



On Trial For Resurrection
Sermon by Pastor Paisley Le Roy
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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Last week, Pastor Sarah spoke of the riot in Ephesus. She spoke of the chaos and confusion and sometimes even terror of a crowd. And this week, four chapters later, we hear of another tense moment. Let's paint the scene: a courtroom in Caesarea.

We see the governor Felix sitting high up on the judge's bench. He is the Roman governor that we know little to nothing about at the time. My contemporary eyes see him donning a black judicial robe. Then we have the prosecutor, a man named Tertullus, a roman advocate employed by the Jewish authorities. And this guy...he's not good news, y'all. It's all in his name, which is derived from a word meaning "liar" or "imposter."

As an avid fan of crime shows, I can't help but think of some of the terrible defense lawyers that come through the courtroom of Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. As I closed my eyes and pictured the scene that was unfolding in our passage, one particular defense lawyer stuck out in my mind: John Bunchanan. Now I'm not sure if I have any fellow SVU fans in here, but this particular defense lawyer is known to be terrible. He is known for berating witnesses and going great lengths to defend people he well knows are guilty of heinous crimes. He contributes to an unjust system. And we see this of Tertullus, he is laying it on thick, just playing to the judge. And, being true to his name, he is spewing lies in the form of flattery.

He says because of Felix the people have long enjoyed peace and great reforms have been made for the Jewish people because of him...which is false. As we see time and time again through scripture, there is no peace under the Roman Empire for occupied people. It is a time of great fear. No reforms have been made on behalf of the Jewish people. He, like other Roman governors we come across does not treat occupied people with graciousness. His opening remarks, if you will, are lies and are meant to win Felix over. After all, this is why Ananias and the other Jewish officials hired Tertullus. He knew the way of the system, how to manipulate it, and how to make sure justice would not be served.

And yet, we look across the room at the other bench and see the defense, representing himself. And though perhaps not historically accurate, as I closed my eyes and pictured the person of Paul, I saw a scrawny guy – a person of little meaning here in Felix’s courtroom. A person who undoubtedly knew he was defending himself against all odds. He is bound by arms and legs. And yet...when he speaks...he isn’t afraid. In fact his words are that of a confident man who knows and fully trusts that even in a court notorious for injustice, God was on his side.

He remains confident even though he has been told what would befall him, just chapters before today’s passage. He is visited by a prophet Agabus from Judea. And while he was there, Agabus took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands with it. And said, ‘this is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and hand him over to the Gentiles.’ And though his companions begged him not to go into certain arrest and even death, Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready

not only to be bound but even to die for the name of Jesus Christ.” And he would not be dissuaded.

This is the Paul we see today. One that will not shy away in the face of a harsh lawyer and a governor known to be unjust. One that knows the risk of being a follower of Christ and yet heads to Jerusalem. And a man who knows very well the truth of Agabus’ prophecy as he was arrested and handed over to Felix. He holds firm, knowing that God is greater indeed.

And as he begins to speak, perhaps you, like me, hears a confidence akin to the Johannine Jesus at his passion. Against all odds, calm. In front of a governor who will only do what benefits him and upholds the pax romana – a “peace” whose foundation is found in intimidation and power-over others...he stands in a human courtroom where the vulnerable are downtrodden and found guilty of that which they didn’t do, purely because a perceived threat to this “peace.”

Which is why Tertullus focuses on these social accusations against Paul – of stirring up crowds, of convincing people that there is something greater out there...greater than the empire. Felix, as any roman governor, would perceive these teachings as that of an insurrectionist – a terrifying threat to all that the roman empire has worked hard to subdue. Paul, the agitator, is a threat to all people of power have worked hard to build. But even more, God’s mission through Paul is the threat.

Here in this courtroom, and in many human courtrooms even to this day, Paul faces a broken system, broken justice. Here in this courtroom, broken justice faces off with God’s mission.

And in spite of all of this, Paul “cheerfully” makes his defense. As to him there is no greater privilege than to speak of God’s loving power, even if it threatened his life.

And though his confidence fills the air, I can’t help but to feel a lot of anxiety. Because as we see of human justice, is that just because Paul is right, just because he has truly done nothing wrong except proclaiming the word of God...doesn’t mean that justice would be served. And, even more, considering everything we know about the courtroom he finds himself in today, justice likely won’t be served.

I think this is very poignant. That even when we are right, even when we faithfully testify to the truth of God’s power and love and mission...it won’t always be received.

As I listen in on this text...I can’t help but worry...will it be enough? Is it going to work out? Will God’s will be done? And we can ask the same questions about the world in which we find ourselves today...will our words and actions be enough? Will God’s will be done?

Now I admit when I asked myself that questions in preparation for preaching, I was having a moment of doubt. Because we know how this passage plays out. He will continue to be detained. Felix will try to exploit him for financial gain. And Paul will die.

And so my answer to if God’s will would be done, was not nearly as confident as Paul’s. It was instead, “yes...I guess we’re supposed to believe that...because we believe in the resurrection.” The resurrection for which Paul is on trial today. The resurrection of both the righteous and wicked. The resurrection

of Paul, and of Felix, and of Tertullus. The resurrection of you and the resurrection of me.

Now I name my own struggle with that notion this week because there is power in naming that I, a rostered leader in God's church, can sometimes be so overwhelmed by the hurts of this world to see how this all could work out. There is power in naming this because surely you have struggled at times to believe it. Because it's hard to have the confidence of Paul. Let's be honest, even Paul doesn't always have the confidence of Paul... I mean there are some passages in his letters where he's downright miserable. And this passage is coming to us when many of us feel like things just could not get worse. More people are dying from covid now than did last summer at this time, by an order of magnitude. The bombings in Kabul. The pictures of devastation from floods and fires.

Yes, it can be hard to trust that God's will will be done. But Bethlehem... today, let us reflect on the spirit of Paul. On his secure knowledge that God's will would be done even when everything happening to him screamed that justice would not be served. God's justice is always served. God's justice is always served.

Thanks be to God. Amen.