December 4, 2016
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Acts: In the Company of Angels
Acts 12:1-23

If you’ve been paying attention on this journey through Acts, you’ve likely noticed a rather frequent reference to the work of angels. Our text this morning will once again highlight the work of angels. Let’s stand and read Acts 12:1-23.

Luke begins chapter 12 by writing, “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.”

First of all, let’s talk about Herod. In the New Testament there are at least three different “Herods” referenced. The first is the patriarch of the Herodian Dynasty known as Herod the Great who ruled from 29 BC to 4 BC. Now, you must understand that Herod the Great was appointed to serve as “King of the Jews” by the Roman Senate. He was not elected by the Jews, nor did he inherit that position through some long family legacy. Herod the Great was a paranoid power freak who became famous for having infants slaughtered in Bethlehem when he was informed by visiting Magi that the “king of Israel” had recently been born. He was so paranoid he had his wife and a few of his sons executed as well. Herod the Great died shortly after Christ was born as we read about in Matthew 2, and his son Herod Archelaus was appointed to take over. Archelaus is not mentioned in the NT, likely because the Romans quickly assessed that he was incompetent, so they sent one of their own, a certain Pontius Pilate, to govern Palestine. The second “Herod” mentioned in the New Testament is Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great) who reigned over the northern region of Galilee from 4BC to AD 39. This is the same Herod who had John the Baptist beheaded, and this is the Herod that Jesus was sent to see the night before he was crucified. The third Herod mentioned in the NT is Antipas’s nephew, Herod Agrippa, the son of Aristobulus who was murdered by his father, Herod the Great. So Herod Agrippa is Herod the Great’s grandson. You got all that, right?

Now, Herod Agrippa…who is the Herod in our text this morning…has an interesting past. Due to his psycho grandfather who had his daddy murdered, Agrippa was sent to Rome as a child where he was raised with the royal Roman family. As you might imagine, Agrippa becomes a playboy who gets entangled in the affairs of the rich and famous. In 23 AD, Agrippa flees to Palestine in order to escape his creditors, but his uncle, Herod Antipas, is less than thrilled to see a potential threat to his throne and basically forces Agrippa to live in poverty for several years. When Agrippa decides to return to Rome, he is arrested by Caesar Tiberius for his previous debts, and he’s thrown into a Roman prison. However, Caesar Tiberius soon dies and his grand-nephew, Caligula, takes over the rule of Rome. Lucky for Agrippa, Caligula was one of his
former classmates when from his childhood, so not only does Agrippa get out of jail, his childhood friend gives him a gold chain that weighed as much as the iron fetters he wore in prison. Caligula places Herod Agrippa as governor over some Palestinian cities, and the next ruler, another former classmate named Claudius, appoints Herod to rule over all of Judea and Samaria.

So Herod Agrippa, the former playboy, whose childhood friend is now the most powerful man in the all the world, begins his rule over Israel with the insatiable desire to be liked and to be popular with those whom he is ruling. The first century Jewish historian Josephus writes that Agrippa learned all the Jewish customs and he joined in with all the festival celebrations. He’s constantly looking to the Sanhedrin for their nods of approval…which leads us to our text this morning.

Luke reports that Herod laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church, and already he has executed one of the apostles, James the brother of John, one of the sons of Zebedee. We should assume that James was arrested at the bidding of the Sanhedrin, that he had a mock trial, and that Herod Agrippa ordered his beheading with a sword. You may wonder why all of the sudden the Jewish Sanhedrin can get somebody executed when we know that they had no such power when it came to killing Jesus. The difference is Herod Agrippa. Herod holds the same office as that previously held by Pontious Pilate. Even though he is called the King of the Jews, he works for the Romans; his old buddy is the Caesar, so Agrippa answers to no one. Now why is James killed? Because it pleased the Jewish Sanhedrin, and Agrippa is desperate to be liked. So what does Agrippa do next? Luke reports that “when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.” Agrippa goes after the top of the Apostolic food chain. If the Sanhedrin smiled when he had James executed, how much more will they applaud his leadership when he presents Peter’s head on a platter? There’s just one problem, and it’s a timing issue. Peter is arrested during the festival of Unleavened Bread, which means Passover is just days away. The Jews would consider it to be bad form to have someone executed during the season of Passover, so Herod decides to wait until Passover is done and then present Peter to the Jewish authorities for the mock trial and Peter’s execution. Remember that a day in the Jewish world ended at sundown and that’s when the next day began. So Passover is literally over at 6 pm, and the trial is scheduled for later that evening. Bogus trials were best held at night, as we saw with Jesus as well, right?

Now, Luke reports that four squadrons of soldiers were commissioned to guard Peter until the time of his trial…that’s 16 soldiers who would divide the day into three hour shifts…four soldiers serving in each shift. As we zoom in to the prison on the night of the trial, we see Peter sound asleep between two soldiers, his wrists are shackled to their wrists, and there are two more soldiers guarding the door. Why so many guards? Why employ 16 soldiers to guard Peter…a humble Christian? The Christians were not violent, they were not armed, nor were they a match
for even two Roman soldiers not to mention 16. The answer is simple: Back in Acts 5 Peter had been placed in jail before, and then the next day when the Sanhedrin went to bring him and John out and put them on trial, the jail was empty because an angel of the Lord had opened the doors and delivered them out of jail! Remember that? I guarantee the Sanhedrin remember that story, which accounts for why Peter is now doubly shackled and doubly guarded. Herod has taken every precaution to ensure that there will be no jailbreaks tonight. Let’s see what happens next beginning with vs. 7:

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up, saying “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” And he went out and followed him.

Once again God sends an angel to liberate Peter from prison and certain death. There is no doubt this is an angel, for light surrounds him and fills up the prison cell which would have most certainly been dark at that hour. How else can we account for the chains falling off without the soldiers noticing, or walking out with two armed soldiers standing guard? This story has a few points of humor that make us smile, like the picture of the angel giving Peter a quick shot to the ribs to wake him up! We can imagine the big, burly fisherman growling as he rolls over to discover a blinding light and an angel of the Lord standing before him. I imagine Peter as simply dumbfounded, mouth hanging wide open, staring at the messenger of God with awe and wonder, so much so that the angel has to spoon feed Peter with constant direction like I do every morning with my 10 year old… “Get up…put your clothes on…put your shoes on…put your coat on…ok, let’s go…come on…follow me.” We learn in vs. 9 that Peter is literally in a fog…he can’t figure out if this is really happening or if he is in some kind of a dream…again…very similar to my 10 year old.

Luke goes on in vs. 10: When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.

The scene is simply remarkable. The chains fall off, the guards do not stir, nor do they see Peter and the angel of God walk past them, and when they get to the gate, the angel pulls out the first ever automatic garage door opener and Peter is blown away! And then, just that quickly, the angel disappears, and Peter…who moments ago was chained in prison and awaiting his execution…stands alone on the street, a freed man, but a man who needs to get off the street as soon as possible!

Reading further beginning with vs. 11: When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish
people were expecting. When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.”

Notice that it takes a minute for Peter to put the pieces together. He looks around him…he’s clearly out of jail…he’s not dreaming…and that beautiful figure cloaked in light was clearly an angel of God sent to rescue him. Notice the rescue is both from Herod and the Jewish people…the Christians now have enemies on every side.

Peter knows he has to get off the street, so he heads to the closest house church where he knows other believers will be gathered in prayer leading up to his trial that was scheduled to be held this very night. He goes to the house of Mary…John Mark’s mother…who is likely a wealthy widow given the size of her house and that her husband is not mentioned here or anywhere else in the NT. Luke tells us that many believers were in fact gathered and praying when Peter arrives and knocks on the door. Again, what follows is a humorous moment that certainly became very famous among the early Christians.

Luke tells us that when Peter knocks on the gate leading into Mary’s property, the servant girl named Rhoda comes to answer as would have been the custom for wealthy landowners. By the way Rhoda means “little rose,” so we can probably assume this is a young lady…maybe a middle-schooler who serves as a maid for Ms. Mary. When Rhoda asks who it is and Peter identifies himself, Rhoda gets so excited at the sound of his voice that she rushes back to the house to tell everyone that Peter is standing at the gate…and she leaves Peter standing there, unable to enter! Of course, the “adults” in the house say, “Little Rose, you are out of your mind!” while some of the others suggest that maybe it’s Peter’s angel…which would be like saying it’s Peter’s ghost. Notice how those who were praying in earnest were completely unprepared, and even resistant, to the possibility that God might actually answer their prayer and grant their request! The scene is very similar to when the women come back from the empty tomb and try to convince the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead…how slow of heart we are to believe the mighty works of God.

Meanwhile, Peter keeps knocking until they come and open the door. Behold, Peter is standing there before them, and Luke reports that they were amazed! Let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 17: But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, Peter described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.

We can only imagine the joy of answered prayer that night at Mary’s house. All too often Christians will say, “All we can do is pray.” Which often translates as, “since we feel completely powerless to change this situation…since we have no power and no influence to fix this situation on our own…we have no other ‘practical’ options, and nothing better to do to…so I guess we’ll just have to pray.” But notice the POWER of prayer. We cannot help but deduce that God’s
action here is fueled by prayer, and as such God receives all the glory for His powerful act of deliverance. Peter takes no credit, and neither do the prayer warriors…Peter makes clear that it was the LORD who brought him out of prison, as does Luke as he presents this story.

Now, in case you are confused, when Peter tells Mary and her guests to spread the word about his jail break to James and the brothers, he’s not talking about the recently deceased James who was martyred by Herod. He’s likely referring to James the brother of Jesus who had become a leader in the Jerusalem church.

Our story about Peter ends as Peter moves on to some undisclosed location, and we won’t hear any more about Peter for quite a while as he goes underground to avoid arrest.

Luke does circle back in vss. 18-19 to describe the scene at the prison the next morning. Luke writes, “there was no little disturbance among the soldiers…” That’s meant to be funny…Luke is using a rhetorical device here for emphasis. You would not have wanted to be one of those four soldiers on guard last night. As word spreads that Peter has escaped, the four squadrons turn on each other, each accusing the other for allowing the prisoner to escape, and then Herod rolls in. He walks through the prison, and you can hear a pin drop. He then has the soldiers assembled so that they might be examined. Rest assured the soldiers were tortured, even as they were accused of aiding Peter’s escape and then executed as a result of their treason.

Meanwhile, the ever-pandering Herod is horrified and embarrassed. The Sanhedrin are furious and he is no longer invited to the temple Christmas party. Herod’s approval ratings tank, so he leaves town and goes to his home in Caesarea.

Now, we’ll unpack some of what we’ve covered here in just a minute, but there’s one more little story that takes place that puts a bow on this thought unit.

While Herod is down in Caesarea, representatives from two Phoenician cities, Tyre and Sidon, come to seek an audience with Herod. Apparently there was a trade embargo upon the ports of those two cities implemented by Herod, and these ambassadors have come to plead with Herod to lift the embargo because their economies are tanking and their people are in desperate need of food.

All this groveling just empowered Herod…he relished the attention of his captive audience. So, according to the first century historian Josephus, Herod donned himself with a robe made of silver such that when he stepped out into the sun to give his address, he was literally blinding his audience. Both Luke and Josephus agree that the crowds begin to chant, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” And both Luke and Josephus agree that Herod just soaked it up. He reveled in the attention. Unlike Peter, he did not correct his listeners and tell them to “get up, for I am just a man.” No…Herod allowed these pagans to worship him like a god. Let’s pick up the story in vs.
23: Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

Luke and Josephus both write that Herod died quite suddenly following his public address where he was worshipped by the Phoenicians. Luke says he was “struck by an angel and eaten by worms,” and Josephus reports that Herod died within five days of his address of a mysterious intestinal sickness.

Again…for you skeptics out there, this is history, not myth and legend. Two independent sources, one Christian and one Jewish, give a very similar report of the same event. All historians agree that Herod Agrippa died suddenly in AD 44…but Luke lets us know why: he took God’s glory.

Now my time is almost up, but let me sum up a few takeaways from our text this morning:

1) Let us simply acknowledge that angels are for real. You cannot read the Bible and come away with any other conclusion. There are some 300 direct and indirect references to angles in the Bible, and we’ve seen several already in Acts. What are we to make of Angels? I still think one of the finest resources on this subject is Billy Graham’s little book entitled, *Angels: God’s Secret Agents*, and I encourage you to pick up a copy and read every page. In short, angels are created spiritual beings who serve as agents and messengers of God. In our story we’ve seen the angels communicate for God, enact God’s rescue, and distribute God’s justice. That’s a pretty good synopsis of what we see throughout the Bible in terms of angels.

2) To have a biblical worldview is to believe that God is present and His massive army of angels is working on behalf of the redeemed. Christians…did you hear me? God is present, and his massive army of angels is working 24/7 on behalf of the redeemed. Let that be an encouragement to you. There are tens of thousands of “angel stories” out there in addition to those we find in the Bible. Remember: only one of them has to be true for angels to exist.

One of my favorite angel stories comes from John G. Paton who served as a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands a few decades ago. He and his wife were trapped one evening in the missionary headquarters as hostile natives surrounded them and prepared to burn them out and kill them. John and his wife prayed all night long, crying out to God. When daylight arrived, they were amazed to see the attackers unaccountably leave. They thanked God for delivering them, and they continued to minister to the natives on that island. A year later, the chief of that tribe became a Jesus follower, so one night John asks the chief, “Hey…remember when you all had us surrounded a year ago…what kept you and your men from burning us down?” The chief replied in surprise, “Who were all those men you had with you there?” The missionary answered, “There were no men there; just my wife and I.” The chief argued that they had seen many men standing guard—hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords in their hands. They were
circling the mission station so that the natives were afraid to attack. Only then did John Paton realize that God had sent angels to protect them. (B. Graham, *Angels*: 3).

3) The problem with a good angel story is the next story where the angels do not show up and the missionary’s family is burned to the ground. How do we reconcile that God miraculously saves some and allows others to perish? We see that exact situation in our text, right? James is executed; Peter is miraculously delivered through the work of God’s angel. How does that work? I don’t know…and the writers of the Bible do not even attempt to answer that question. God is sovereign, He loves his own, but some will be rescued, others will not. That’s how it works, but what we can assume based on the witness of scripture: even when James was being executed, God was there, His angels were at work, and James stepped over into victory. Death did not win when James died, and death will not win some years later when Peter is finally arrested and crucified upside down, and death will not win when you and I breathe our last. Regardless of our circumstances, as believers in the Gospel our hope is this: God hears the prayers of the church; God employs his army of angels for His purpose and our benefit; and because Jesus conquered death and rose again, death doesn’t win.

4) We must remember to never, ever, ever take God’s glory upon ourselves, as though we’re all that. We’re not. Notice: God did not strike down Herod for murdering James. God did not strike down Herod for arresting Peter. But God has no tolerance for people pretending to be god. Judgment comes swiftly for those who would welcome the worship of other people. Remember the chief end of man…to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

5) Finally, we should pray first, pray always, and pray with confidence. God hears the prayers of the church, and God is moving. I know we all get frustrated when we are praying for an outcome that does not come to pass, but does that mean God is absent, that His angles took the day off, that our prayers were ignored or that God doesn’t love us anymore? No. God’s love is perfectly demonstrated in His Son, and His Son was perfectly obedient to the Father. So let’s leave here remembering how that worked out.

On the night that Christ was betrayed, prior to his arrest, he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed that the cup of suffering and death might be taken away, and God said NO. But God sent an angel to comfort him. Then God allowed his most beloved son to suffer unjustly, but for our benefit, and ultimately his suffering and death would save the world.

Children of God: Pray, trust God, follow where he leads---he may lead us out of prison, he may lead us down the Via Delarosa…still He is good. Our God is the great liberator, He is the great comforter, His plans are perfect, even when they are hard. Pray church, believe the gospel, angels are all around, the prison doors are opening…follow Him.

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Let us pray together.