

Own the Vision Acts 12

For the past three months we've been talking about vision and seeking God's vision for our church by looking at the first church in Jerusalem. We have seen several things throughout the book of Acts and this week, as I reviewed what we've talked about, I think the common thread that flows throughout everything we've seen is that at the heart of God's vision for the church is that we are to be witnesses for Jesus Christ in our community and world.

That's where this sermon series began and in some way everything we've seen relates to that, and I believe that we need to continue to pursue that vision as a central focus and figure out what that's going to look like for us in rural Wisconsin in the 21st century. We're not here to just strengthen our own faith and manage the affairs of the church; we're here to shine the light of the gospel into our community and world. As a church we are called to be witnesses for Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit through a lifestyle of dependent prayer.

In this last sermon I want to ask us: Who needs to own this calling and vision? Who needs to shoulder the responsibility of keeping it in focus? The obvious answer seems to be: the leaders – the pastors and elders. It's their responsibility to keep the church focused and on task. That's what leaders do – not only in the church, but throughout all of society – in government, business, and non-profit organizations. If a church is going to be strong and effective in carrying out its vision, then the leaders need to own that vision and inspire people to carry it out.

This morning we are going to look at why that might not be a good answer. In fact, that perspective will probably lead to the death of East Lincoln Alliance Church. I want you to picture this building sitting here, winterized, freezing, and empty. There's a thick layer of dust on the pews and a strong musty smell. The mice have finally won the battle and have free reign in the church. There are no traps, no poison. No one has set foot in the building in months. These walls haven't heard the sound of people singing, children laughing, sermons being preached. The smell of coffee and soup and potluck meals hasn't filled the sanctuary. There haven't been any cars in the parking lot. The snow piles up in winter and the weeds in summer.

That's a really sad image for me to think about, but it's the reality for thousands of churches in America. According to an article posted earlier this year by Lifeway Research Group, "Between 6,000 and 10,000 churches in the U.S. are dying each year. That means around 100-200 churches will close this week." When is that going to happen to us? How is that going to happen? Well, I hope it never happens. And that's what compels me to preach this sermon today. If we are going to survive and thrive as a church into the future, it cannot be just the pastors and elders who own our calling and vision and the story we're going to look at today will help us see why.

We have reached the point in the book of Acts where Luke is about to shift the attention from the church in Jerusalem to the missionary efforts of the apostle Paul. In chapters 10-11 we saw the incredibly significant step when the gospel broke outside the walls of the Jewish church and took root among the Gentiles in Caesarea. At about that same time there were other Jewish believers who decided to preach to Gentiles further north in the city of Antioch and the gospel was received with joyful hearts. A great number of Gentiles were saved and a very influential church was born that became Paul's home sending church.

But back in Jerusalem, the church was facing another wave of persecution. And that's what we read about in chapter 12. This wasn't widespread like Saul's persecution. Instead it targeted some of the primary church leaders. The Roman appointed king that governed Israel at that time was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. In what appears to be a political move he was going after some of the Christians in Jerusalem as a favor to the Jewish leaders.

Read Acts 12:1-5.

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

The "James" mentioned in verse 1 is the apostle James – not the half brother of Jesus who wrote the book of James, but the apostle – one of the Twelve. He had a brother named John and together they were known as the "sons of thunder,"

which I'm taking to mean they had rather bold personalities. So I assume this James was an influential leader in the Jerusalem church and was targeted by Herod and he not only arrested him, but had him executed by beheading according to church tradition.

Peter was also arrested and we know he was another bold leader and the most prominent leader in the church of Jerusalem. Herod arrested him around the days of the feast of Unleavened Bread, which was the same time as the Passover and meant the city would have been filled with some of the more zealous Jews. It's likely he was arrested around the middle of the week and Herod's plan was to bring him before the people on Sunday, the day after the Passover, to be judged and sentenced. It was obvious that the plan was to condemn him and have him executed in another political move to please the Jews. So Herod had four squads of four soldiers guarding him. Each squad would take a shift and he was chained to two of them while the other two stood guard at the doors. Peter was in grave danger and the church knew it, so they gathered together to pray.

Read Acts 12:6-11.

⁶ Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 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, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. ⁸ 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." ⁹ And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 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. 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."

It appears that Peter and the two soldiers chained to him were all sleeping when the angel showed up. But when Peter was awakened, he slipped away from them unnoticed. The other two soldiers were wide awake by the doors and Peter walked right by them without being seen. They didn't even see when the doors were opened and shut. God miraculously blocked their vision and Peter escaped.

Read Acts. 12:12-17.

¹² 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.

¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James [the other James] and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

So this is a great story of escape and answered prayer, but I want us to see a couple of things. Do you think earnest prayer was made for James when he was arrested? I think it probably was. Only he didn't experience a miracle. He had his head cut off. One prominent church leader down. I think they were expecting the same thing to happen to Peter – even though they were praying, which is why they were so shocked to see him. So his experience was obviously different than James, but at the end of the story you see that he hightailed it out of there and no one knew when or if he'd be back. So: second prominent church leader gone.

If that was to happen in most modern-day churches, what do you think would happen? If a church lost their beloved Sr. Pastor and gifted Assoc. Pastor who had both been with them since day one and were strong leaders, what would happen to that church? In most cases, I think they wouldn't ever really recover – at least not for several years. They might even end up closing their doors.

Most modern churches are set up in such a way that a lot of responsibility rests on just a few key pastors for the success of the church. They are expected to have clear vision and inspire the people to follow them. And when their leadership is strong and stable, churches oftentimes flourish – the church rides on their strengths. But when a key pastor is removed, churches usually falter – sometimes the effect is so damaging the church never recovers. I thought about 2 churches I've heard about recently that were similar to our size who lost their Sr. Pastor and within a matter of months they only had 20-30 people left and were in danger of closing their doors. There are all kinds of similar stories. So much

dependence is placed on the leadership of a Sr. Pastor that when he's gone, the whole thing falls apart.

What would happen if Randy, Kent and I were meeting for coffee and prayer and there was a propane leak and an explosion and all three of us were gone? Though that probably won't happen, at some point all three of us are going to be gone. Leaders come and go. We've had 35 Sr. Pastors at East Lincoln over our 135 years of existence. I'm not the first and I won't be the last. And whoever comes in after me isn't going to last forever either. The average Sr. Pastor tenure at East Lincoln is currently 3.9 years. In America it's 6 years. The reality is that transitions in key leadership positions in the church happen all the time.

If we lost two key leaders like the church in Jerusalem did, how would we respond? What would we do about our calling and vision? Will we say: "We need to hire another Lead Pastor and Assoc. Pastor as soon as possible so they can come in and lead us – cast their vision so we have someone to follow"? Most churches do and that's why I think so many struggle and die. Or, will we say: "We know what our calling and vision is and we need to be faithful to that whether we have strong pastors in place or not"?

That's where I think we need to be, so I think God's message for us as we end this series is this: "Own the Vision." Own the Vision. Not just pastors and elders, but all of us. Leaders are very important and they have their place, but if our calling and vision is merely owned by them, the church is in real trouble. Christ designed the church with really only one key leader – himself. And all of us, whether we're pastors or elders or church members have been called to follow him. He's given us a calling and vision to follow – we are to be his witnesses, empowered by the Holy Spirit through a lifestyle of dependent prayer. We've seen it throughout the book of Acts and now I think we must each ask ourselves: "Do I own it, or am I going to depend on someone else to own it for me?"