

May 3, 2009
Easter 4

"Lord, Help Us Speak Your Word More Boldly"

ACTS 4:22-23

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' ²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹ Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰ Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. ³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

There is a saying that "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." If the current flu situation becomes worse, it may be necessary to carry wipes or a bottle of sanitizer or even a mask to cover your mouth and nose, and avoid certain public places. An ounce of prevention is also important when you drive. You may look twice or even three times at certain intersections because you know how dangerous they are.

What precautions would you take if the local government told us they did not want any more sermons preached in this church that proclaimed Jesus as the only way back to God and the only hope of salvation? What if they threatened to arrest us and make life difficult for us or fine us if we continue to sing hymns that speak of Jesus as the only way to be saved? Would you think twice about coming to worship for fear of what might happen because an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?

In the words just read to you, Peter and John have returned from their meeting with Jewish leaders. They have just been told to stop talking about Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Fearlessly they told the Jewish leaders, "For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." What did the gathered Christians do? Did they lock their doors and hide? Did they lay low for awhile? Did they start packing their bags to get out Jerusalem while they still had the chance? No, they gathered and prayed that the Holy Spirit would make them even bolder in their witness to Jesus' resurrection and the only hope of eternal life that is found in him.

It is an amazing prayer that they prayed. It is a prayer that you want to underline in your Bible. "Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

You know the challenges we face

The Lord knew the threats that had been made and the challenges these early Christians faced just as the Lord knows the challenges we face in a world that does not want Jesus and his resurrection. Peter and John reported to the believers in Jerusalem how they had been told that they should not teach or preach in Jesus' name. The huge storm clouds were building. Persecution was on its way. It would not be long before Saul of Tarsus would supervise the efforts to have Christians arrested, thrown into prison, and even put to death.

How did the early Christians respond to this threat to their lives? It says, "When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God." They raised their voices together. There was a unity and close bond of conviction that they needed to be even bolder in their witness. This was not a time to run and hide like scared rabbits. This was a time to pray to the Lord as the one who controls all things and who knows what they were going through. Listen to them pray. "Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them." Look at the stars. Look at the mountains. Look at the ocean. In Isaiah 40 the Lord says, "Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? Who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name?" The Lord who knows each star by name also knows every aspect of our lives. Psalm 139 says, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before they came to me." The Lord already knows the challenging moments that we face in our lives when we have opportunities to confess our faith before our family and friends, and even those who make fun of what we believe.

In this beautiful prayer, they acknowledge to the Lord that the violent persecution that happened to Jesus was also coming to them. They pray with their words of Psalm 2 "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth gather together against the Lord and his anointed one?" They told the Lord how they saw this prophecy fulfilled when King Herod and the governor Pontius plotted together to have Jesus put to death. They told how they knew this was all part of his plan to save the world from eternal death and destruction. "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." What an amazing prayer this was. They are willing to put their lives into the hands of the heavenly Father just as Jesus committed his life to the hands of his heavenly Father. They believed with all their hearts that the Lord was so powerful he could take persecution, pain and suffering and turn it into a blessing.

The Lord who designed the mountains, and made the trees and flowers, and put the oceans into their places and designed our bodies to function as they do, is the same Lord and God is working out everything in our life for his good and his glory. The Lord already knows the times he will put you into a tough spot where you will have an opportunity to talk to people about what you believe. Parents, you have to believe that our risen Lord and Savior, our loving Shepherd, already has plotted out the times and the teachable moments to sit down with your children and encourage them to stay close to Jesus their one true Shepherd. We have to believe that certain situations have already been planned and designed for

us where we may speak to someone we have never known before about the love of our Shepherd for sheep that are lost. And if we suddenly find our lives are in danger for what we believe, then we need to believe with all our hearts as the early Christians did that the Lord is taking these tough times and opening up amazing doors of opportunity. 2 Timothy 4 tells us, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." That may sound awful, but it is not. The early Christian saw the impending persecution as an opportunity for witnessing that rested in the hands of the Lord.

I am holding in my hand colored sheets of paper. Where are you at right now as far as difficulty level for witnessing to your faith? Are these easy times, a green? Will the hard times be coming soon a yellow or orange? Are their challenges for you personally a potential red? The Lord knows what the future brings, and he already has planned how to give his Holy Spirit to help you.

We know the Lord will hear our prayers

What amazes us about these early Christians was their confidence that Jesus would hear their prayers. "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." "Lord, consider their threats." They ask the Lord to assess the situation and look at the challenges. "Lord you know what I am going through." "Lord, you know what I am facing." "Now, Lord, help me speak your word with greater boldness and confidence." They do not pray, "Lord, stretch out your hand and help us find a good hiding place." They do not say, "Lord, stretch out your hand and help us get out of the city." No, they ask the Lord to help them where they are at to be even more outspoken in confessing Jesus and his resurrection.

These people are so eager to have more opportunities to witness boldly that they even pray for more miraculous signs and wonders. "Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." As we said in our sermon last week, if the Lord would perform miraculous signs and wonders through this congregation, you can be sure that huge crowds of people would gather here Sunday after Sunday. We would certainly have more opportunities to speak about Jesus and his resurrection. Instead of praying for signs and wonders, why not pray that the Lord would help us do a better job at being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Then people will be attracted to what we believe and we will be given more opportunities to speak the truth in love to those who are without hope.

The Lord answered their prayers in a most dramatic and powerful way. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." The Holy Spirit filled them and they spoke the word of God boldly. They were so confident in the Lord they shared everything they had. Then it says, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all." Instead of retreating or hiding or laying low for awhile, they continued to witness boldly to the resurrection.

The night of his resurrection Jesus told his disciples, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Then it says, "And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven. If you do not

forgive them, they are not forgiven." It takes tremendous boldness to tell someone they will stand before God in the final judgment without their sin forgiven if they are trusting in themselves or some false religion for their salvation. One billion Muslims believe they will stand forgiven by Allah because they have tried to live a good life according to the teachings of the Koran. It takes great boldness to tell them they are wrong, just as it takes boldness to tell a good friend, they will not be forgiven if they want nothing to do with Jesus and his blood that cleanses them of sin.

What a privilege it is to have Jesus breathe on us and give us the Holy Spirit so we can point to the amazing nail marks in his hands, nail marks that prove he is Lord and God and prove everything he said was true. What a privilege it is to show people the nail marks as the evidence that every sin was paid for by Jesus and to show them that is where they need to put their hope. What a privilege to talk about a Shepherd who has come to rescue sheep who are lost and bring them back to God so they can join you in saying, "Goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

"Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." Amen.