

The Guarantee of Opposition

Acts 3-4

We are going to look at a biblical story today that could easily take place right now in one of the many Muslim countries where there is opposition to Christianity. On Friday I grabbed a copy of the latest newsletter from News Service 2000 and read about real people in real places who are being severely mistreated, beaten, and even killed because of their faith.

One of those stories was about a Christian man in Egypt named Maher who was a 45-year-old barber and father of four. Maher had arranged a trip with his wife and made a verbal agreement with a Muslim man to rent his car for the day. When the trip was over, and he went to return the car, the man demanded that he pay more than the agreed upon price. When he refused, that man threatened to destroy his barbershop. Two days later that same man showed up at the barbershop with more threats. He broke the lock of the door and shouted at Maher, demanding even more money, or he would burn his shop. In order to avoid further confrontation, Maher went to the police.

But Christians are often mistreated by the police in Muslim countries, and that night, around midnight, his wife received a call from the police telling her that her husband was dead and that he had died because of falling into a coma due to his diabetes. But he didn't have diabetes and when his family saw his body they found bruises on the back of his neck and evidence that he had been murdered. When they went to report it, they were threatened by a group of police officers that if they insisted he was killed at the police station they would bring charges against them.

These kinds of stories are common in certain parts of the world and remind us that opposition to Christianity is alive and well in the 21st century. We can even begin to feel some growing opposition in our own country and I think most of us wonder what things will be like 5 or 10 years from now. Things could change quickly for Christians in America and I wonder what will happen to the church when it does? How quickly will people depart from the faith in order to avoid opposition? I wonder what will happen to us at East Lincoln? Do we have what it takes to persevere?

This morning I want us to see God's vision for how we can be a church that endures opposition. We are going to look at a story when the church in Jerusalem first began to face serious persecution. We are going to see how they responded and how they were able to endure. And then we are going to ask ourselves: Do we have what they had? Is it part of who we are today so that we will be ready when the opposition comes?

The story begins soon after Pentecost. In the verses we read last week we saw that after Pentecost many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles and great awe came upon all the people and this story begins with one of the first times that happened.

Read Acts 3:1-10.

¹ Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. ² And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. ³ Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. ⁴ And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" ⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹ And all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

So this was amazing and exciting. I'm sure it was exhilarating for Peter and John. Things were going great for the early church. The Holy Spirit was moving, they were experiencing growth and unity. And now this amazing miracle happened. To make things even better, when everyone in the temple saw what had happened, they wanted to know what was going on, so Peter found himself with a large, captive audience.

Read Acts 3:11-26.

¹¹ While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. ¹² And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶ And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.

¹⁷ "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. ¹⁹ Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, ²⁰ that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, ²¹ whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. ²² Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. ²³ And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.' ²⁴ And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. ²⁵ You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' ²⁶ God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness."

So Peter had an amazing opportunity to share the gospel and he went for it. And the people he was talking to were all ears. We dream about having an opportunity like that! But not everyone was happy about what he had to say. The people in charge of the temple were greatly agitated.

Read Acts 4:1-4.

¹ And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were

teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

So the mood quickly changed. Things were broken up by the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees, one of the leading religious group in the city. The priests were ticked off because Peter was talking about Jesus and the Sadducees were mad because he was talking about the resurrection, a belief that went directly against one of their distinctive teachings. Never mind that a lame man had just been healed... what Peter was saying had to be stopped. It was a threat to their system of religion and government. So they arrested them and put them in custody. They had to summon the powers that be and figure out how to handle this situation.

For the early church, this must have been quite a shock. Things were going so well – even in that situation hundreds of people believed. There was so much momentum. If only they could have continued without hinderance. But now they had run into a brick wall. What was going to happen?

Read Acts 4:5-14.

⁵ On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well.

¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that

they had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.

I love this part of the story! With Peter and John in custody, it was time to shut them down and put an end to their following. So all the big wigs in their government gathered together. Luke makes a point to name who was there – these were the Who’s Who in Jerusalem. These were the top politicians and law enforcement who had all the power and authority to get whatever they wanted. It was a highly intimidating situation.

They gathered in the hall and brought in Peter and John to interrogate them. “By what power or name did you do this?” It is likely that they were trying to pin Peter and John as wielding demonic powers, which would have destroyed their reputation and given grounds for their condemnation. But instead of being intimidated, Peter stood up and shocked them all. With Holy Spirit empowered boldness he told them exactly what happened. “It was by the name and the power of Jesus – the guy you crucified, and whom God raised from the dead – that this man was healed. And it is only by his name and his name alone that man must be saved.”

So now all the sudden, the tables turned completely. Instead of the poor, uneducated fishermen being shut down, the high ranking, educated politicians were shut down. They didn’t know what to say. They were shocked. How could these no-name commoners be so bold? And then they remembered that they had been with Jesus and things really got confusing. Jesus was dead. All the disruption he had caused was supposed to be over. But now these guys who had been with him were claiming that he was alive and that the power that healed the lame man had come from him. They didn’t know what to say. So they sent Peter and John out of there to figure out what to do.

Read Acts 4:15-22.

¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, ¹⁶ saying, “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

¹⁹ But 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, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” ²¹ And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

So they decided to threaten them to try to keep them quiet. They wanted to use fear to shut them down. Fear is a powerful motivator. And I imagine their threats included arrest, imprisonment, beatings, and painful execution. So when Peter and John were released, those threats would have been ringing in their ears. Being a Christian had been amazing and exciting and the church had been growing, but what was going to happen now? How were they going to respond when faced with such serious opposition?

I want us to see how they responded. I want us to see if they had what they needed in their church family to endure such terrible threats and opposition. And I want us to ask ourselves if we have that same thing here at East Lincoln?

Acts 4:23-31

²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ 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, ²⁵ 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? ²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’— 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, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ 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.

With threats of pain and death in their ears, they went to their church family... But did you notice what Luke calls their church family? He calls them their friends... They went to their friends to tell them about the threats. Their friends were their church family. The friends they needed most for strength and support after being in such a scary and intimidating situation were their church family. They were one in the same.

They reported the threats and I think it would have had a very sobering effect on all of them. They were all facing those threats, not just Peter and John. Their very own government was against them and threatening great harm to them if they continued to do what they were doing. So together, as friends and as a church family they did what they knew they needed to do. They turned to the Lord and prayed.

They lifted up their voices to God. And in that prayer they recognized that the same people that were threatening them were the people that had conspired against Jesus and put him to death. But they also recognized that God had been sovereign over all of it. Jesus' suffering and death, along with the threats and actions of those who killed him was according to God's hand and the plan that he had predestined to take place. And I think it began to sink in – the threats and opposition they were now facing were also part of God's plan. Things weren't falling apart just because they were now facing opposition. God was still in control and still had the same mission and calling. So they put their faith in the Lord and instead of shrinking back in fear, they asked him to grant them boldness to continue to speak the word.

And God answered that prayer. I don't know exactly what happened, but it says the place that they were in was shaken and they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they continued to speak the word of God with boldness. In the face of persecution they had what they needed to persevere. They had close Christian friends in their church family and when they prayed, God gave them the boldness they needed by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to do what he had called them to do.

I don't know what that does for you, but it gives me a vision of what I believe God wants us to be. A church family that is knit together with the bonds of friendship and prays together so that when opposition comes we are ready to stand firm,

side by side for the sake of the gospel. Do we have what it takes right now to persevere when opposition comes? What is God calling you to do today to move in that direction?

Coming here on a Sunday morning is a good first step to begin this process, but maybe it's time for you to take this further. Maybe it's time for you to join a small group if you haven't already, where you can begin to make friends and learn to pray together. Or maybe for you it's going one step further and reaching out to a Christian friend or two to connect with even further for deeper friendship, support and prayer. I urge you to take whatever step God is laying on your heart.