

Prayer Meetings in Our Messiness
Rev. Katelyn Nutter Dowling
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Our reading this morning comes from Acts 12:5b-17. Listen now for how the Word of God is speaking to you this morning.

While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists. 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." Peter[a] went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

After the angel had escorted him out of the city and left, Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.'

As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They broke from their fervent praying for his release and said to her, 'You are out of your mind!' But she insisted that it was so. They said, 'It is his angel.' Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, 'Tell this to James and to the believers.'* Then he left and went to another place.

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

This morning we are looking into a glimpse of the book of The Acts of the Apostles. Even further, I'd like to look with you all through a specific view, a certain set of binoculars, a set of

glasses. Specifically, a lens of prayer. As the book opens, the Holy Spirit descends on the church at Pentecost, shaking up everything. The spirit of God spreads like wild fire. This is an idea that continues throughout the book—and one that continues into the scripture today.

Just before this, we've just seen Peter, the disciple, thrown into prison unjustly, maximum security. 4 guards. The sun has hardly set and Peter is asleep.

From out of nowhere an angel shows up and enters his cell. The angel shakes Peter awake and says, "Get up, Peter. Put on your sandals; strap on your belt. We're getting out of here." Peter staggers around in confusion, which, to be honest, is understandable. They go through one door and then another, both swing open right in front of them.

So Peter bangs on a familiar door—Mary's door, anxious to get off the street where the authorities can spot him. No one answers right away. While Peter is banging on the door the little band of disciples is fervently praying. And the church prays fervently to God for him. Fervently. Intensely. Enthusiastically. Who have we been praying for fervently? And my, how beautiful it is to be on the receiving end of that fervent prayer. I have been. And perhaps you all have been, too. It's a physical lifting up, loving. Hmm.

Prayer is a sharing. I try to encourage the congregants where I serve to feed us their prayers, and not just the fearful or scary timed ones, but to call up the office or call up their elder, so that we might be redirected by God to serve them in a new way. In a tight-knit community way. So that we may pray for them fervently. And that maybe they might pray for the Pastoral Team and staff.

It's been a crazy year for us at First Presbyterian, the church where I currently serve, our little church with a big heart. We, like your church, have experiences deep deaths that affect our congregation in huge ways. We lost a woman who loved to hear our bells toll. We lost a former mayor who was a member, and deep friend who had joined us recently but made a huge impact. We had a woman who experienced homelessness living on our front porch after she'd been kicked out of everywhere else. It made us come to grips with the idea that, even in Peachtree City, homelessness is all around us. Our church helped her find and fund housing where she is currently staying. We baptized families and gathered them into the greater family of God and remembered our own baptism while doing so. We had large and small service projects, and I finally got to see the 4th of July parade that everyone told me I wouldn't believe until I saw it. I come from a church that takes prayer seriously—that takes God seriously. That looks at the community around it and doesn't just tweet out our thoughts and prayers but sits...and mourns...and celebrates...and feels led to work.

And I pray that, together as a denomination, we might pray for how we are called together to serve the world at large. Our brothers and sisters out "there" who have not yet even stepped foot "in here." And that maybe one day there won't be a here and there, only an us.

Back to Peter banging outside the prayer meeting...

Finally, the only person inside who is really paying any attention to the racket at the gate outside is a maid who works there named Rhoda. Seeing that no one is listening, Rhoda gets up to answer the door.

There are moments where this feels like a movie—Peter confused, doors swinging open magically, prayer that is so loud that they can't hear the answer to their prayer outside the door, and the only person that is listening is a woman. A maid.

Dear little Rhoda comes to the gate that is a buffer between the house and the street, and she asks who's knocking. She hears Peter's voice, recognizes it immediately, and full of joy, but also terribly rattled, she runs back into the house to tell everyone that Peter is outside. He's loose, he's alive, he's right here now, she says. But he's still out on the street, knocking, knocking, knocking.

And the ancient church, in the form of this small band of male disciples, responds in unison, "Get a grip, Rhoda. Peter's in jail. Keep on doing your maid thing, we're praying here." And then moments later Peter appears before them, they can't deny it. He is free! And then he quickly disappears. And then the ancient church mutters, "Dang; Rhoda was right." (big smile) Or something like that.

All over town jail cells are swinging open, the military are put in disarray, and women like Rhoda are spreading the subversive news that the people Caesar is killing, or trying to kill, won't take it lying down.

What Luke, the writer of Acts, wants us to know is that the Good News isn't over until God says it's over. No matter where we are—what mess we've gotten ourselves into... It's not over until God says it's over.

And this news is wild. This news that Peter is out—changes everything. As Lin-Manuel Miranda puts it in his hit musical Hamilton, the world turned upside down.

I imagine this is how the church in Acts feels when Peter shows up. When Rhoda tells the group that Peter is out of jail. I know it's certainly how the Church in our world feels. That the world is turned upside down. Violence is everywhere, election is already starting to warm up, churches are quite literally on fire, wildness and death all around. I know it's certainly how we feel. Personal losses, uncertainty, just waiting in these moments between stability. Maybe it's a new job. Or new baby. Or a new loss. Or a new house. Or a new boss. Newness is all around us. Our world has been turned upside down.

And yet--God uses the prophets—the unlikely ones, like Rhoda, to say it's not over. To proclaim hope in a prayer. To turn us right side up. Through her, God claims that there will even come a

day when the powerless among us will have their opportunity to rise up and address the powerful. And, according to Luke, that day has now come because a maid like Rhoda who works a second job cleaning the Jerusalem Motel 6 on weekends, is commissioned to preach the second Easter sermon. And she says, "God is alive and look, God meets us even here."

Our lives are messy. There is disappointment, falling out, broken relationships, loss, and so much more. So much messiness. But then, just when we think that death has the last word, when we feel like we're sitting in the prison of our choices and actions, praying that we weren't who we were... God moves in, kicks open the iron gate, slaps us on the side, as the angel slapped Peter, gives us a vision, leads us into the darkness and also through it, knocks on a door, turns the key in the lock; servant girls are charged to preach the good news; the men in charge end up laughing at themselves, and lives our changed.

Yes, God is a God of the prophets, the Rhodas. And God is also a God of the incarcerated, of the lonely and the contained.

But God is also the God of the pew, of prayer. Of the people.

God meets us where we are, in our messiness. In our pew. In our problems and sinfulness and human failings. And God calls you good. Loved. Valuable. Mine. God calls you.

And prayer is a response to that call. When our prayers are messy even, God meets us. When we cry, when we scream, when we're angry, frustrated, embarrassed, shameful, whatever it could be... God meets us there, in our messiness. And redirects us as to where we should go from here. That's how grace works. That's how prayer works.

So where are we being directed to go? As a church, as a Presbytery, as a city here in Buffalo, as a next call, as an individual? Where are the places where God is meeting us here, in our mess, in our pew, in our prayer, and leading us toward a calling to each other?

See, because I believe prayer isn't just that. It doesn't stop there. When we say we will pray for someone, we do it. But I think that prayer is a much larger responsibility than meets the eye. Prayer is a commitment, not only to talk with God for that person, but also that I think God hears our prayers. God hears us asking God to help those folks out there and puts us up on a sign up sheet to help out with them in God's plan.

When the church is asking God to set Peter free from the jail and asking God to make it so Peter was there in the room with them, they should think that they now have some kind of responsibility.

But, Rhoda. Dear Rhoda, prays with the church and then hears the knocking at the gate and goes. Not because she's the servant, or because she was in the area, or because she knew there was the most faithful and knew God's plan, but because she had agreed to be open to

God's plan for Peter's freeing. And she realizes that agreeing to pray for someone doesn't just stop there.

And that's pretty extreme. Certainly not something to be thrown about or around like we do so often today. So that's something that I hope we'll take away from Rhoda here. Her idea of prayer is certainly talking to God about the brokenness of the world and her friend, but also that her idea of prayer having open ears to what is happening into his world and being committed to being a part of God's plan to answer that prayer, an actor and advocate, an agent and a minister.

Prayer is us saying to God "these are our people. These are our community. We claim them. And we're ready to help you love them and help them." Because, who do you think God is going to use to answer those prayers, anyway?

Perhaps we can meet others in their mess. Maybe that's where God is calling us to. Let's all join in on that work, at Westminster Presbyterian or wherever you serve, in the highest of courts to the lowliest of classrooms, in our denomination and in our world, in praying fervently, in listening for the voices of people like Rhoda, in listening when we feel like the world is turned upside down, and finding out where we might go--together.