

Sermon Text for June 28, 2020

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Isaiah 6:9-10, Acts 28:23-28

“The final countdown”

On July 22, 2018 we began a sermon series on Acts of the Apostles and we began with the title of the sermon: Are you ready? It has almost been two complete years to make our way through this book of the Bible that describes the early fledgling Christian community as it dealt with existing and thriving within a world that was very hostile to it and its message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Two years ago things were quite different. We had just finished VBS, Grant and Emily Garber had just gotten married. We were together in person and we were not streaming our services anywhere, and so we were not reaching out to the world with the message of Jesus Christ.

We began two years ago together a journey together through this book of the Bible. Today, we finish it together. Today is our last day, the final countdown and we find Paul in a position where we often found himself in Acts which is speaking and defending the truths of the Gospel in front of a group of Jewish religious leaders who weren't completely convinced by the testimony of Scripture that Jesus Christ was the Lord and Savior as the prophets and the promises of the Old Testament attested. Some do hear and believe and join the kingdom of God. But others will not and will actively fight against the message of the Gospel and the ministry of Paul.

Where were you two years ago? How was your life different from two years ago? How are you doing now? We find ourselves in a final countdown ourselves. I don't tend to go in this direction in my messages, but we do find ourselves in a final countdown as we know that Jesus Christ is going to come back and take us as His children to the Father. What is happening in the world around us now is peculiar, certainly peculiar to us, but not peculiar to our Father. It may feel like we are not only one step closer to the final countdown, to the day of judgment, but some of you may be thinking that the world events are leading us clearly to the final countdown happening any moment, that it is immanent.

I have always said that we know for sure that Jesus is coming back. We also know for sure, that we do not know for sure when that is and that today we are one day closer to that day than we were yesterday. Let's read our last Scripture in Acts.

READ SCRIPTURE

If I were to take a poll and ask you what is one of your favorite hymns I bet most of you would list Here I am Lord as one of the top ten. Many of us, myself included, have a hard time making our way through that hymn without having a tear in our eye as we envision receiving a calling from God to go and do God's work. But the hymn really only has a part of the story and it leaves out the most difficult part of the story which could potentially prevent most of us from actually saying: here I am Lord, send me.

So that hymn finishes at the place where we actually pick up. Here I am Lord, Is it I Lord, I have heard you calling in the night, I will go Lord, if you need me, I will hold, your people in my heart. Well, not really how it goes. God does ask who will be my messenger. Have you ever been around a group of preschoolers and anytime you begin to answer a question, even if you are leading up to asking for volunteers, the hands go up even before you begin, much less end, the request for volunteers. They will raise their hand no matter what, until you actually explain what it is that you want them to do.

This kind of reminds me of what happens with Isaiah. God says, okay folks, I need someone to carry out a mission for me. Isaiah is that child who raises his hand, me, choose me, here I am, choose me. Having no idea what he was signing up to do. Okay Isaiah, here is what I want you to do, in vs.9, tell the people that they are going to listen and look but have no clue to what is going on. Also, I want you, vs.10, to make the people have dull minds, stop up their ears, shut their eyes so that they are not able to be healed by me. How's that sound? And then we have Isaiah respond, which we did not read together in vs.11. Uhm, how long is this going to last? Just one time and then I get to switch gears and be the hero. No Isaiah, as long as the land is laid waste, and the people are sent far away.

So, who would sign up for that? Your job is to usher in your people into the final countdown and to equip them in a way that they are vastly unprepared for what comes next. God had had enough with the people and Isaiah was tasked with ushering the people from a chosen status to one of a chosen status of people who are being punished by God for the unfaithfulness, for their unwillingness to obey, for their already blindness and their muteness and the deafness in the midst of God being at work.

Paul in our Scripture today uses Isaiah's words to describe how he felt at the end of his ministry, in this his final countdown. His experience has been what is reflected in our Scripture

today, where he has an audience with his colleagues in the synagogue and where he argues the faith, the faith based upon Jesus Christ.

We pick up and find that Paul's journey is complete. We left him on Malta where he was welcomed in an extraordinary way by the natives of the island. Since the last time we saw him he has gotten back on the ship to head toward his final destination which is Rome. We find that he stops in Syracuse which is in Sicily. He stops in Pozzuoli which was about 5 miles away from the orphanage where Stacy and I began our ministry and where two of our kids were born. And then he ends up in Rome. In Rome they let him have his own lodging with his jailer, so not a very traditional prison, but one where he could have more freedom than most prisoners.

What a journey he has been on up to this point, and you would think that at this point he may want to put his feet up and relax in the last days of his life. But that is not what we find happening in our final Scripture. We pick up in vs.23 and read that a crowd of people has come to hear Paul speak about Jesus. From the morning until the evening he tries to convince the crowd that has gathered in his lodging about how Jesus Christ is the Messiah as was attested to the Scripture through the prophets and through Moses.

The result of his preaching, as we see all throughout Acts, is that some believed, and some did not. While in the past that unbelief led to Paul being persecuted and often even beaten and driven out of the town, here it was just a disagreement and the crowd argued among themselves the finer points of what Paul was sharing with them. Unbelief is always a mystery to those who believe. How do we explain that the truth which motivates us, which helps us to explain the world and to give meaning to our lives, does not move others? If the truth is so self-evident to us, why doesn't it move others?

It is at this stage, in vs.25 and 26, that Paul transitions from explaining the Gospel to making one last gasp attempt, to help those realize that we are now in the final countdown. As a result, God has lost His patience and this message of good news and this message of the kingdom of God which has come down in Jesus and who has shown us how to live with God and with each other, if you are not going to listen, or see, or understand, then it is time to use Isaiah's words. Paul puts himself in the position of Isaiah in telling the people that the plan of God to bless His people with a promised land is not static, it changes, and now that promise is no longer for the people of God, but for all people. Salvation is for all people.

There is a bit of a difference between what Isaiah says and what Paul says. Isaiah says that he is responsible to shut the eyes. Paul says that the people themselves shut their

eyes, it was their own fault that they did not understand and see and hear and follow the desire of God. So here both prophet and people are caught up in a tragic situation, for the prophet is commanded to speak to a people that cannot understand, a seemingly hopeless task. God's purpose has been blocked by human resistance, at least temporarily. Paul indicates that he shares in the failure. The greatest preacher and church planter of all time acknowledges his failing.

The final countdown where we find ourselves is one where Paul recognizes that God's plans for us have been expanded to include not just those he chose through Father Abraham, but all of humanity. Remember, Luke wrote Acts and in the very beginning of Luke 3:6 we read the following: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." But not if they close their eyes and refuse to see. But our task in these final days is to try so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Paul kept trying. In vs.30 we read that he welcomed all who came to him.

Brothers and sisters our eyes are blinded. Our ears are stopped as we focus on that which is happening around us as opposed to that which is from God. God's new normal way of being His people may not be normal to us. God's new normal was to include the gentiles into the plan of salvation, but we have still remained steadfast in our understanding that our way from old is still the only way.

In this final countdown look for ways in which God is able to reach us in spite of our stubbornness to see Him at work. Amen.