

Sermon Text for June 30, 2019

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Daniel 3:19-27, Acts 12:1-11

“Against all odds I”

We are currently in a season in our life as adults that we have never experienced before. Naomi was home over the weekend, and it was so great to have her and we were so excited to see her. It wasn't long ago that when she would come home after basketball practice, it was nice, it was a joy to see her, but now when the kids come home it is a big deal, a big event. We all go through different seasons in life. When the girls were really young Stacy had to take a trip out West to see her family for 5 days, and you know what I realized over those 5 days? It took a lot more energy, creativity, and ability to coordinate three girls than it takes to coordinate over 350 Presbyterians.

The day Stacy was supposed to come home I had to make a trip to the hospital to see a member so I called my mom who lived a half hour away, and of course she could watch them before I got back. When I got home, and this was an hour before Stacy was supposed to get home, Rachel was up in the highest branches of a tree with her pillow and sheets from her bed. Naomi was in the garage with my big hammer and nails and making an art deco project that incorporated hitting as hard as you could these pieces of wood with the nails hoping that none of the nails pinged off into your eye, and Bethany was playing in the dirt and sand by our house trying to figure out how to get in and out of the house without bringing half of the dirt from that pit. She didn't succeed in figuring it out and the house bore the brunt of her footsteps.

I needed a miracle, and God provided grandma who whipped everything into shape in no time so that just the lingering effect remained when Stacy got home. Today in Acts we find a whole community of people praying for a miracle because things had really gotten out of the hand and to the point where they probably didn't believe that God could do anything about it. It was beyond God's ability to help at this point. What we find, instead, is that there is nothing more powerful than the power of God. When God wants to act, God does. Every single day we are faced with circumstances, situations, and life events that when put together may seem completely overwhelming and far bigger than we are and way beyond our resources and capacities.

But today, I'm glad you came today because we hear the voice of God that says: I am bigger than all of that. I can handle all of that. Think of the anxieties and pressures

you faced this past week. How many times did you go to God in prayer and ask God to intervene and take over. Why would God take over unless you ask Him to? That is a huge difference. When things happen in our lives we often go to God and say: why didn't you do anything about it. We should hear the answer: you never asked me to do anything about it until the situation was over and then you started complaining. Well, today the church and Peter faced a power far greater than they were, but they did not hesitate to pray and they knew, as we need to be reminded today, that God's presence and power trumps all things.

READ SCRIPTURE

We all know the story of Daniel and the lion's den, but do we know the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace? It is an awesome story of God working the impossible. Turn to Daniel and look at the details of this story. The king of Babylon, furious with Daniel's 3 friends for not bowing and worshipping only him, decided to put them to death in a very visible way.

He heated the furnace to 7 times its normal capacity. He chose his strongest guards to throw them in. The furnace was so hot that his best guards were killed because they got so close. The king looks from afar and sees these men walking around and carrying on a conversation inside this furnace. There was a 4th person in there as well. What's going on? This 4th man looks like a God! The king approached the door carefully and says, okay, that's enough, come on out guys. Everyone was gathered when they came out: it was apparent that neither the fire, nor the king, nor anybody had any power over them. They were not only unharmed, but they didn't even smell like smoke. Not even their clothes were touched.

Everyone there, and certainly the king, attributes what just happened to God. Peter finds himself in a similar situation where the King of the land, just like in Daniel, was looking to lay violent hands against him. Let's look at that story and at the details. King Herod that we read about in these verses had a thing about killing people. You remember after Jesus was born a Herod killed all the children within a certain age, you remember John the Baptist who had his head delivered to him on a platter by a Herod. This Scripture today starts with one of the original 12, James the brother of John and the son of Zebedee killed by Herod.

Herod notices that his approval ratings shoot up after he has him executed. The Jewish people were all in favor of killing Christians because, after all, they were a threat

to everyone, not just the Romans but the Jews as well. Well, if the ratings go up after James, let's go after the main guy, the one in charge, Peter. He arrests Peter but has to wait a couple of days because the Passover was about to begin so he has to wait until after the Sabbath. Even he wouldn't go against this high holy day. He wasn't totally insensitive.

There is something about these two Scriptures that place people of God in direct conflict with the rulers of the time. In Daniel it was King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and in Acts it was King Herod and Caesar of Rome. They were in charge and kings and rulers then and now have the power to say a word and by that word thousands of people can go off to oblivion. It is a scary thing to go against the powers that be, because they be powerful.

But when those powers that be try to go against God's power and direction and against God's people, well, then it becomes no contest because God doesn't go by the rules of the game. God allows people to live through hot furnaces without their clothes smelling like smoke. God allows people to escape from captivity by not even trying and not even being aware of what is going on. God allows his son Jesus Christ to rise from the dead and bring salvation to all people.

If God's power is unmatched by anything else on the face of the earth, then why do we continue to waste our time in trying to defeat the Herod's of our lives through our own means instead of through God's ability and power?

Look at Peter. He was arrested and 4 squadrons of 4 soldiers looked over him. The night before an angel comes. The night before. Oh how much we would benefit from allowing God to work and provide what God is going to provide even at the last hour if necessary. The angel comes and here I have to believe that Peter is married and has children, small children. Peter has the uncanny ability to sleep through anything. Peter was sleeping like a rock...But like many fathers have also experienced from their lovely wives in the middle of the night the angel struck him on the side and told him to wake up quickly.

He does and then the angel gives him dressing instructions and through all of this Peter is in a fog, he doesn't even realize that this is actually happening. It is only until he has walked past the soldiers, out of the gate and in the country lane that he states: "Now I understand, now I get it that an angel came, delivered me from Herod and from all that the people were expecting."

Nothing can stop God's power, not chains, guards, kings, gates, people. Nothing. I know a lot of you today are facing overwhelming odds and overwhelming situations in your life. You feel burned by the fiery furnace of a relationship. You feel as if you are in chains to some dependency on either alcohol or drugs. You feel as if you are in a bit of a fog lately. And usually we think that there is no greater power than the verdict of the boss, the diagnosis of the doctor, the decree of the judge, the anger of the spouse, the misunderstanding of the parents. Once they make their decisions, there is nothing we can do.

Let me tell you about someone who faced a verdict and a future even more grim and hopeless than one you will ever face. His verdict was death, execution style in the first century, on a cross. And they actually carried it out, he didn't get saved on the cross, God didn't come at the right moment on the cross. Jesus died. Can we get any lower, any more hopeless than that? But God doesn't play by the rules, we think that when someone dies they are dead. But not with God, Jesus rose from the dead but not for his sake, but for ours.

We have already beat the overwhelming odds. We have in these stories that God will rescue those chosen to carry out his vision. We are those chosen and so the obstacles, the overwhelming furnace and the heavy chain that are such a real and heavy part of our lives now can be overcome through our complete reliance upon Jesus Christ,

When the church in vs. 5 is faced with the power of the king they resorted to their most powerful weapon, prayer. This type of prayer is only used one other time, that is with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Gut wrenching, sincere, total prayer. We must be a church that believes that God doesn't play by the rules, and every time it is to His children's benefit, and that is us. Amen.