

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
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**“Of Man or Of God”
Psalm 150:1-6
Acts 5:33-40**

**Second Sunday of Easter
April 28, 2019**

Psalm 150:1-6

Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Introduction

Before we dive into today's Scripture, I wanted to give a brief background to the situation. In Acts 3, Luke records a famous scene where a lame man begs Peter for alms. The Apostle famously says, "Silver and gold I have none, but what I do have I give to you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk!" The Apostles were preaching and performing miracles in the name of dead man. At least that's the way the Sanhedrin saw it. The Sanhedrin—or religious council—was able to arrest Peter and John not on the basis of preaching Christ but on the basis that they were preaching the resurrection of the dead. You see, the majority party on the Sanhedrin is the Sadducees, and these folks don't believe in the resurrection of the dead. This pops up again in 5:31, when Peter and John find themselves before the Council for a second time saying "God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." This leads to our passage for this morning...

Acts 5:33-40

"When they [the Jewish council] heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. And he said to them, 'Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!' So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go."

Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

"Of Man or Of God"

The sudden urge to kill Peter and John seems like a massive overreaction on behalf of some on the council. The Gospel of John gives us some insight into this reaction. In 5:18, John tells us that the Jews were seeking to kill Jesus "because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." Indeed, to assert Sonship

of God and equality with God is a huge claim and one that should not be taken lightly. Any good Jew would be cautious of any person staking that claim. However, as we know, Jesus had the proofs to back up his claim, and so the actual blasphemy is the authorities' rejection of Jesus as the Christ. John also tells us as much in 10:33 when the Jews, again, respond to Jesus' claim by attempting to stone him. They say, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God." This is exactly what happened to Peter and John. They did a good work, they healed a lame man, empowering a former beggar to become an active participant of society. This is fantastic work! And yet, they, like Jesus, were persecuted.

No one cared that they were healing people. No one cared that they were providing hope in a hopeless time. All they wanted to do was stop the message of Jesus Christ. And things haven't changed much. The world today doesn't care about the hope, the promises, the transformations that the Gospel brings. They only care about stopping the message. Last week, we saw, once again, terrorists striking at Christians on Easter Sunday. They didn't care about the new life that Christianity offers to the individual or the support the Church offers to the community. They just wanted to silence it. You would think the Sanhedrin's response was over-the-top. Death for simply spreading hope? Well, if the Scriptures and church history tell us anything, death threats are par for the course.

In this instance, however, something is a little different. In the middle of the council chambers, a member rises. Not just any council member. This is Gamaliel. To us, that's just a name. Luke says he's a pharisee, which automatically puts most Christians on the defensive. To understand the gravity of this motion, we need to understand the gravity of the man. According to Jewish writings, Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel. Again, to our ears just another man, but to the ears of Luke's Jewish readers, they would've known exactly who these two men were. Many of us recognize Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as influential to Western philosophy. Likewise, Hillel and Gamaliel were influential to Jewish philosophical thought.

Luke also tells us that he was a Pharisee. Like I said earlier, most Christians are quick to the defense when Pharisees are around. While the Gospels depict the Pharisees as Jesus' archenemies, the Acts of the Apostles reveals they had more in common. Specifically, they shared a doctrine of the resurrection. Acts 23:8 describes a time when the Pharisees and Sadducees argued because the latter "say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all." The Pharisees were also a minority voice in the Sanhedrin, which was made up of 70 men, plus the High Priest. Nevertheless, Gamaliel was a well-respected Pharisee. On top of this, we learn that he was a mentor to Saul of Tarsus, who studied under him strictly and zealously. Of course, Saul of Tarsus would later have a life-changing encounter on the road to Damascus, but we'll actually talk about that next week.

Let's go back to the council chambers. We see Gamaliel rising, and the room grows silent to hear his sage advice. He ushers Peter and John out so he can speak candidly and privately to the Sanhedrin. The truth is, he didn't have to do that. As history shows us, he should've just let the Apostles stay there. He says, "Councilmen, let us be careful with our next steps." *Take care. Take heed.* The Greek phrase *prosechete eautois* is more emphatic than that. It literally means

“beware!” Gamaliel has posted a verbal “no trespassing” sign: “Danger!” “Enter at your own risk!” “Beware of dog!” He warns them, “Watch your steps.” Such bold words for an introduction. We don’t often hear that in the church. When God is doing things, we need to watch out, we need to be careful not to get in his way. We cannot be roadblocks before God. Because the truth is, we can’t stop him. And worse more so, because that puts us at enmity with God. And I don’t think any of us want to be there.

Now, Gamaliel is a wise and learned man, so he refreshes the council’s memory on past uprisings. He mentions Theudas and Judas of Galilee. He just lists two, but the reality is there were thousands of revolts. Remember, we’re not looking at this passage with the eyes and mind of a First or Second Century Jew. Josephus, the great Jewish historian, was born in the year AD 37, just a few years after Christ’s crucifixion, and he died in the year AD 100. He’s authoring his books contemporaneously with the Apostle John’s Gospel, Epistles, and Revelation. This man, Josephus, records that there were ten thousand revolts since the dawn of Roman occupation. To mention just two revolutionaries was enough to conjure up the hundreds of others the Sanhedrin had to deal with. And now he reveals the corruption of whole system. The ruling powers wanted to keep Roman control over Judea. So much so, that they killed every insurrectionist. Gamaliel says as much. After both Theudas and Judas were killed, their followers were dispersed. It’s the classic tactic of cutting the head off the snake.

Gamaliel reminds his fellow councilmen that they killed the head of the insurrection, which became known as Christianity. They hung him on the cross and everyone saw him die. Here’s the thing. Remember, Gamaliel is a Pharisee. He believes in the resurrection. He believes in angels. He believes in the prophecies. His Sadducee compatriots, however, don’t believe in any of those things. So he offers them this warning: “Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.” I imagine that if Gamaliel is well respected by the Sanhedrin, even though he’s a minority voice, he’s probably older and well established. Therefore, I also imagine his student, Saul of Tarsus, as a younger man. When Paul talks about his past, he describes himself as very zealous. And certainly, as a Christian Apostle, he is likely the most zealous of them all. Saul, in his youthful zeal, seems to reject his mentor’s own advice, going out and actively persecuting the earliest Christians. And so we have to pause and ponder Gamaliel’s cautious warning.

If this undertaking is of man, it will fail. A lot of obstacles stand in the path of the Church. From extremist groups, to rogue lobbyists, to corrupt pastors. But the greatest obstacle to the great commission is ourselves. When we allow ourselves to be the foundation, the rule, and the cornerstone, we are like the foolish builder who constructs his house on the shift sands of human pride. Man is man’s own worst enemy. When we rely on our own devices or set ourselves as the focus, our undertakings will come to ruin. When God is not the focus, all plans, all agendas, all good works will fail. The mainline church forgot its focus. They forgot to teach that apathy is just as dangerous as disobedience. While the council, in that moment, heeded Gamaliel’s advice, the reality is no they didn’t.

And this reality makes the second part of Gamaliel’s warning all the more poignant. *If it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.* Perhaps he had a faint inclination toward the

Gospel, after all, he was very learned; or perhaps he was simply cautious in his older age. Regardless of the impetus, Gamaliel's words were more than just warning, they were prophecy. The Sanhedrin tasted a glimpse of hope in Gamaliel's words. They saw the history and the repeated dispersing of revolts. "Perhaps," they thought, "this is just like one of those?" But this was no political uprising. Jesus was no idealistic peasant. He is the Son of God, Christ, the Messiah, come to bring salvation to the world. His mission was God's plan all along. This is another place where the Church errs. When we hear this, we think, "Ah, we must be untouchable because God is on our side!" God is not on the side of the arrogant. This is *God's* plan working out, not ours. And his plan is written in Scripture. We cannot add to it nor take anything away from it. We can choose to ignore it or parts of it, but then we cease to be the church. And when we ignore the Scriptures, our mission is no longer of God's but of man's, and it is doomed to fail.

But it's worse than that. Gamaliel doesn't leave his warning there. He adds "You might even be found opposing God!" Now that's a frightening thought. And certainly the Sanhedrin took that warning seriously. At least for a moment. But this warning is one that stretches beyond the First Century. What the Sanhedrin chose to ignore cannot be ignored by us. Gamaliel's final warning is a double-edged sword. First, it means anyone who stands against the mission of the church is standing against God. Any person, whether peasant or king, merchant or president, congressman or despot who attempts to stop the church is not fighting men, but is fighting God. Isaiah 54:17 says, "No weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. *This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord...*"

Here's the second edge. Not only are outside forces fighting against God, so are internal forces that seek to guide the church astray. The church isn't limited to external foes. Christ himself warns of false teachers and wolves disguised as sheep. Doctrines that aim to strip God of his sovereignty. Doctrines that aim to dumb down his holiness. Doctrines that aim to downplay our need to put to death the old self. Doctrines that aim to lift up sin as something to not worry about. These are teachings that are posited not just in churches in big cities, but in areas like ours. In our Presbytery even. Friends, we have to remember, to oppose the God of the Bible is to enter into a boxing match with him. And I'm sorry, but you're going to lose. As Jesus says in Matthew 7, "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*"

Nevertheless, the church will be assailed. False teachers will continue to rise within the church. Nations and peoples will continue to punish and oppress the church. From his own experience the Apostle Peter will come to write, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." The persecution of the church, the intentional misdirection of the body of Christ, shouldn't surprise us. We should grieve, definitely we should grieve; but we shouldn't be surprised. I don't care if you know nothing about Sri Lanka. You might not know where it is, you might not know what language they speak, or what currency they use, but you do know something. *Our* brothers and sisters were attacked on Easter. That's right. We don't know anything about them, but we do know we are brethren. We are adopted of the same Father and heirs of the same kingdom. And our brothers and sisters are dead. They were targeted. The radical Islamists waited for the highest holy day, when the most number of people are in church. Where's the public outcry? Where's

the GoFundMe pages? Where's the petitions, blog posts, and profile banners? Weeks after the act of terror in Christchurch, New Zealand, their government enacted sweeping gun control reforms. Days after the act of terror in Pittsburgh, local groups came together to decry anti-Semitism. It's been seven days and the only thing all over the news is whether or not Russia colluded. Christians are dying and the focus of our attention is on politicians being politicians. But should we be surprised? This just solidifies in my mind that which Peter and John did in verse 41 is what we need to do every day: "they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for his name."

On that day in history, Peter and John were flogged for their commitment to the Gospel. They were commanded to stop preaching Jesus' name and were beaten. They continued preaching the truth of Jesus Christ to the point of crucifixion for Peter and exile for John. Throughout history the church has been persecuted by empires and barbarians. Men and women have died delivering the Gospel message. And yes, the church has erred, religious leaders have faulted and many have created divisions within the body. Through all of this, there are those who continue to heed the call of Scripture—to continue to conform their lives to the will of the Father as dictated in Holy Writ. In this season after Easter, I ask you, where do you fall? Are you a wolf in sheep's clothing trying to lead people astray? Or are you willing to suffer on behalf of the truth of the Gospel? It is not my place to decide or to judge. For there is only one Judge. And he tells us in Revelation 3, "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot.... So, because you are lukewarm... I will spit you out of my mouth... Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent."

Let us pray. Holy God, after celebrating Easter last week, there are many who are back at home unchanged. After hearing the message of the resurrection, many are unmoved. And yet, because of Christ, there are faithful who are no longer on this earth, martyred because of the Gospel. May their suffering and death be a reminder to us that the church is not without enemies and that the highest call of the Gospel is to live for God, even to the point of death. Father, welcome their souls into your heavenly bliss. And change our hearts to conform to your way. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, we pray. Amen.