

Acts 4:23-31, No. 11
“Christian Courage”
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It is Reformation Day and for two reasons I have decided to continue our sermons in Acts rather than preach a sermon apropos that great theological and spiritual renewal of the 16th century, the event that created, however unintentionally, the Protestant Church of which, of course, Faith Presbyterian is a part.

First, preaching in the Reformation became in a many places, including Wittenberg and Geneva, the consecutive exposition of books of the Bible, just what we are doing with Acts these Sundays. The reformers realized that the people as a rule did not know the Bible and needed a thorough and in-depth introduction to its teaching. Calvin, for example, preached through much of the Bible during his years in Geneva. So by continuing with the next paragraph of Acts I am honoring the tradition of Reformation preaching. *Second*, the particular paragraph before us highlights the courage of the apostles and early Christians in the face of official persecution. In this it might just as well have been describing the Reformers who, literally, took their lives in their hands to stand up for the reformation of the church, its faith, and its worship. The Reformation was a movement of heroes as was the establishment of the Church in its earliest days.

Text Comment

- v.24 What was the reaction of the apostles to the threats of the Sanhedrin? Well they gathered the Christians together and they prayed. They addressed themselves to one who had far greater authority and power than the Sanhedrin. As the Puritan John Flavel put it, “He who is used to being before a great God will not be afraid to look such little things as men in the face.” [*Works*, vol. VI, 65] Notice once again, as before in chapter one, that they prayed *together*, a point that Luke is ringing the changes on.
- v.26 The citation from Psalm 2 reminded them that the Scripture had long before foretold the world’s opposition to Christ, the Lord’s anointed; “anointed one,” as you remember is the meaning of “Christ.” Government officials and religious leaders, both Gentiles and Jews had conspired to kill him. But in that opposition, unbeknownst to them, they were in fact accomplishing God’s will, for Jesus came into the world to suffer and die for the sins of his people. The prayers of God’s people have always been shaped by the teaching, even the wording of the Bible.
- v.30 Just as God had vindicated Jesus and frustrated the opposition of so many to him by raising him from the dead, so they asked that he would continue to frustrate their antagonism, now directed not at him, because he was in heaven, but at Jesus’ followers.

Take note. They weren’t asking that their enemies be punished or even removed. They simply didn’t want to be undone by their opposition. They were asking God to enable them to continue spreading the word with boldness. The authorities could threaten, but as

they themselves admitted in the previous paragraph, the miracle had put them in an impossible position. The people were ecstatic and would neither understand nor appreciate any government attack on men who could work miracles, especially such happy miracles!

- v.31 In those heady days of signs and wonders, extraordinary precisely because so contrary to the normal experience of people, they were granted still another visible and audible demonstration of the Holy Spirit's presence with them and, encouraged and emboldened, their preaching went on as before. As Chrysostom, the great early Christian preacher put it, the shaking of the room made them the more unshaken! [*Homilies on Acts*, XI, 73] Once again we see that the attacks of the world lead to the strengthening of the church, a fact that will prove to be a theme in Acts. [Peterson, 198]

Peter and John had been arrested, kept in jail overnight, hauled before the authorities and questioned, ordered not to preach in the name of Jesus, and threatened with further reprisals should they do so. Their response is more than an interesting bit of early Christian history. Like everything else in Luke's narrative, this is a picture of the Christian life and of Christian witness as they ought to be.

We have already read of the authorities having taken notice of the "boldness" of these men. Galilean fishermen not university or divinity school graduates, their public speaking was taking the city of Jerusalem by storm. They had a great story to tell, a message to deliver, and they were fearless. Nothing in their lives to this point had prepared them for public speaking – something that makes even well educated people nervous and insecure – but they were captivating huge crowds of people, holding them spellbound by what they had to say and the way they said it.. Here was Peter, who had cowered and betrayed the Lord before a servant girl the night of the Lord's arrest, commanding the attention of multitudes and declaring the triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death fully aware that the authorities were going to hate him for doing so.

As I said, this boldness and courage will prove to be an important part of Luke's profile of a Christian in the book of Acts. In fact, the book will end on this same note. Chapter 28 ends with this:

“[Paul] lived there [i.e. under house arrest in Rome] 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...*”

Courage, boldness, and a refusal to be cowed by the active opposition or even the indifference of the world is throughout the Bible a prominent feature of Christian character. We are commanded to be this way repeatedly in the Bible.

“Be strong and courageous...” the Lord told Joshua. [1:6-9]

“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you...” So said the Lord to his people through Isaiah the prophet. [41:10]

And it is the same in the New Testament. Paul tells the Christians in Corinth: "...stand firm in the faith, be men of courage (literally, "play the man") and be strong." [1 Cor. 16:13]

And, again typical of the Bible, the same point is made negatively, as is often the case in the Bible's moral teaching. We read in Rev. 21:8 that *the cowardly* will be among those punished in the final judgment, along with the unbelieving, the sexually immoral, liars, and so on.

And, as we would expect, throughout Holy Scripture we are provided with example after example of such courage and boldness: David before Goliath, Elijah before Ahab, and the apostles here in Acts 4. We are also, of course, given examples of cowardice so that we do not fail to see it for what it is. Think of Israel at Kadesh Barnea refusing to enter the Promised Land for fear of its inhabitants, or Peter on the night of the Lord's arrest, or John Mark on Paul's first missionary journey. Even faithful men can sometimes play the coward!

And because the Bible describes life and Christian life as it is, we are not surprised to find the landscape of church history ever since littered with both the brave and the cowardly, the bold and the fearful. The martyrs, for their courageous loyalty to the Lord and his kingdom, are the quintessential Christians, the representative followers of Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation and there have been a great many of them in the centuries since. Indeed, it's now thought that probably many more Christians have been murdered for their loyalty to Christ over the last century than in any previous century of human history. But in many lesser ways Christians have boldly and courageously borne witness to Jesus in the face of great danger or opposition.

This is Reformation Sunday so let's take examples from that period. You know the name John Hus, the pre-reformer, who was executed for what was essentially the same teaching as Martin Luther's but a century earlier, in the year 1514. This past June we saw the great monument to Hus in the main square of Prague. Though not for the best reasons, he is still a hero to the Czechs. We also walked through the church where he preached and from which he began a movement that would lead eventually to the Reformation.

Luther read Hus and began repeating some of the things Hus had said about the gospel and the teaching of the Bible and so Luther's Catholic adversaries attempted to get him to incriminate himself as a heretic by forcing him to admit that he agreed with the man who had earlier been executed as a heretic. Finally Luther realized that this was precisely the issue. Hus had been right and the Church had been wrong, and had committed a grave sin in executing a faithful minister of Christ precisely for being a faithful minister of the gospel. He bravely and publicly embraced Hus as a true teacher of the faith. In a formal debate with the German scholar John Eck at the University of Leipzig in July 1519, Eck had said,

"I see that you are following the damned and pestiferous errors of...John Hus..."

To be identified with a heretic in those days was a serious charge, one that could get you killed. Luther replied, "Among the articles of John Hus, I find many which are plainly Christian and evangelical, which the universal Church cannot condemn." After the debate Eck described Luther as "the Saxon Hus." Luther would later write that he now agreed with Hus more than

than he had realized at the debate at Leipzig. By 1521 he was willing to say “We are all Hussites without knowing it.” To say that in 1521 was to ally oneself with someone the church had executed for heresy; it was asking for trouble and, of course, trouble found Luther in spades.

Now both Hus and Luther were brave men, willing to risk reputation and life itself for what they came to see was the plain teaching of the Bible about Christ and salvation. But there were many others who sided with these men who risked much by doing so. When John Hus was being led out of the Council of Constance that had just condemned him to death, a Czech nobleman, John of Chlum, publicly held out his hand to Hus to signify his loyalty to him. In other words he let everyone in that assembly the hall know that he stood with the man they had just condemned to death, a dangerous thing to do. Just a few weeks ago the lawyer of a civil rights advocate in Iran was reportedly arrested for shaking the hand of his client while meeting her in prison! [WSJ Oct. 30, 2015, op ed page] Do you realize that without the courage of such men, without their boldness, humanly speaking the Christian church would not have survived in the world! But with it, with such courage, such self-forgetful throwing caution to the wind, it has overspread the world. I remember Adlai Stevenson, the American politician and twice presidential candidate, remarking, after returning home from a trip to West Africa many years ago, that having seen a number of cemeteries on his visit he had learned for the first time how many missionaries, especially from England, had given their lives to bring the gospel of Christ to people who had never heard of the Lord or his death or resurrection. They knew very well the likelihood of dying violently or from one of Africa’s fevers, and they knew that many who had preceded them to West Africa had die. Nevertheless they filled ship after ship after ship, making their way to African folk who needed to hear about Christ. And Multitudes of them died, as they knew they would.

But, alas, Christians have not always covered themselves with such glory. Two great controversies in the history of the early church – the Novation and the Donatist controversies – were spawned by disagreements among ministers and churches over what to do with Christians who had betrayed the faith under threat of punishment but who, afterward, were sorry and wanted to be readmitted to the church. Some were willing to forgive them – surely they were right – but **many** others were not.

And in the era of the Reformation it was the same. A century after Luther the Reformation was still uncertain of success in Scotland. The advocates of the Reformation – the Scottish Covenanters – were being threatened with every sort of punishment, including cruel forms of death, by the Scottish government, by the church which was aligned with the government. One of the fascinating documents of the period is the diary of the Scottish nobleman, Alexander Brodie, who wanted to side with the Reformation men, but feared the consequences. One does not usually read such frank admissions of cowardice as are found in Brodie’s diary.

“Jan. 20, 1662. My perplexity continues as to whether I shall move now or not, stay or return, hold by Lauderdale [the Reformation man], or make use of the bishop [that is, submit to the government]. I desired to reflect on giving titles, speaking fair, and complying. [In other words, he knew very well that he was playing the coward, saying things he didn’t mean to avoid trouble.] I went to Sir George Mushet’s funeral, where I was looked at...like a speckled bird. [That is, his former friends were realizing he wasn’t

willing to stand up for them or for the truth.] Oct. 16. Did see the bishop, and in my discourse with him did go far in fair words and the like. [He knows he's a coward and he knows he's saying what they want to hear simply to avoid trouble for himself.] Oct. 31 James Urquhart was with me. Oh that I could attain to his steadfastness and firmness! But, alas! I am soon overcome; I soon yield to the least difficulty. [Amazing! The man is admitting to himself that he's a coward; that he admires courage in others but lacks it in himself.] Oct. 26 Duncan Cuming was here, and I desired him to tell the honest men in the south that though I did not come up to their length, I hoped they would not stumble [at] me." [In other words, tell the prisoners on the Bass and the martyrs of the Grassmarket in Edinburgh that Lord Brodie is a [Reformation man] at heart, and ought to be a sufferer with them, but that he loves Brodie Castle and a whole skin more than he loves Jesus Christ, or the gospel, or the faithful disciples of the Lord.] Die Dom. I find great averseness in myself to suffering. I am afraid to lose life or estate. I hold it a duty not to abandon these honest ministers that have stuck to the Reformation. And if the Lord would strengthen me, I would desire to confess the truth like them. [Now his cowardice is the Lord's fault!] Shall I [refuse] to hear that honest minister, James Urquhart, for a time, seeing the storm that is like to fall on me if I [go to hear him]? What counsel shall I give my son? Shall I expose myself and my family to danger at this time? What is my duty? A grain of faith would easily answer all these questions? [The man was admitting to himself that he was betraying the Lord by his cowardice and that his profession of loyalty to Christ was pure hypocrisy!]

The apostle Peter, John Hus, Martin Luther, John of Chlum, and Alexander Brodie found themselves in the same situation as every Christian must eventually in one way or another. To be bold for Christ, to identify themselves with him would cost them something, might very well cost them everything. Indeed in Peter's case, and John Hus' case it eventually cost them their lives. But how differently Brodie handled himself than did the others. While he equivocated in fear, the others turned to the Lord for help and strength and said and did what honesty, faith, obedience, and loyalty to Jesus Christ required.

When we read this short paragraph in Acts 4 we may be inclined to think, "Well, of course *they* were bold. The Holy Spirit had descended upon them at Pentecost, they had been given the ability to speak in languages they had never learned, they wielded miraculous power to heal the sick, and, when they prayed *the building shook!* I'd be courageous and bold too, if I had such advantages.

But actually that is not right. They had many advantages, no doubt. We wish we had them ourselves, understandably. But we are going to learn very soon that there were cowards in the church even in those heady early days. And even the Apostles themselves were not immune to the temptation to protect themselves from the anger and opposition of others. Peter will stumble in just this way as we learn in the first two chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, asks them to pray for him that he might be bold and fearless in his preaching of the gospel. The apostle Paul! Even that titan of a man needed their prayers to steel himself against playing the coward!

But more than that, throughout the Bible and throughout church history we see courageous men and women defying dangers of every kind, ignoring threats, undertaking perils *precisely because they believed the very same things these early Christians confessed in their prayer*. No miracles for them, but they knew that God was very great, that he would be faithful to his Word, that he had given them a high and holy and sacred calling to point others to the way of salvation, the way to find eternal life, *and, that safe as they were in the salvation they found in Jesus Christ, they were the ones of all people who were free to risk life and limb for others*. Should the Lord allow them to bear witness by their death, death for them would be triumph itself, immediate entrance into the presence of the Lord. They could take the risk because they had nothing to lose and everything to gain. That will be Stephen's state of mind when we meet the first Christian martyr in chapters 6 and 7.

See the way the Christians worked through the problem in their prayer to God.

1. When we act as servants of the living God, when we do his will and serve his cause, no man will be able to harm us unless it is the Lord's will. And if it is his will, as it was, for example, when his enemies sent Jesus to the cross, everything will work out to our ultimate good and the good of many others. These people were setting the Lord before them and remembering whose side they were on!
2. Then they remembered, what we are often tempted to forget, that the opposition we encounter as the followers and representatives of Jesus Christ is only what Scripture teaches us we will face. A known, predictable problem is easier to face.
3. More than that, even that opposition, even the most hateful and cruel opposition, is in some mysterious way the plan and purpose of God. No one can hurt us without the will of our Father in heaven. And if he has chosen to let us suffer loss or peril or sword, then we can be sure that in this way we are making some important contribution to the kingdom of God. Those Egyptian Christian men who met their deaths so valiantly a few months ago, whom Islamic State Jihadists beheaded on camera, will, I'm quite sure, be the cause of a good number of Muslims leaving their faith for Christ and the gospel. It has always been so. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

The opposition we face in this world, either the positive scorn or the dismissive indifference of the enemies of Jesus Christ, either the threat of some temporal loss or to our very lives, is utterly at God's command. Those we are inclined to fear in this world, those whose better opinion of us we are often so desperate to protect, those before whom we remain silent when we should speak for fear of what they will think of us or do to us, have no power to do us any real harm and are at a deeper level railing at God who has them and their lives entirely in his hands. So futile is their rebellion against him that even their rebellion ultimately accomplishes his will.

4. Still more, there is something impossibly ennobling in the realization that the hatred of the world is not really for us, but for Christ himself and it falls on us only because the world cannot express its hostility to the Lord in any other way than by directing it against his followers. "If they hated me, they will hate you," our Savior told us before he left the world.

But he also said, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” It is our glory to suffer for our Savior’s sake. Indeed, any man or woman with Christian blood in his or her veins wants in some way to share in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. We will read in the very next chapter that these same early Christians considered it high honor to “be counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Christ’s name.”

At the same time Lord Brodie was conniving somehow to avoid suffering for Christ, another layman, John Campbell, Earl of Loudon (Loudon is where our friends in Newmilns live!) was losing everything for the cause of the Reformation. Samuel Rutherford wrote to him to encourage him:

“You are many ways blessed of God, who have taken upon you to come out to the streets with Christ on your forehead, when so many are ashamed of him, and hide him (as it were) under their cloak...” [CXVI, p. 235]

5. And, then, finally, the Lord is near to hear us when we pray to him for strength and courage and ready to put his power and presence to work on our behalf. The disciples knew this and counted on this: they never imagined that they had to take on the world *by themselves* or that this was *their fight alone!* They believed that God would be true to his promise to give them words to speak when they were called upon to defend themselves or the faith, to protect them, and to bless their words and witness to the life and salvation of others. How many times throughout the Bible do we hear something like this?

“...the Lord Almighty is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress.” [Psalm 46:5-8]

And through the ages how wonderfully he has come to the aid of those who desire to honor and serve him. Not necessarily a shaking room in these cases, but no less the powerful ministry, protection, and aid of the Holy Spirit. From that same time in Scottish church history, when the Reformation was still very much in doubt, comes this illustration of that divine faithfulness.

A girl was going into the country to attend a ... communion service on a Sunday afternoon. Such services were, of course, a way for reformation-minded people to meet together in worship and so they were against the law; those found at them or proved to have attended them were punished severely – jail or worse – and the countryside was being scoured by the king’s troops looking for just such services in order to arrest those attending them as a way of intimidating everybody else in the population. Well, this girl came suddenly face to face with just such a band of dragoons. She was momentarily dumbstruck, wondering how to explain her presence out in the country. But upon being questioned she found herself thinking to say, “My elder brother has died and they are going to read his will this afternoon, and he has done something for me and left something to me, and I want to hear them read the will.” The soldiers who have persecuted the church of God through the ages have not, as a rule, been the sharpest knives in the drawer, and this answer satisfied them and they let the girl go on her way.” [In Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 104-105] What was that but the Lord keeping his promise that the Holy Spirit would speak through his servants by giving them the words to speak when they were called, as Jesus said they would be, “before rulers and kings, synagogues and councils.” [Mark 13:11]

What a beautiful thought and what a beautiful thing: to come out to the streets with Jesus Christ on your forehead. Surely that is what any Christian wants to do. The Lord Jesus was sometimes afraid; no man was ever as afraid as he was in prospect of his death on the cross, bearing the sin of the human race as he was about to do. He knows our fears and he cares for us. Surely he will help us who want to be bold and brave for his sake!