



OPPOSITION AND OPPORTUNITY
Matthew 5:10-12, Acts 12:1-11

The late Dr. Brack – our much-beloved Professor of Speech and Communication at Drew Seminary – would encourage us to read sacred scriptures over and over and over again. He believed that a certain text which moved you little a year before when you read it could bring you to your knees a year later. He said, “**The words are the same – but you are not.**” Now you not only know the words – but the truth behind those words. Nowhere is this insight more deeply felt than in our scriptures for today.

We know from reliable historical sources that – of the 11 disciples who continued the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ – 10 or them were either crucified, tortured, or beheaded for the faith. Only John (the beloved disciple) died of old age – and some believed he died as a prisoner on the Isle of Patmos. Yet – not one of them denied their faith in God or complained of an unfair life. Their witness and shed blood provided rich soil for the seeds of faith which will continue to reap a harvest for our Lord and his church until he comes again.

November 9th is the date this year for the Christian Church to pray for the Persecuted Church. Since I will be at the Garden Spot Village chapel that day – I felt led by the Holy Spirit to preach on this text today at the 8:30 a.m. service.

Right before the Olympics began in China – our Lamplighters Class passed out wristbands reminding us to pray for the persecuted church in China. The tourists are gone and television cameras have been safely packed on airplanes – and the Olympics are now a footnote in the pages of history. It was reported even before the Olympic Games began that the Chinese government in October, 2008, would begin a systematic crackdown on churches and other religious expressions when the games were over.

We know from the missionaries our church supports – the Conklins – that persecution of the church in China and Taiwan is an everyday occurrence. Did you know that 175,000 Christians were killed or martyred for the faith in 2007?

One of the fascinating stories that NBC network shared about the 2008 Olympics was about Eric Liddell. Eric Liddell was the Scottish runner immortalized in the film **CHARIOTS OF FIRE**. What most people did not know was that Eric was born to missionary parents in China.

After winning the gold medal, Eric Liddell was an instant celebrity and hero in Scotland. He was offered a wide range of high paying positions back in Scotland. Instead he chose to return to China – the land of his birth – and share the gospel with the people of China. He spent some years teaching at a Christian College in China.

In 1943, when the Japanese occupied China, Eric was imprisoned in the Wiefang Prison Camp. For the next 2 years he worked in the prison camp ministering to fellow prisoners – bringing encouragement to them.

Sir Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain, heard of his imprisonment and personally intervened for his release. His name was on the approved list to be liberated. However, at the last moment, Eric arranged for a pregnant woman to take his place – and remained in the prison camp – caring for others – sharing his meager rations with others.

On February 21, 1945, the Olympic champion died in the camp from malnourishment. The prisoners said of his work and witness,

“That day he crossed the finish line and captured the gold medal which will never fade.”

In 1991, a memorial plaque was placed at the site of Eric’s death in Wiefang, China. The inscription is taken from a simple verse in Isaiah that says, **“They shall mount up with wings as eagles’. They shall run and not be weary.”** When he died his body was placed in the Mausoleum of Martyrs in Shijazhoung, China.¹

In our first lesson today, Jesus is teaching and mentoring his disciples. It is called the Sermon on the Mount – and is often referred to as the ordination sermon of the disciples. It is also called, “The Christian Manifesto.”

We know it is the only beatitude that Jesus had to repeat twice. He wanted to be sure they heard him correctly. They were looking for a Messiah who would overthrow the oppressive Roman Empire – and they would be in power. They wanted swords and Jesus was talking about crosses. They did not see persecution as a good thing.

One of the greatest books in our church library is the **FOX’S BOOK OF MARTYRS**. I hope after this sermon that someone will be inspired to check it out and actually read it.

We have already studied how the Apostle Paul helped to establish a strong Christian presence at Antioch. This is where the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians.” About 30 or 40 years after Paul’s death by execution – another strong Christian leader emerged for the church. His name was Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch – later to be named St. Ignatius for good reason. Great persecution of the church began under Emperor Trajan of Rome. He was arrested and sent to Rome to face the Emperor. On his way to Rome, the Roman guards allowed him to preach to the crowds that gathered. People offered their lives to the guards to take his place.

He refused. Facing the Emperor – he refused to give ultimate loyalty and allegiance to the Emperor. In the Roman coliseum filled with pagan citizens he was thrown to the lions. His last words were remembered by fellow believers: “I am the wheat of Christ. I am going to be ground with the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found pure bread for Christ.”

The great hymn **A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD** by Martin Luther is part of that legacy. This hymn was written by Martin Luther – not when the Protestant reformation was at its height of success – but at his lowest moment – when he felt all that he fought for was lost. Hiding out in a castle – he was inspired to write these immortal words. I personally consider it to be one of the greatest hymns ever written.

In our own generation we saw the fall of the Berlin wall – and communism in so many eastern bloc countries. So many churches were closed and burned and forced underground. When communism failed – and freedom was restored – the church was stronger and more numerous than before the persecution began.

Eddie Fox, head of the World Methodist counsel tells the story of a former Czechoslovakian United Methodist Church. For decades the church was forbidden to witness outside its walls. There could be no bulletin boards with messages, or church bell sounding. The first day after the fall of communism – the church built its first makeshift sign – with the words “**The Lamb Wins.**” The battle belongs to the Lord.

In the closing verses of **chapter 7** of the book of Acts is the famous story of the death of St. Stephen. He is stoned to death on the orders of a Jewish extremist by the name of Saul of Tarsus. Stephen was killed for his witness. His blood which was shed, however, worked as a powerful seed planted in the world.

The church sprang out of it stronger – fuller – more complete than at any point in its short history. Instead of subtracting one from its membership – the church was actually strengthened.² When there is opposition to the kingdom – God often reverses the tables and uses it as an opportunity to grow the kingdom of God.

We know from **Genesis 50:20**, “**You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.**” **Romans 8:28** further instructs, “God works all things to the good for those who believe.”

As we open our text today from **Acts 12**, we see how God provides for his church through times of adversity and times of plenty. The Christian church had actually benefited from many years of peace until this new wave of persecution erupts in **verse 1**. King Herod was a very crafty but cruel ruler. He steps forward to consolidate his power base and enhance his popularity among the Jewish population.

The Herod family is a constant in the pages of the New Testament. The Herod clan is a reminder to us that we push against an evil power and presence in the world.

It is a necessary reminder to us that there is always a mixed reaction to God's coming in Jesus Christ to bring the true light into the world to dispel the power of darkness. Truth always has its opponents.

The kingdom of God always threatens our political and economic kingdoms. The kingdom of God is always a threat to our own empires. In **Acts 12:24** we are reminded, **"But the word of God increased and spread."** Remember, all names – even the names of kings, emperors, presidents, dictators – will someday fade into the pages of history – but the name of Jesus Christ – the Lord of the church – will live forever. Someday, "every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

I once was asked by a dear member why James, the half-brother of Jesus was killed and Peter was delivered. We can get so carried away with the outcome of this story that we forget that James was martyred for the faith. I simply said, "There are some things simply locked away in the purposes of God." God must have decided that the work of James on earth was completed – but there was further work for Peter to do. Perhaps more was accomplished for the kingdom of God – by the death of James than we will ever know until we get to heaven. St. Augustine believed that the death of Stephen – and his prayer at the end of his life – was the reason for the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. The church owes Paul to the prayers of Stephen. That is why it is important to live each day and night to the glory of God. However, let us never forget that Peter – years later in the plans and purposes of God – was martyred for the faith.

In **Matthew 24:35** it shares, "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away." In **Isaiah 40:8** we are told, "The grass withers and the flower falls – but the word of our God stands forever." This is why Christians take such a stand in the world for the kingdom of God. Dr. James Boice shares, "People say: 'Nothing can be more precious than life.' But that is not true. Physical life is precious. However, it is not the most precious thing of all. Spiritual life is more valuable. This is why Christians have been willing to sacrifice their physical lives for the sake of what they know lies beyond. They know whoever builds their lives on the foundation of Christ's teaching will never be destroyed."³

If you read the entire 12th chapter of Acts – which I encourage you to do – you will notice that a great reversal takes place. At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage – arresting and persecuting church leaders.

However, at the end he is struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James dead – Peter in prison – and Herod seemingly triumphant. However, the chapter closes with Herod dead – Peter free – and the word of God triumphing.⁴

Yes, this is why we keep the faith under pressure. This is why we pray and pass the ammunition. This is why we anchor ourselves to the word of God. This is why we awake ready each morning to live to the honor and glory of the Father.

Nelson Mandela, in his autobiography **THE LONG WALK TO FREEDOM**, shares of his 27 years spent in a prison cell for his political and religious beliefs. He tells that one of the greatest sources of encouragement was when the prisoners would sing. They would sing the hymns learned in church and the gospel songs that had long nurtured his people. The prison guards would share that as long as the prisoners sang, their spirit was good. When the prisoners could no longer sing, they knew they had defeated them and killed their spirit. As long as they could sing – they were free.

In the hymn **“Once to Every Man and Nation”** comes these powerful words:

“Tho’ the cause of evil proper, yet the truth alone is strong.
Tho’ her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong.
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.”⁵

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

September 21, 2008 – 10:30 a.m. service – Preached 10-12-08 at 8:30 a. m. service

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ENDNOTES

¹ Thanks to Dr. David Dykes of Tyler, Texas for this story.

²Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its translator**, NavPress Publishing, Colorado Springs, Co. 2007, page 1694.

³ James M. Boice, **ACTS: An Expository Commentary**, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, page 220.

⁴ John Stott, **THE MESSAGE OF ACTS: The Spirit, the Church, the World**, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, ILL, 1990, page 213.

⁵ James Russell Lowell, **“Once to Every Man and Nation,”** 4th stanza.