As we continue our journey through Acts, I want to thank Mark Potter for delivering a powerful and pointed message last Sunday as he masterfully unpacked Acts 4:13-22. This morning we will pick up with Acts 4:23-31. Please stand and let’s read the Word of God together.

Before I begin, let me say a brief word about our methodology for those who might be visiting this morning. Here at Colonial, we have devoted many years now to expository preaching, which is to say that we walk slowly through a book of the Bible and allow the text to speak for itself as opposed to offering topical sermon series. I do not have anything against topical series, nor do I condemn or belittle pastors who preach topical sermon series. However, there are benefits that come with expository preaching that keep me motivated to stay on this path, and I want to share them with you for just a moment. First, expository preaching gives primacy to the text. In other words, in each sermon we dig into the Word of God to learn what it says, what it meant in its original context, and what that means in light of our cultural context and the circumstances of our lives. Expository preaching allows the text to speak for itself and to speak directly to the listeners without forcing or coercing the text to speak to a particular topic.

Second, expository preaching helps us learn the biblical narrative. If all you hear are topical sermons, you may struggle to understand the biblical narrative. In other words, you will hear scriptures quoted, but you won’t know where and how those verses fit into the overall story of the Bible. There are other ways to learn the biblical narrative beyond listening to sermons, but we find that understanding scripture within the larger narrative brings a richness to our faith and a deeper understanding of God’s activity in the world then and now.

Third, the text establishes the pastor’s agenda, rather than the pastor’s agenda determining the text. In our highly skeptical world, it’s not uncommon for people to walk away from a sermon thinking that the pastor picked that scripture and that subject on that day because he was “going after” a certain group of people! And truth be known, pastors can do that from time to time. However, expository preaching removes that likelihood. I don’t pick the scriptures each Sunday, nor do I determine the topics…I simply preach what comes next and try very hard to allow the text to say what it says. Sometimes that’s comforting, sometimes it feels like a rebuke, but whatever the case, you know that here at Colonial, the sermon came from the text, and the text chosen for that day was simply what came next in the book that we’re working through…no human agenda attached.
Finally, expository preaching trusts God to speak in a relevant way in whatever verses come next. As most of you know, I spent 4.5 years preaching through the Gospel of Luke, and during that period of time our church, as well as our country, experienced challenges, celebrations, crisis, and times of sadness. Amazingly, we found that Sunday after Sunday the text that “just happened” to come next was the perfect text for whatever was going on in our life together or even for what was happening in our culture. In other words, we didn’t need to engineer a topical sermon in order for the Word of God to speak into the practical realities of our lives in a timely manner. That observation increases our love and appreciation for God’s Word, and hopefully leads people to a greater confidence that when they read the Bible, God does and will speak to our greatest needs and concerns. So…I hope that bit of explanation is helpful in addressing why we spend so much time in one book of the Bible, and why we are not constantly rolling out new topical sermon series. We will do a series from time to time, so don’t hear me saying it won’t ever happen…it most likely will. However, our preferred methodology at Colonial, and my preferred methodology as the Lead Pastor, is expository preaching…and now you know why!

With that, let’s turn to the text. We learn in vs. 23 that Peter and John, and presumably their new friend who was crippled but miraculously healed in the name of Jesus…all three have now been “released”. Remember that Peter and John were arrested and placed into custody for proclaiming the gospel to a large crowd shortly after healing a crippled man in the temple courts. They have been examined and threatened by the Sanhedrin, and now Luke reports that they were released and “went to their friends…” The Greek word used here for “friends” is “their own.” They went to their own…their family in the faith…their community of believers…and there they reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And what did the chief priests and elders say? Luke reports in vs. 18, “So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”

In vs. 17, as the Sanhedrin are talking amongst themselves, they say, “Let us WARN them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” So the Sanhedrin have threatened, commanded, and warned Peter and John: no more teaching or preaching in the name of Jesus…or else.

Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” That was clearly not the answer the Sanhedrin anticipated, so Luke tells us in vs. 21 that the chief priests and elders “threatened them further” before finally letting them go.

Now Peter and John have shared all of this information with the church. I want you to imagine what that would be like. That would be like having the mayor, the police chief, the district attorney, and the toughest judge in town telling your pastor and the youth minister: no more talking about Jesus…or else. These were powerful men…people with position, influence, wealth, and power. These were the people who could have you arrested, locked away, or even...
killed. These are the people who managed to get Jesus crucified and a murderer set free. They’re not playing…these are not idle threats. If the name of Jesus is proclaimed again…if Peter and John…or the assembly of believers…continue to preach and teach in the name of Jesus…somebody is going to get hurt. That’s not a threat, it’s a promise. It’s a certainty.

So…what do you do? What would you do? What would you say to me as your pastor, to your elders, to the Sunday School teachers…if we had such a report presented to us? “Cease all teaching about Jesus, or we will be arrested.” Which means we may serve time in prison, which means we might lose our jobs, which means our families will suffer, which means our children would be in jeopardy. What would you do? What would we do?

Here’s what the early church did: they prayed. In vs. 24 we read, “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

Let’ stop there for a moment. We’re going to take a minute to dig into this prayer because it’s important. This prayer reveals some deep-seeded convictions of the early church that are very relevant to our cultural conversation today. First, notice the very real threat of persecution and opposition immediately leads the church to pray…not problem solve. We’re exactly the opposite. As Westerners, we are very conditioned to try to problem solve rather than pray. We’re going to “lawyer up.” We’re going to do a fundraiser. We’re going to protect our own. We’re going to strategize. But notice that the early church immediately turned to God…they’re not separating their physical world from the spiritual world. The physical threat leads to a spiritual response, and that is how it should be for the believers. Our first inclination in the face of any kind of threat should be prayer. And look at how they prayed.

First, they call upon God as their Sovereign Lord. The Greek word here is “Despota” which is where we get the English word “despot.” The English word refers to a powerful dictator, but the Greek word does not hold such a negative connotation. It does, however, mean Master…to the degree that the master has power and authority. When the church calls upon God as Despota, they are appealing to the High King, the ultimate Judge, the Supreme Justice, the final authority. And why can they call upon God as the only true Master? Look at vs. 24. God is the one who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. Do you see how Darwinian evolution erodes away our concept of God? If we call ourselves Christians, yet walk around secretly believing that the universe popped into existence all on its own and that human life is the freakish accident of impersonal, unguided coincidences…how does that affect the way you think of God? Is God still MASTER of the universe, or an observer of the universe, or even worse, a
product of the universe? If time and chance are responsible for the universe, than time and chance will be your new masters…and those gods bring no comfort or hope in a time of crisis. The early church held to a powerful conviction that God was their supreme Master, the Authority above all authorities, first and specifically because all of creation pointed to His Mastery…that is not a small point or an insignificant observation.

They also see God as their Supreme Master because what He spoke long ago through the prophets has come to pass, just as He said. This is why they quote Psalm 2, where David writes, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed—“

The Christians are finding their place in the narrative…they are connecting the dots and in prayer, they are discerning that what God foretold through David has now come to pass. They are applying ancient scriptures to their contemporary situation. Look at vs. 27, “…for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” Clearly the Jews thought that text in Psalm 2 was speaking about David, but the Christians now see that David was serving as God’s prophet, pointing to those who would oppose God’s anointed, who they clearly understand to be Jesus.

But notice, the powerbrokers from both the Gentiles and the Jews, those who plot against and oppose the anointed one of God—they do so in vain…they will fail…they will not win…why? Because whatever they thought they were accomplishing in plotting and raging against Jesus was simply doing “whatever God’s hand and His plan had predestined to take place.” Wow…so there it is…a perfect example of what I was talking about earlier. No pastor in his right mind would choose to preach on that verse, but I have no choice since I’m an expository preacher! Alright…let’s go there.

Here’s what the early church just prayed and stated as their system of belief: all the evil done against Jesus…the betrayal of Judas, the trumped up charges by the Sanhedrin, the spineless judgment of Pontius Pilate, the mob’s chanting for Christ’s crucifixion, the flogging, the cross…all of it, served God’s predestined outcome.

Simply put, the early church believed in the absolute sovereignty of God. According to their prayer, God is all powerful; and no matter how bad things might get, no matter how savage the opposition against Christ and His church, even those terrible people and their very terrible behavior will ultimately serve what God’s hand and God’s plan has predestined to take place.

Of all the theological quandaries and mysteries that we wrestle with as theologians, this is perhaps one of the most difficult for me personally. I have long wrestled with the tension
between God’s sovereignty and the reality of human free will and consequence. This text makes that tension unavoidable for us all. I clearly do not have the time, or likely the intelligence, to make this tension go away or satisfy all of the questions this verse raises, but let me speak to it for just a moment. I was listening to a sermon the other day on this very subject by one of my teachers, Dr. Timothy Keller entitled “Does God Control Everything?”, and here’s what he said. He said that as Westerners, we’re always inclined to draw a line in the sand and say it’s this or it’s that. Either we have free will or God is fully sovereign, but it can’t be both. And it looks that way to us. What we have then is what is called an “antinomy.” An antinomy is an apparent contradiction between two statements that seem equally reasonable.

In other words, it seems equally reasonable to say, “God is sovereign” and at the same time to say, “Humans have free will.” However, to say that both of those statements are true seems like it must yield a contradiction. However, listen to these two statements: 1) light behaves like particles; 2) light behaves like waves. Those two statements are both true, and yet they could easily be presented as a contradiction. Those statements also represent an antinomy. They are both true, even if we can’t reconcile WHY it’s true or how it works.

Scripturally, both human free will and the absolute sovereignty of God are always true. They are never mutually exclusive. We are inclined to think that God’s sovereignty must work in spite of our choices, but what if God’s sovereignty works THROUGH our choices? Does that mean we are not free to choose? No. Does that mean that God and all of history is somehow subject to our choices? No. God can accomplish His plan and His sovereignty through our choices, and all the while honor and protect our free will. “How does God do that, because I don’t see how I could do that if I were God…?” Right…that’s above your pay grade! We shouldn’t limit God to our ability to imagine how we would rule the universe if we were god. We’re under qualified for that position. But listen: scripturally, it’s always both. The story of Joseph is a great example, which of course, I don’t have time to get into. But remember all the choices made by Joseph, his brothers, choices made by Potiphar’s wife, the pagan Pharaoh, etc…and yet in the end, we see that God had Joseph exactly where he needed to be to save millions of people from starving to death. Did God trespass the free will of all the characters in the story? No. Did God ultimately get Joseph where he wanted Joseph to be at just the right moment in time? Yes, so ultimately, all the choices of those people served God’s plan…whether they liked it or not.

That’s where the early church is in their understanding of God…and surely they have benefitted from stories like Joseph’s and David’s and so many others. They have developed a worldview that allows for this antinomy, as so must all whom would follow Jesus and abide by His word. Humans have free will, but God is ultimately sovereign. Humans are accountable, but God is the author of life, and He will finally have His way, even though we may completely oppose Him and attempt to frustrate His plans. That is why the Christians in the early church pray with confidence to their Master and Sovereign Lord, even in the certainty of imminent persecution.

(c) 2016 Colonial Presbyterian Church
So, as they pray to their Sovereign Lord, they first ask for justice, and then they ask for power and boldness to be faithful when it hurts.

Look at vs. 29, “And now, Lord, look upon their threats…” Notice that the Christians do not pray against their persecutors. They do not wish evil or harm upon them. They simply appeal to the Judge. “Look at what they are doing Judge, and you do with that as you will.” It’s your call, God…we trust you to be just and to justify those who are wrongfully harmed or accused.

Then they pray “grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

The early fellowship of believers understood that God was responsible for the power, the miracles, the healings, the signs and wonders accomplished in the name of Jesus. But they had a role to play: their role was to proclaim the name of Jesus. It would be this proclamation that would get them arrested, beaten, and even martyred. They were afraid…we all would be afraid…so they prayed for boldness. And Luke tells us that God answered that prayer.

In vs. 31 he concludes, “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”

Church, the request for boldness to proclaim the name of Jesus is a prayer God is always ready and willing to grant, because boldness comes with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us a boldness that we cannot find in the flesh. The Holy Spirit gives us the words that we need, and even the breath in our lungs necessary to speak the name of Jesus to a hostile world.

Are you afraid of the cost of discipleship? You are not the first…we will not be the last to feel that fear. What should we do? We should pray. We should pray with confidence to our Master, our King, our Lord, and our Father. We should appeal to His justice, and ask for boldness through the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. We may not feel the building shake, but God will answer that prayer and grant our request. The evidence of Holy Spirit boldness was then what it remains to this day: the public proclamation of the Gospel in a hostile environment.

Now, is that text relevant to our cultural conversation? Yep…it is.

Listen friends: we can’t muster up miracles, and we can’t convince people to love Jesus. We can’t perform signs and wonders, nor can we “grow the church.” God has to do all of those things, and He is constantly doing all of those things. Our job is to proclaim His Name…with
the words we speak, in our generosity, in our service, in our sacrifice. There will be a cost, but we should have the confidence of the first century believers that no matter what may come, God wins. God is sovereign, so let us trust His justice, let us pray for boldness in light of whatever resistance may come our way, and let us proclaim His name into every corner of the earth until He comes again. Let us pray even now for such a boldness.