

“Looking for a More Convenient Season”

Acts 24 (selected verses)

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W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

During these Sundays from Epiphany (January 6) and Ash Wednesday the scripture passages are chosen to help us see Jesus as the light of the world. Today’s passage from Acts 24 shows that light in a little different way. It shows that light through the witness of Paul as he witnesses/testifies in court to the Roman Governor, Felix, and the Jewish High Priest Ananias and the lawyer that Ananias has brought along Tertullus. I know those are a lot of names to keep us with so I will talk slower.

The passage in Acts 24 has Paul in Caesarea Maritima or Caesarea by the Sea. It is on the Mediterranean coast and the headquarters of the Roman Garrison for Judea. Paul was initially arrested in Jerusalem by the temple police for causing a disturbance on temple mount. The authorities so disliked Paul that they had taken a vow that they would fast, not eat anything, until Paul was dead. That is serious trouble for Paul. However, the son of Paul’s sister heard of the plot and went to the Roman tribune, the person in charge of the prison in Jerusalem, and had Paul removed from Jerusalem to Caesarea for Paul’s protection.

Paul did not lead a dull life. He was always in trouble either with the church leaders like Peter and James because he was preaching the message of Jesus to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews, and he was in trouble with the local authorities either because he incited crowds to excitement or the local synagogue leaders didn’t like the competition of dealing with Paul and his new message about the Christian sect and Jesus.

One of the messages of the writer of Acts, Luke, is delivering is that the apostles and other Christian leaders are going to suffer the same kind of treatment that Jesus suffered. They are going to be beaten, despised, ridiculed, stand trial before local and Roman authorities and through all these encounters witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Paul is always in mortal danger. Ananias the man from Damascus who helped Paul restore his sight after his Damascus Road encounter with Jesus was told by an angel, “The Lord will show Paul how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” (Acts 9:16) Paul must suffer through many attempts on his life, like the one here in Jerusalem. The Christian faith is borne into the world in a very personal way, through persons whom God chooses to speak the truth. It is quite natural then for the enemies of the good news to try and stop the spread of the gospel by killing the leaders.

The Roman Tribune in Jerusalem, Claudius Lysias writes a letter to Governor Felix explaining how Paul is innocent of all charges as far as Roman law is concerned. Of course the real audience for Paul’s trial is not the temple leaders who come to pursue Paul in Caesarea or the Roman officials, the real audience is the church that Luke is addressing in the book of Acts. The

real audience are those faithful Christians who will also face persecution in the time ahead and need an example of what they can say and do and how they can stand firm in the Lord.

At Caesarea Antonius Felix is the governor of the area, who in a little act of nepotism had been given a kind of favor because of his elder brother's friendship with the Emperor Claudius at Rome. Felix was a funny little man, unfit for his job of Governor. All manner of gluttony and corruption covered his short reign, even if he managed to survive and govern. That's Felix.

Tertullus is the Roman lawyer. Acts 24 is the case which he is making before Felix about how evil Paul of Tarsus really is. It was said in another place that Paul was turning the world upside down. "We enjoy peace," Tertullus said, "my most excellent Felix; but it could be ruined by this fanatic and his new religion. Examine him, O Governor Felix, and you will see for yourself that we are right." Rest the case for the prosecution.

Defending himself, Paul responded, "I am innocent. They cannot prove their charges. The only thing I admit is that I follow *The Way*, worshipping the same God as our parents, believing everything laid down by the Law and the Prophets, because I believe that the supremacy of God in Christ takes place in this world and the next. They brought me to trial because of my statements regarding his righteous power. It's a fraud."

Poor old indecisive Felix, not knowing what to do, he put Paul under house arrest. And after a few days, he came with his wife, Drusilla, to talk with Paul. Paul explained his faith in Christ, told Felix about the justice of God and about the future time when people will be judged according to what they do. Felix became alarmed and said, "Go thy way this time, Paul and—listen—when I have a convenient season, I will summon you again." Who knows why Felix and Drusilla came to listen to Paul. Maybe they were just curious. Maybe they were bored with their life here in one of the outposts of Rome. Maybe when they went back to Rome they wanted to brag how they actually talked to this upstart Paul who same claimed was "turning the world upside down." Who knows? Felix obvious didn't like what he heard. Paul was probably too demanding for Felix, too sure of what he believed in and frightened Felix.

The Bible adds parenthetically that he was waiting for a bribe. But anyway, let's just say that, standing at the edge of the Christian faith and all that it could offer, being captivated by the curiosity of what he had heard about it, giving great courtesy and consideration to Paul, Felix just could not commit himself to it. And the one important moment in all his dreary life, the key that could have unlocked the doorway to his greatest fears, the entrance into all that heaven means, was delayed until . . . a convenient season came . . . and of course, it never did.

It is a short step from Felix to you and me isn't it? Felix is not the only one who puts off the first important decision of his life. It is not only he who says, "Hmmm, when I have a convenient season . . . I shall get around to it."

Let me just hint at a few things this might mean for you and me. I'll let you fill in the details for your life. First, let's take it to the fall recently passed. Funny how the seasons of our lives are marked with such distinct appreciation, but how they pass with such alarming similarity . . . how they blend . . . what was that fall anyway? How many parties were there? How many football

games did we attend or watch? How many times did we wonder, what am I doing here? Why am I doing this? When was the last time . . . and the words just trail off.

Second, I spend some time every fall looking for someone who has changed. And I rarely can find a soul. Those who were kind and considerate in the spring are kind and considerate in the fall. The pushy ones are still pushing; the praying ones still praying; the fussy ones, still fussing; the workers still working; the poor excuser still excusing poorly; the kind and good and true; promisers still promising. So free we seem, so bound we really are. A few of us change over the course of our lives, but most of us finish the way we begin.

Aye, what we learn first we learn best. The leopard still does not change his spots; what God has made crooked, you cannot make straight! The “why” is complex and humiliating . . . but it should not surprise you that you did not change this summer, or did you?!

I can tell you one who did change and reinvented her life several times over her 100 years. She is the woman I went to bury near Seattle last Friday, my mother-in-law, Esther Fulk. She wanted to be a nurse in the 1930's but those in charge said she was too small, too frail and too sickly to keep up with the duties of nursing. So she became a beautician instead but spent much time nursing others. First her mother who had a terrible stroke in the 1950's, then her husband in the '70's and her grandchildren though not of a physical ailment but grandchildren always need nursing do they not? She was also a caregiver to the clients who came to her to fix their hair and make them look nice but they brought their physical and emotional illnesses and allowed her to listen and sometimes add a word of encouragement here and there. She was the nurse she always wanted to be but unofficially. She changed a lot over those years each time to meet the occasion that presented itself. One of the grandchildren remarked recently, “those people who thought she was too frail and sickly had been dead now sixty years and you are still going grandma.”

We all live in history. Not one of us begins ex-nihil, but we all come in the line that's moving on, and we are all given this time to live, this certain period, this three score and ten, or four score or more. A thousand years pass freely as a watch in the night.

And in that time, we all make and break promises, first to others, then ourselves, then to God. All the high dreams that we had to the things we would change, the greatness we were going to do: “I'll get to that quite soon, I'll do it in a little while.”

Well, maybe next summer. If we want to make changes we have to resolve to do it. If we truly want to “chase the secret life” we have to somehow find the power to do it. We don't have the power to make the change ourselves. You must become a slave to something greater than yourself, or something greater than yourself will make a slave of you. Our chief glory is to lean upon the One who gives us life.

There are verses in first John which say Christ can make all things new. We are reminded that Jesus is the light of the world. Are we looking for a light? There are verses all through Scripture which tell you more. “There is one who knows the way.” There is one who knows the path you have to take.” “There is one who has walked every lonely valley you and I must walk”

A couple of decades ago Ginny and I spent a week at Virginia Beach. Just the two of us, leaving children and others behind. It is a place to go and sit and watch the water and listen for the voice of God to calm your weary soul. On our last morning there I got up very early. And I stepped out on the balcony overlooking the Atlantic and the sun was just coming up. That is a powerful sight, isn't it? And on that calm ocean the sun was throwing a lane of gold right to me, a golden pathway from the horizon to my balcony. It was as though I was being invited to step out and follow the golden pathway into the new horizon that God has envisioned for all of us. And then a boat that had just put out from Norfolk I guess sailed right through my lane, as if to say, "Come on get on board it's time to go." And in a few minutes the sun was higher in the sky, the lane was gone as the sun was illuminating the whole coast and the ship was gone. We have these moments to see a beautiful sun rise, to listen to the voice speaking to us, to respond. For life moves on, it waits not, and you and I have this time to say what it is we will do.

Well, maybe next summer, when I have a convenient season. Summer is gone. Winter came to Felix, to be sure, as it comes to you and me. I wonder how he ever faced his final hour. I wonder how his restless heart ever managed to find its rest. I wonder if he ever thought back to the forgotten moment when he was in the presence of one who really knew. Pity poor old Felix; he almost made it. And given the chance to turn it all around, simply listened with interest time and time again; listened, but delayed decision . . . maybe next summer, maybe next season. But winter comes first sometimes.

When I have a convenient season, I will come to you. That convenient season is NOW and it might never come again.