



“With All Boldness & Without Hindrance Acts 28:11-30 November 26, 2006

On the Sunday after Easter, you and I began a journey through the Book of Acts, trying to keep up with the Holy Spirit of God, as the gospel spread from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the world. Today, on the last Sunday before Advent, we come to the final chapter, when Paul arrives at the last place one would ever guess the gospel would reach: the capitol of the Empire, Rome, truly the end of the earth. Already we've read the first part of the chapter. Now for the conclusion: (Read vv. 16-31).

Today's message is in three parts: first, Triumphant Welcome; second, Mixed Results; third, Without Hindrance.

PART ONE: TRIUMPHANT WELCOME

In the movie “Mr. Holland’s Opus,” there is a moment of triumphant welcome and recognition. “Mr. Holland’s Opus” is about a high school music teacher. He could have had a very different career, traveling the country in professional bands, but Mr. Holland found himself staying at the school longer and longer, until the decades caught up with him, and it was time to retire. On his last day, he gets the surprise of his life. His students, from the past years and the present, have gotten together and formed an orchestra to play for him. They usher him into the concert hall. They all rise in honor of him, students from five, ten, twenty years ago. They give him the conductor’s baton, and they tell him they are ready to play for him one of his own compositions. They play Mr. Holland’s Opus. They indeed ARE Mr. Holland’s Opus; they are his work.

After decades of hard work, Mr. Holland’s work finally comes together. He realizes he really has reached his goal. He is honored for his accomplishment.

It was like that for Paul when his ship finally arrived at the port of Rome called Puteoli. Years before, the Lord had promised him that just as Paul had preached the gospel in Jerusalem, so he would preach in Rome. After years of imprisonments, and hundreds of miles by sea, and one shipwreck, Paul at last arrives in Italy. Did he wonder how a little Jewish tentmaker would fare in the greatest city in the world? (*Barclay, Commentary on Acts, p. 190*) But there at the port Paul was greeted by believers, who honored him with a week of hospitality. And then on the Appian highway to the capitol, Paul was greeted by the church in Rome. They couldn’t wait for him to enter the city. They had walked 30-40 miles to greet him with honor. You would have thought Paul was a victorious general about to march through the arch of triumph. In fact, the Greek language here implies just that.

The delegation from the church of Rome greeted Paul as one of the great ones of the earth. The Lord was keeping his promise to Paul. The Lord was staying with Paul all the way to Rome. Even better, the Lord had gone to Rome way ahead of Paul, and began a church that now greeted him like a hero. Paul let it all sink in: the assurance that the Risen Lord was sticking with him as promised, the consciousness of belonging to a world wide fellowship, the knowledge that wherever Paul went, there God would be. And then, together, the believers and Paul went the rest of the way into Rome. “The gospel is taken to the heart of the Empire, brought by one who journeys not alone.” *(Will Willimon, Anchor Commentary on Acts)*

We all need moments like that, when we get the encouragement we need to know that we are not alone. How precious is a Bible study, or a support group, or a mission group, when you come into the room, and you see six to eight faces light up because they are glad to see you. It is the mini-triumphal entry that all of us need. It is a foretaste of heaven, of that moment when we enter into the presence of the Father, and he throws a celebration because we have come at last. That was the triumphant welcome Paul got.

PART TWO: MIXED RESULTS

Once in Rome, Paul was relatively free despite being chained to a Roman soldier. He rented a place to live. He started his traveling tent-making business in this new market, and he made contact with the Jews in Rome. He did this wherever he went, for they were his people. The Jewish community in Rome was well established, with a dozen synagogues and thousands of members. Paul met with the leaders of the Jewish community. They had not heard of him, but they had heard nothing but bad things about the Christian movement. Nevertheless, they made an appointment to meet again and hear Paul out.

At the appointed time, they came back with so many people that they filled up Paul’s home. Paul kept them there the whole day. With his best logic and his deepest feelings, Paul explained how Jesus was the fulfillment of the hope of the Jewish people.

The results, as usual, were mixed. Some were convinced, but some were not. At the end of the day, as his guests were heading out the door, Paul made one last appeal, quoting their great prophet Isaiah on the tragedy of ears that cannot hear and eyes that do not see.

It was a mystery to Paul how some can look at Christ and right away recognize the Light of the World, while others see nothing. Some Jews could see it while other Jews could not. Some Gentiles could see it while other Gentiles could not. Paul had mixed results with both groups, but he never gave up on either of them.

It was especially hard for Paul whenever a fellow Jew would walk away. Paul had witnessed wind and wave and even the power of the Empire be controlled by the Lord God. Yet it was possible for a human being to resist the gospel of God. Where was God in this? Was this rejection a part of God’s plan that would still result in all Israel

recognizing the Messiah? Or was this rejection a rebellion that God would bend back to his will? Either way, Paul was convinced that God would find a way to keep the divine promise that all Israel would be saved.

At the same time that Paul struggled with the rejection of the gospel, he found that the most receptive group was the Gentiles who worshipped at the synagogues. Many of them recognized Jesus right away, and welcomed the good news into their hearts.

Why is it today that some people are so resistant to the gospel? Why can they not recognize who Jesus is? The worst witnessing experience I have ever had was when I tried to get my father to go with us to church. He used to go with us, until his parents came to live with us, which required him to stay home on Sundays to care for them. One by one they died. But after they were gone, my dad still stayed home on Sundays. I remember one Saturday I went to him. I must have been around nine years old. He was in his favorite spot, his easy chair, smoking one of his Prince Albert cigars. I pleaded with him to go with us. He just looked at me. Probably he was so taken aback that he didn't know what to say. But one thing he did. Every Sunday he would leave two dollars on the table by his chair for Debra and I to take to church. It was over thirty years later, when he was flat on his back in a nursing home, that he experienced a recommitment to Christ.

Some people are so resistant. And yet other people have no problem seeing right away who Jesus is. That has happened to me too. I have had people call me and say, "Can you meet with me this morning? I want to become a Christian today." As they made their leap of faith, all I had to do was catch.

Next month, a DVD of the life of Jesus according to Luke will be mailed to every home in Wilson County. Who will respond and who will not? That will be a mystery. Some people will find it among their bills and toss it into the trash. Some will pop it into their players, but after a while change the channel. But some will watch, and some will recognize who Jesus is. They will be convinced, and they will begin to change the direction of their lives. It will help if there is someone already in their lives, some trusted friend, who will be ready to catch...

But back to Paul's triumphant welcome, which was followed by a mixed response, which was followed by a bold conclusion:

PART THREE: "WITHOUT HINDRANCE"

The last words we have about Paul are these:

He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28:30-31)

At the beginning of the book, no one would have ever guessed that it could end this way. This year in ACC football, no one would have ever guessed that Wake Forest would play for the leader of the Atlantic Division. The story of Paul is even more amazing. Thirty years before, Paul was the number one enemy of the Way, rabidly hunting believers down. But now here he is in the center of the Empire, Rome, telling about Jesus to anyone who will listen.

The guards who were chained to him had no choice but to listen. There's no telling how many of them became believers. Besides the guards, Paul "welcomed all who came to him...teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ..." The last words of this book are just right: "without hindrance."

All roads lead to Rome, and now all roads lead to where the gospel of Jesus is being proclaimed boldly. The gospel has spread from a fearful handful of people hiding in an upper room in a backwater town of the empire, to being proclaimed openly in the center of the world, "without hindrance."

Oh, we know that Paul eventually will be killed. But that doesn't take anything away from this moment. For we also know that after Paul, there will be others. Despite rejections, persecutions, executions, the gospel continues to the very end of the earth, "without hindrance."

Today in America, we believers tend to bellyache about all the hindrances there are to sharing the gospel. Our culture is so much more materialistic and so much less willing to acknowledge any supreme authority. We feel all chained up by all the limitations we face. All those chains are nothing compared to the chains that shackled Paul, yet he was able to proclaim with all boldness.

Today I find myself thinking about another evangelist who did not let any chains hinder her from proclaiming the gospel. I keep thinking about Kay Simpson, who served on the staff here, and then went on to be a pastor in Dunn, and then came to Memorial Baptist Church in Buies Creek as minister of music.

At her funeral service, we learned of some chains that Kay carried that we did not know about. Her heart was so weakened that a normal person would have been severely restricted. Yet Kay worked a full-time job, and did music ministry too, and was working on her doctorate as well.

There were other chains on Kay that we did know about, the chains that some would place on a woman in ministry. Kay did not let them slow her down either. During the funeral service, there was a man who was so overcome with grief that he rushed out of the sanctuary. Later we learned that Kay had personally led him to saving faith in Jesus and (I assume) baptized him into the church where she was pastor. Kay proclaimed the kingdom with all boldness and without hindrance.

And so can we. No matter what chains weigh us down, you and I follow Paul and Kay and all the others who have gone before us, and who now cheer us on. Like them, we follow the powerful wind of God's Holy Spirit to the ends of the earth, and proclaim Jesus Christ, with all boldness, and without hindrance.

-- Douglas E. Murray