Yeah, like the apostles were really going to take that seriously. Think about it. They had seen the miracles of Jesus first hand. They had seen Jesus die with their own eyes. Then they had seen, heard, and touched Jesus alive again from the dead. What power

could this cluster of old men have in comparison to the Lord of both death and life? Clearly, the Sadducees had the power to persecute and kill the apostles. But Jesus had the power of death and life over all eternity. So, what was God up to in this face-off between the apostles and the Sadducees? What could possibly be gained by this confrontation?

***But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."***

We expected Peter to stand up to the High Priest. But the High Priest was the religious ruler in the Holy City. Peter's response was nothing less than poking a bear in the eye. In the council chamber, the angry outcry in response to the apostles was blood-curdling. The Sadducees had the power of life or death in their hands. The apostles were in mortal danger at that moment. It is so common for us to read our scriptures without any sense of the very real suspense that takes place from verse to verse. In this very dangerous moment, the earliest Christian Church could have been decapitated in a single stroke. Don't we have to ask ourselves, "What can God possibly be up to letting his church enter into such mortal danger?"

***But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.***

God used a Pharisee named Gamaliel to save his infant church in Jerusalem that day. Gamaliel was a Pharisee, not a Sadducee. He was respected by all for his wise teaching. He reasoned with the Sadducees by pointing out two events where letting errant religious movements burn themselves out had worked well. He also cautioned the Sadducees that if Christian teaching was from God, then opposing it would be the worst course of action. In this way, God used Gamaliel to give the brand new Christian Church the space it needed to reach maturity. When Jesus was on earth, he required adequate time to teach the disciples what they needed to know. The earliest church needed time to learn from the apostles. By arguing for a hands-off treatment of the Christians, Gamaliel set up the time God needed to prepare his Church in Jerusalem.

Taking Gamaliel's words to heart, the Sadducees let the apostles go with only a beating. And rejoicing in the privilege of sharing Christ's suffering they went on their way. What

was God up to? From our perspective today, we can see that God was creating a place in time for the earliest Christian church to mature for the work they would be called to do in the days ahead. Exile, and in some cases martyrdom, was still in the future for members of that first Christian congregation. But they were allowed the time they needed to get ready.

The journey from the days of Jesus ministry on earth to the Day of Judgement is filled with many twists and turns. The part of the story we read today, shows that God is attentive, purposeful, and resourceful in leading his people through time. It is so easy for us today to look at what is happening and think to ourselves, "What is God up to?" We are like Peter on the water. We fail to keep our eyes on Jesus and look around at the storm. When we do that we begin to sink. We cry out in our fear and lack of faith. But the God who released the apostles from prison, led them in bold witness, and guided the words of wise old Gamaliel is still at work on our behalf.

What is God up to? God has a plan for Heritage Lutheran Church. He has good things in mind for each of us that call on his name here. We do not gather to praise Him in vain. He hears our prayers and he accepts our praises. We are still called to love and support each by means of the faith we share. We have the sacred duty to declare the truth of God's word to each other and the world. We are called to come together in worship and to sing God's praise. There is nothing more important than that. And from that sacred task we find the means to go, make, baptize, and teach disciples in his name.

What is God up to? He is making you into his own child. You are becoming a daughter or a son of God himself. In this transition, you are made full members of the family of God. Your destiny is changed from death and destruction to resurrection and life everlasting in the kingdom of God. Everything that God is up to is for this purpose. It is the purpose that you might be his own. It is the purpose that you will receive the true fruit of his love for you. It is the purpose that you will indeed live with him forever as royalty in the kingdom of God.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.