

Sermon Text for July 7, 2019

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Daniel 6:16-24, Acts 12:12-17

“I don’t believe it!”

The Scripture in Acts doesn’t lend itself to any fancy stories because it is very clearly a Scripture that speaks to the greatest asset we have as Christians which is prayer. Now many of you may tune yourselves out because you’ve heard a myriad of sermons on prayer. You’ve heard one, you’ve heard them all. I agree, this is going to be just another sermon on prayer. We agreed together to pray for a healing for weeks on end for an individual and you are already sharing stories with me about how God is answering those prayers. I can’t wait for September 1st.

There is a real spectrum of beliefs about prayer. Some swear by it, I mean not really, but they are absolutely convinced that prayer is central to our faith: Calvin called prayer the chief exercise of faith by which we daily receive God’s benefits. There are others that are not only skeptical but really have no use for it at all. Freud called prayer the stink of believers breath that fill a room. Today, I am going to try through the Scriptures we read to convince you that prayer is not one of many neat ideas that as Christians we may have but rather an absolutely necessary component to our lives.

I have told you this example before, but for me this happens regularly. I have to give you an example of answered prayer. **MANUELA**. Now not every story turns out like Daniel’s, or Peter’s or Manuela’s, but the fact remains that God is at work in our midst. How do we trust God in prayer and then when God answers, how do we respond?

READ SCRIPTURE

We love the story of Daniel and the lion’s den. Usually the king who threw Daniel in is seen as the antagonist, the bad guy, but if you look at the story he is really a good guy. Let’s look at it. The king is really putting Daniel into the pit with the lions against his wishes. When he throws him in he tells Daniel, I really hope you find a way to get out of this.

He then in vs. 18 goes back to his palace, fasts all night, doesn’t fall asleep, I assume he is praying all night for David. Well, some might ask if he was king why wouldn’t he just let him go? We wouldn’t be able to see God at work so powerfully in an impossible situation. It is almost like Batman and Robin, why didn’t the bad guy just kill them instead of leaving them in an impossible situation and then walk away, when you

know somehow, inevitably they are going to get out of the jamb that they find themselves in.

At the break of day the king comes tearing out. How his heart broke when he saw the stone and the seal. He didn't make it. Daniel, he cries out, Daniel. I made it, God sent me an angel. The king was so glad that he took those enemies of Daniel and threw them with their wives and children into the pit and the lions ate them instead.

Now we are going to be talking about how do we respond once God has answered our prayers and I will tell you ahead of time that taking your enemies and throwing them and their families into a pit full of lions is not going to be one of the options that I am going to give you. The king couldn't believe it. We know about impossible situations.

I got a call a number of years ago about a young mom who had teenage kids and had just overdosed on heroin. She was in the hospital, alive, but unresponsive. We prayed with her kids for her healing and we were convinced that she was going to live. Celia died the next day, her kids were crushed, my conviction that God was going to heal was put into question and I wondered what did I miss. Sometimes our experiences are less like Manuela and more like Celia. But God is working in both.

Peter has just made it through an impossible situation. Again, with the help of an angel, we can't do this on our own, and with a church that was praying fervently he makes it through. Now I know that I've been rescued, he realizes. He went to the house where he knew that the believers were gathered in prayer for his release, it's where they always got together in prayer.

When he arrived he knocked on the outer gate, probably trying to knock loud enough that those inside would hear but not too loud just in case the guards were already looking for him. You can imagine that Peter was probably a little anxious now, wanting to get to safety and out of the streets. Then Rhoda comes, asks who's there and Peter answers and when she recognizes his voice she gets so excited that she rushes back into the house leaving Peter behind a locked gate out on the street. I bet Peter said in a forceful whisper: "Rhoda!" He was probably thinking, okay God, where's your angel now. You probably didn't imagine that the hardest gate to get through is into my own community. I could use a little help here please.

Rhoda gets back in and tells the disciples that they can stop praying because Peter is at the gate. Against all odds, Peter is outside the gate. Another woman telling a miraculous story that is not believed. In Luke when the women come back and tell of the

resurrection of Jesus it is considered an idle tale by the disciples, but Rhoda insisted. Luke and Acts both have the women as the messengers of miracles that people don't believe.

When you are in fervent prayer, and God answers you, don't expect everyone to believe you, not even those closest to you in the faith. It is ironic that the ones used most powerfully by God are the ones praying, but they also turn out to be the most skeptical.

If you are going to believe God in prayer, if you are going to pray, then when God answers your prayer act in accordance with that answer. When Rhoda recognizes that God had answered their prayer she doesn't open the gate for Peter and take the step that God would normally want her to take.

She runs back to her old environment that is filled with skepticism, doubt, and fear. She was almost, almost overcome by that. But Peter kept knocking. So often we pray that God would liberate us from something or answer our prayers and when that happens it doesn't take long for us to go back to disbelief, doubt, and fear, and skepticism.

It should only take one answered prayer for us to believe that God is at work in our midst and so be able to pray and act when God answers instead of going back to our old ways of life when the gates are closed and God is knocking but we refuse to open because, we just don't believe it. This was a good moment for the early church after hearing of Peter's escape to recognize that God is at work and to see the impossible happen.

First Presbyterian Church in 2019 is a community of believers that are gathered around this room in prayer. We are at a point, at a crossroads where we need to recognize what has brought us here this far over these handful of years. In our history we have people who have prayed for the church continuously, against all odds we find ourselves in a time where we have to decide, do we open the gate all the way open and welcome all people, and move in a way that launches us, against all odds for a mainline Protestant Church, to be the heart of this region with not just programs for people, but a lifeline for those who are struggling to make it day by day.

Against all odds we have to be a group of people who have thick skins because people within and people without are not always going to be on board with this mission. It is more comfortable to just keep those that we know in and not really extend ourselves beyond that. But that is not what we are all about. I say against all odds because there

are not many churches in our denomination that are growing like we are, that are able to be a family which is able to see the authority of Scripture as authentic, while at the same time see Scripture as a road map to God's kingdom which is inclusive and not selective in who is in the kingdom and who is out. God so loved the world, that is all of us.

But at this crossroads where we find ourselves we can't think that our own power and our own skill is going to push us forward. It has to be framed in a spirit and a priority of prayer. Like the king who fasted and prayed and God's will was done, like the disciples who fasted and prayed and God's will was done. We cannot expect God's will to be done, we cannot expect God's plans to be accomplished just because of our momentum. We have to, against all odds, go before God confidently, but consistently as those before us have gone.

We will see results happen and my plea with you is when you do see answered prayer, let's not run back to our places that we think are sanctuaries, places of doubt, fear. But let's build on each prayer that is answered, on each gate that is opened so that we can see and experience the fullness of the life that God has for us in Jesus Christ. Amen.