

When God Works Release from Confinement
Acts 12:1-11

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The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." Acts 12:8

Our prayers take us to the throne of God. There we ask for the threat of the Coronavirus to be removed and for the conditions of our confinement to be lifted. We trust God will answer our prayers, but we wonder how the answer will come.

We can put the question to the story of Peter's divine deliverance from prison and use that story as a case study. What can we learn from it about how God works release from confinement? To discover what we can learn we have to begin with the background of the story before we pull it into the foreground of our experience.

The background

Peter is confined to a jail. King Herod has felt his popularity and power threatened for some reason and in response has been lashing out at Christians as his scapegoats. He has already killed James, one of the Lord's chief disciples. Herod saw that the killing of James improved his poll numbers, so he had Peter arrested, and intended to kill him, too, as soon as it was convenient.

Herod made sure Peter's confinement was close-quartered and secure. Four squads of soldiers were put over him to shelter him in place. Two chains were bound around him. Two guards were stationed beside him, one at his right and one at his left. Two more were stationed at the door. Outside stood a heavy and tightly latched iron gate.

Peter slept. Someone who has instructed me on this passage took special note of Peter's sleeping and said, "A man must have a very good conscience, or a very dead one, to be able to sleep on [the night before his execution]."¹ But Peter slept. His spiritual security and moral confidence are in stark contrast to Herod's anxiety.

While Peter slept, an angel of the Lord appeared and light filled the room. I am inclined to believe it was Jesus himself who appeared, especially given the angel's use of a phrase so characteristic of Jesus: "Follow me." I think Peter may have heard a special and familiar timbre in that voice which was give-away to the Master. In any case, whether it was Christ himself or a messenger whom he sent, this much is clear: the guards are all oblivious to the divine intruder who has come to set the captive free.

The angel jabs Peter in the side to wake him. The heavy chains fall off as if on their own. In time the heavy gate will open on its own. But before the gate opens, before they are able

¹ George H. Morrison, *The Wings of the Morning* (1907, rpt.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 229.

to get passed any of the guards, the angel tells Peter to fasten his belt, tie his shoes, and put on his coat.

Linger with me right there with that part of the scene, for this is where the message is.² Mark the mixture of the miraculous and the mundane. The angel did what it took a miracle to do: break the chains, get passed the guards unnoticed, and open the tightly-latched gate. But the angel told Peter to do the mundane things he could do that did not require divine intervention: loop your belt, tie your shoes, put on your coat. The angel had Peter participate in his release from confinements. The release was a joint effort between the miraculous and the mundane.

The foreground

So much for the biblical background. Let's bring this story now into the foreground of our experience. There is a near one-to-one correspondence between Peter's situation and our own.

Our confinement is in plain view. A deadly virus is now afflicting nearly every country in the world. At the time of this recording, the global death toll is around 294,000 persons. Here in the U.S., the number of the dead is over 84,000 and rising. The virus is mysterious. There is much that is unknown. It is highly contagious and nearly everyone is vulnerable, though some appear more susceptible than others. We are under a "Safer at Home" order. We are not on a lock-down as though we were in prison. There are no chains, no guards, no locked gates to keep us in. But there are restrictions that have us confined and, the longer the confinement lasts, the more challenging, inconvenient, and uncomfortable it feels.

Laying the story from Acts 12 right alongside our confinement, I think it shines light enough to suggest our release will happen in the following way.

God will work our release by doing the miraculous things it takes divine power to do. God will be present with us. Outlining how God has been present has been the focus of several of my recent sermons. Beyond being present, God will inspire researchers who are studying the virus, developing treatments, and hoping to discover a vaccine. God will not be idle but will be at work doing the miraculous.

But at the same time, God will expect us to do the mundane things that are within our power. The paradox is that in order for the threat to pass as quickly as possible we have to stay in quarantine as long as necessary. To end the pandemic and be released from quarantine we have to do the equivalent of looping our belts, tying our shoes, and putting on our coats.

In practical terms: the longer we stay apart, the sooner we will be together; the longer we wear our masks, the sooner we will be able to breathe freely; the longer we refuse comfortable falsehoods, the sooner the uncomfortable truth will pass; the longer we sacrifice, the sooner we will gain. God will work our release but God will require our partnership.

Here at the church this means we are in no hurry to lift restrictions. Our Church Council will decide for Salem when it is best to return to normal congregational activity and how to

² At this point in the interpretation of the text, I am following Morrison, *Wings of the Morning*, p.232ff, closely.

structure that return. The Council will weigh with care the advice coming from state and national governments and from the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ as well as the Wisconsin Conference of Churches. But the decision as to when it is safe, wise, and prudent to re-open will be made locally by our Church Council.

In the meantime, here is what you should do. Pray for the miracle from God and do the mundane things God expects from you: loop your belt, tie your shoes, put on your coat: wear your mask, keep social distance, and stay home.