



The Big One That Got Away

Acts 25:23-26:1

Acts 26:19-29

October 29, 2006

INTRODUCTION

How many of you out there are fishermen? There's a lot of FBC folk who love to head to the beach and wet a hook. Now, how many of you have told a tale or two about "the big one that got away?" We'll take your word for it. Today I have a story for you about the big one that got away from Paul.

I think that people who love to fish must have an inside track on understanding the gospel. When Jesus told a group of fishermen, "Stick with me and I'll make you fishers of men," they began to understand what the Lord was about. If you understand a little about the art of fishing, then you understand a little about the art of sharing the gospel. Wise fishermen fish where the fish are. They use the right bait. They learn as much as they can about the life of the fish they are after. We can push this analogy too far, but there are some genuine parallels between fishing and evangelism.

Today we see Paul fishing in some deep water for a big fish, none other than a king, but the big one got away.

THE BIG ONE...

...in Acts 25 and 26, was King Agrippa II, great grandson of none other than bad old Herod the Great. Agrippa was Jewish in name, but Roman in style. He was raised in Rome in the Emperor's home. Emperor Claudius had named him king of the region east of the Galilee.

It was while Paul was in prison in Caesarea that King Agrippa and his ever-present sister Bernice came to pay a courtesy call on the new governor, Festus. Festus was trying to clear his desk of unfinished business left over by his predecessor. One of those bits of unfinished business was the fate of Paul. Festus saw no violation of Roman law, but knew that if he released Paul, he would never hear the end of it. Those religious leaders in Jerusalem who detested Paul would keep on pestering Festus and keep on trying to assassinate Paul. So when King Agrippa came calling, Governor Festus saw a chance to get advice from Agrippa and a little political cover for himself. They arranged a hearing for Paul the very next day. What happened was one of the most dramatic scenes in all the New Testament. (Read Acts 25:23 – 26:1)

What a scene. The setting was the palace complex in the coastal port of Caesarea. A wide jetty had been built straight out into the sea, and the palace was built there, surrounded on three sides by the beauty of the Mediterranean. In the great receiving hall, the royal court assembled, flanked on all sides by the honor guards of the five Roman regiments under Festus. The leading citizens of the city were in attendance, all of them waiting for the appearance of King Agrippa and his sister. And then, with splendid pomp and ceremony, the King Agrippa and his sister Bernice, robed in royal purple, enter the hall. And then together they all -- the king, the governor, the soldiers, the citizens -- they all turn their eyes toward the door for the entrance of the prisoner.

The apostle Paul is led in, chained by his arms to two Roman soldiers. Festus, arrayed in his scarlet governor's robe, makes a formal speech to summarize the case of Paul. Then Agrippa takes charge and gives Paul permission to speak. Paul, in keeping with the formality of the occasion, takes the classic pose of an orator by stretching his arm out before him, and begins to tell the king his story.

In Acts, this is the third time that Paul tells his story. For the third time he tells how he grew up in the heart of the Hebrew faith, how he came to work for the very people who now want him dead, how he chased down the followers of Jesus. For the third time Paul tells of being blinded by the light on the road to Damascus, and of meeting the risen Jesus, who appointed Paul to be a witness for him. Listen to how Paul concludes his formal defense, and listen to the response Paul got from the governor and the king. (Read Acts 26:19-29)

THE BIG ONE ... THAT GOT AWAY

Well, as you have heard, Paul tried to land the big one, King Agrippa, but he got away. It is amazing to me the courage and the audacity of Paul. Here he is, a chained prisoner on trial for his life, and yet he manages to turn the proceedings into an evangelistic appeal to the king himself. How did Paul do this? Simple: he just told his story.

For you and me, this repeats a lesson in evangelism we have had again and again in Acts: our stories are the most effective tools in evangelism we can use. We live in an environment that is hostile to Christianity. Our peers and coworkers and neighbors may tease us and try us, wondering how we can follow such a different path in life. When they do, it is easy for us to get on the defensive, to debate, even to attack those who question us. But if we would just open up and tell our story of our experience with Christ, the Spirit of God can use that story to transform the situation, to get our neighbors' full attention, even to pull them into our story until it they make it their story too. Religious debates only polarize. Religious attacks only make enemies. But the story of our walk with Christ: that can change lives.

That is what Paul did before the governor and the king: he told his story. How did they react? Governor Festus was so disturbed that he interrupted Paul to say Paul's great learning must be driving Paul crazy.

Undaunted, Paul turned to King Agrippa, called him by name and asked: “do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” (Acts 26:27) Paul was being so bold as to say, “Not only do you know about the prophecies of a Messiah, but you are beginning to understand that they are fulfilled in Jesus.” Now it is not Paul on trial, but the king. Whatever is going on in his heart, the king is evasive: “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?” Paul didn’t miss a beat and answered,

Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am – except for these chains.
(Acts 26:29)

Those words echoed through the hall, around the king, and the governor, and all their guests, and the crack Roman soldiers of five regiments. In that moment, the promise of the risen Jesus for Paul came true: that Paul “is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name to the heathen and their kings...” (Acts 9:15 Williams)

But King Agrippa didn’t bite. He was the big one who got away. But then, a student is no greater than his teacher. Even Jesus knew what it was like to present the good news, and then see someone walk away. The rich young ruler walked away from Jesus; certainly others did too. And King Herod Agrippa walked away from Paul.

And so others will walk away from us. That’s no sign of failure. We’re merely following in the footsteps of Jesus. So if you have made an attempt to share the good news with someone, but he didn’t bite, don’t let that sour you forever. That comes with the territory. Keep the big picture in mind.

THE APOSTLE THAT GOT AWAY

In Acts, the big picture was that although King Agrippa got away, the apostle Paul got away too. Paul got away from Palestine and was sent to Rome. It’s curious how that happened. After Paul had spoken, the governor and the king were convinced all the more that Paul had done nothing to deserve death or imprisonment. Yet they knew that if they released Paul, they would hear no end of it from the local religious leaders. So they fell back to Paul’s previous request for an audience with Caesar, and ordered Paul to Rome.

But in Acts, the governor and the king don’t get full credit for sending Paul to Rome. The risen Lord Jesus had already appeared to Paul, and said, “Courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, you must testify for me in Rome, too.” (Acts 23:11) The overall plan had already been set. The governor and the king were merely unwitting participants in the plan. Between their sense of Roman justice and their fear of the Palestinian populace, God was giving Paul a ticket to Rome paid by the Empire. Paul was getting away to take his story all the way to the Emperor himself.

It's like that for you and me too. We're not going to catch the big one every time we tell our story. But that's O.K., because we know that God is at work on the bigger picture. The Holy Spirit that got that apostle away from certain death in Jerusalem for a mission to Rome is the same Holy Spirit that directs our destinies too. The Holy Spirit that had set the overall plan for Paul has a plan and a mission for us.

Now what plans and missions might the Holy Spirit have in mind for us here? In the past few weeks, I believe I've been getting some hints. Here's one hint: recently our nation passed the 300 million mark in population. The U.S. is the third most populous nation in the world. It seems like everyone in the world wants to come to America, which makes our nation a major mission field. Even in our corner of the nation, just within a few miles of our corner on Nash and Park, there live 25,000 people who are not worshipping or serving Jesus in a church. Many of those 25,000 people are not the kind of people that churches try to reach out to. Many of them are overlooked by most churches. But honestly, knowing the heart and the mind of First Baptist, if there is any congregation in Wilson that can reach out to those overlooked people, it is us.

Now here is a second hint of the Holy Spirit's plan for us. This week Carol Bullard and I had a little reunion with Dr. Kunjumon Chacko. He's in Durham visiting his son Biju. Dr. Chacko ministers in the second most populous nation in the world: India. The children's homes he has founded care for hundreds of orphans. The seminary next to the children's home is training ministers to fan out across India with the gospel. Over lunch Friday he looked at me and asked "When are you coming to India?" I said, "Wouldn't it be a better use of resources for us just to send to you what it would cost to fly to India?" He said basically, "No, I don't want your money. I want you." He believes that relationships will endure far longer than cash. Now, I don't know what that means for me. But I do know that here we are, witnessing in the third most populous nation in the world, and a brother in the second most populous nation in the world is saying, "Come on over and help us."

But that's not all, and here may be a third hint of the Spirit's plans for us. Our congregation also has missionaries that are serving on the edge of the number one flash point in the world, the Middle East. One of them has grown up in this congregation and is now serving Christ in the Muslim world. In December, he and his family will spend a Sunday evening with us to tell us what God is doing with them in the Middle East. They too will tell us what Dr. Chacko told me: "Come on over and help us."

All of the above has happened or will happen in just a few weeks. It could be just a coincidence. Or it could be the Holy Spirit of God working through coincidences with our congregation to give us a mission in the Muslim world, and in the world's second largest population of India, and in the world's third largest population of America.

Like Paul and King Agrippa, you and I know what it is like to share our story with someone, only to see them walk away. It can be discouraging, unless we see the big picture of what the Spirit of God is doing among us. Jesus helped Paul to see the big picture when he told Paul:

“Courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, you must testify for me in Rome, too.”

Could it be that the Spirit of Christ is telling us:

“Courage! For just as you have testified for me in Wilson, you must testify for me in the whole world.

-- Douglas E. Murray