



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

February 9, 2014

"When We Pray" (Book of Acts Series)

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Before I start my sermon, I need to make a confession. I have never before tried to predict the winner of a Super Bowl like I did last week in my sermon. I don't know what got into me.

If you were here last week, you'll remember I predicted the Denver Broncos would win the Super Bowl. I know; that was wrong of me. I confess I shouldn't have done it. Go ahead; laugh it up, Seattle fans.

It's just that on Saturday night I clearly heard God say to me the Broncos would win. So there I was, waiting for the Super Bowl to start eating my chips and salsa, when, just seconds before the first hike of the ball by Manny Ramirez to Peyton Manning, I hear God say, "Wait a minute. The Denver Broncos? Isn't this the team that fired Tim Tebow? No way. They are NOT going to win!"

And so I apologize, I didn't have enough time to call or text or email you all to tell you that God had changed His mind at the last minute. If only I could have warned Peyton just before he took the first snap, things may have turned out differently. But alas, the ball was hiked and, as you know, it supernaturally whizzed past Peyton's head and into the end zone for a safety, and, well, you know the rest of the story.

And for you Seahawks fans, don't get all uppity. Richard Sherman, the opinionated Seahawks cornerback, didn't even get to finish the game. How

did that happen? Hmmm? Now, I'm not saying God took him out or anything. But being a Christian, I do believe God is involved in this world and acts in it all the time.

And today's sermon passage shows just how much God can, and will, intervene miraculously and supernaturally for good.

This passage is from one of my favorite stories in the Bible because it is so funny and profound, funnier than a *New Girl* episode when you hear about a woman in our Bible passage named Rhoda. It starts off more intense than *24* or *Breaking Bad* when you hear about Herod. And yet it ends very much like a family story in *Downton Abbey* when you hear about the disciples. So you see, it's all rolled into one. So let me read to you our Scripture passage:

Acts 12:6 The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison.

Acts 12:7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists.

Acts 12:8 The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."

Acts 12:9 Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision.

Acts 12:10 After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him.

Acts 12:11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

Acts 12:12 As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying.

Acts 12:13 When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer.

Acts 12:14 On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate.

Acts 12:15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel."

Acts 12:16 Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed.

Acts 12:17 He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, "Tell this to James and to the believers." Then he left and went to another place.

Acts 12:18 When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.

Acts 12:19 When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death. Then Peter went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

Acts 12:20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they came to him in a body; and after winning over Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for a reconciliation, because their country depended on the king's country for food.

Acts 12:21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them.

Acts 12:22 The people kept shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a mortal!"

Acts 12:23 And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

Acts 12:24 But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents.

This is the Word of God. What points can we draw from this Bible passage? First:

1) Persecution happens

It is part of the deal for Christians that there will be persecution and suffering in our life. We may want to think following Jesus means it will always be happy, but know it is the Lord who says, "...If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

True followers of Christ have always been known by their willingness to put aside their own self-interests for the sake of following Jesus.

Beware of an American-Christian consumer Christianity, which says following Jesus is all about "me." Beware of a Christianity that expects God to bless "me." And beware if much of our prayer life is centered on "why am I suffering, why is life so hard," as if to say and expect it should never be that way.

But as long as we are in this world, it will be hard. As long as we are Christians, it will be harder, not easier, in many ways. The fact is, there is a lot of pain and suffering in the world and in our lives. And not all of it is our fault. As Christians we are often misunderstood, and there are King Herods out there who are out to hurt us or are willing to betray us.

2) Angels exist.

Peter is in jail, chained to two men. The guards really didn't want him to escape; they could be executed if the convict gets away.

Peter is in a dark, dirty jail. Sometimes we feel that way: isolated, lonely, dark, depressed, feeling like we are in a jail.

But in this case, God sends an angel to help Peter. Angels do exist. There are a lot of them in this world. Some people see them. I wish I could, but I don't. But I know there are people in this church, who are not crazy, who do see angels. One person sees an

angel near me all the time when I am preaching; an angel that's tall, really tall, like as high as this ceiling, golden, bright, with swords and many eyes, right here in this sanctuary. I don't think she is crazy. Some people are gifted in seeing such things. When my wife Pam was young, she was running down a hill and tripped, and her sister saw an angel catch her and steady her.

Angels are real. God created them long before He formed the earth or made humans. Every major religion acknowledges and believes in angels. John Calvin, founder of the Presbyterian denomination said, "Angels are the dispensers and administrators of the divine beneficence toward us – they regard our safety, undertake our defense and direct our ways."

Martin Luther says they are "spiritual creatures created by God without a body for the service of Christendom and the church."

It is said in the Bible:

"He sends his angels like the winds, and his servants like flames of fire." (Heb. 1:7)

"Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" (Heb. 1:14)

Angels are like the delivery man who brings you flowers on Valentine's Day. You know they are only the messenger – the bearer of the gift – on behalf of the one who really loves you. That is what angels are – messengers of God and His love.

Angels do exist. In her book "Angels Are for Real," Judith MacNutt tells the story of Anthony Knighton, who said:

"After an emergency visit to the hospital, my wife and I were very concerned about her health.

Upon returning home, my wife woke up in the middle of the night and her bedroom was filled with a brilliant light. She saw an angel standing in the middle of her room. She said the angel only stayed for five seconds, but when he vanished, she was filled with peace, knowing that God was with her and would continue to be with her through her health issue.” (Angels Are for Real: Inspiring True Stories and Biblical Answers, Judith MacNutt, 2013, page 38).

As the Bible says – *For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways, (Psalm 91:11).*

Did we think that was just poetry. But what if it is literal and true? I believe so.

Angels come in many forms. Humorously, my friend Bonnie Joyce said in a Facebook post: “God sends angels down to earth in the form of dogs, with notes saying: don’t judge, just love. They ate the notes but they keep trying to deliver the message.”

Now angels aren’t really dogs, *or are they?* But when we pray, I believe God sends His Holy Spirit, and sometimes, angels, to minister to us; we just don’t realize it. When angels appear, they often vanish quickly once their mission is done.

I bet if we broke up in small groups right now, many of us would have stories that made us wonder if a person who once helped us was in fact an angel. I know of a story of one of our members who had an angel save her from drowning. I know of another who said a man helped her when she blew out a tire on H-3 and then suddenly vanished. She didn’t see him leave.

I know for me, once when I was sick but decided to lead a group of tourist friends up to the top of

Diamond Head just before a HIM conference. I had decided to run up the hill, which was really dumb. I suddenly felt really sick. I got dizzy while in the pillbox up on top. I was going to fall.

Suddenly, these two clean cut *haole* guys appeared, claiming they had climbed up there with large ice chests filled with ice and cans of cold soda to sell to tourists. They produced large pieces of cardboard for me to lie down on as I was about to pass out.

I rested for a few minutes, then got up and thanked them. When I went to tell my friends what had happened, and turned to point the men out, they were gone. Everything was gone, their ice chests, cardboard, everything. I had this inner sense that they were not from this world. They just disappeared too fast.

This disappearing act seems to be a trait of angels. Bob Counihan reported that while he was in Vietnam during the war, he had parked his jeep while waiting for his commanding officer at a meeting, when suddenly he saw a lone Marine signaling him to come over. Then in his words:

“He told me that they were getting “incoming” (attacks from enemy mortars, artillery, etc.) that morning around where I was parked. Of course, I moved my jeep. Two or three minutes later came the cry, ‘Incoming!’

“I dove into a trench and waited out the attack. When it was over, I saw that the area where the jeep had been parked was completely demolished. When I tried to find my new best friend to thank him for the warning, he was nowhere to be found.

“At the time, I did not believe in angels; I just considered myself lucky. Now, as I find myself closer to Jesus, I realize my Marine friend was probably my angel who saved my life. [Ibid., page 38]

Let’s look at the angel in our Bible passage. Peter is imprisoned. And so the brothers and sisters, friends of Peter, gather to pray for him. Fervently. They are in a meeting DEDICATED to praying for Peter!

When we pray, amazing things happen. Suddenly an angel appears in Peter’s cell. A dark cell with little or no light is suddenly bathed in bright light. He says, “Get up quickly.” And the chains on Peter fall off. Such detail! And then comes one of my favorite lines in the passage: “*Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.*” (Acts. 12:8)

When you pray, fasten your seat belt. Put on your shoes. When we pray, we are in for the adventure of our life!

The angel tells Peter to grab his cloak and wrap it around him. Made me think of Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak. But no, this is real. This is the Bible. This is God. It’s not an invisibility cloak.

There is always a practical part of prayer. I am going to save you, says God, but it’s cold outside and I want you to be warm. Peter follows him, but he is still in a daze. Is this a dream? Is this for real? None of the guards wake up. Peter and the angel keep on walking all the way to the huge metal gates leading into the city. Locked out. Blocked. Dead end.

But somehow, like Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*, the angel looks at the gate or maybe he waves his hands like this, saying, “These are not the droids you want” and the gates telekinetically swing open! They walk into the city, and then suddenly, as is the characteristic of an angel—poof! He’s gone and Peter is alone.

And now Peter comes to his senses. He must have thought, “That was an angel who was with me and now is gone. He saved me from King Herod and his men.”

So he heads to the house of Mary, not the mother of Jesus but the mother of the Apostle John, and now here comes the comedic part. He gets to the house. Now remember, the people at this house—what are they doing?—are PRAYING for a miracle. They are PRAYING that Peter would somehow be freed, that no harm would come to Peter, that they would once again be able to see and hug him.

Peter gets to the outer gate of Mary's house and knocks on the door. Rhoda, a maid, goes to the door. In those days, the doors often had a little door in the gate, which they could open to look out. She goes to the door and hears Peter's voice. Maybe she opened the little door and looked out, but it was pitch black, but she heard his voice. Her prayers were answered. The people inside – their prayers were answered too.

So somehow Peter got out and he is at the front door. And what does Rhoda do? She leaves Peter outside and runs inside. It's like she opens the peep hole—it's Peter! And then she slams the door shut and runs inside.

Meanwhile the Bible passage says, Peter continues knocking at the door. Yoo-hoo, it's me, Peter. Don't mind me. I'm just knocking on the door here, out in the cold, miraculously freed from prison.

Rhoda runs inside and says, "Hey guys, guys, gals, Peter is outside knocking on the door."

And the guests say, "You must be out of your mind! Shut up! Get out of here!"

But she insisted that no, it's really him! But they said, nah, or maybe it was his angel? I don't know if they meant his guardian angel or like someone dies and they think he turns into an angel.

Meanwhile, Peter keeps knocking at the door. "Hey guys, it's me, Peter! Open up. Herod's men may be looking for me. Come on; open up."

Finally the people inside say, "Okay already, Rhoda, let's go see who's at the door."

They open the door and the Bible says, and I love this line, "they were amazed." Duh, I think so! And Peter explains to them what had happened.

What a lesson for us all. Are there times we pray and pray and God is saying, "I've answered your prayers." And we say, "Don't bother us, God. We are still praying." And He says, "But I have answered it."

Maybe it would be like praying, "Lord, help my child get into the best college. I am praying it is Harvard."

And instead the child gets into UCLA. And the parent says, "But we prayed for the best school for our child—Harvard." And God says, "No. You asked for me to guide your child towards the best college match for him."

As many of you know I have been fighting a headache everyday for nearly three months. So I pray, "Lord, help me with this headache. Take it away. I trust You no matter what. I want to follow you, but could you please take away my headache?"

Well, nearly three months later, the headache finally disappeared. I could have said, "Lord, I asked you to take away the headache, but why did it take so long?"

And God would probably say, "You asked me to take it away, but you didn't say it had to be now. [But that was implied, Lord!] No, instead you prayed that you would trust Me no matter what, and that you want to

follow me. So if I am your Lord, then it's my time line on when, even if, you are to be healed."

"Okay, yes Lord, yes, Lord. You're right. It's about You, not about me. I am in Your hands. You are the Lord, not me."

Time and time again we all pray and sometimes we don't even realize that God is working on our behalf or has already answered our prayer. Maybe not in the way we wanted but He did answer our prayer.

As I have shared with you before, when God answers our prayers it is normally in four ways:

- 1) No, not now.
- 2) No, I love you too much.
- 3) Yes, I thought you would never ask.
- 4) Yes, and here's more.

When we pray, we need to know that God always, always, always answers our prayers, but granted it might not be how we want it. It's always for our good but we just can't see it at the time.

It's like when Moses doesn't get to go to the Promised Land and dies on a mountain after he sees the Promised Land from afar. So close and yet so far after 40 years! We can say, "What a bummer, for Moses!" But in the big picture, Moses goes to heaven, which is not a bad place to go, and skips all the battles that Joshua had to fight against 35 kings in the Promised Land. Who got the good deal then?

Yes, our loved ones do get sick, and they do die. Yes, we don't get the job we want, but it all goes back to trusting God no matter what. There's also the fact that this world is not our home. The world is full of pain and sin. We are tasked to fight the good fight for us and others, and to pick up our cross and follow Jesus so that one day all will be good in the end. And we will see our loved ones in the next life.

In the meantime our spiritual maturity grows, our trust strengthens, and we have the empathy to understand other people's pain. We are able to help them draw closer to God. We should help our neighbors. We should help other church members. We should even fly to the Philippines to help those in need.

When we pray, know that it works. God does hear us.

Now let me finish our passage with this last short thought. Herod. In our story, King Herod is trying to capture and kill followers of Jesus, like Peter. The passage said that he laid "violent hands" on the Christians. There are always situations or people who challenge us or are a burden to us where it feels they have put "violent hands" on us. I want to say, Judge not the Herods in your life.

We see dramatically in our Acts story that in the end, God strikes down Herod and is eaten by worms. How's that for a graphic gothic tale? I am not sure what kind of worms or weevils ate him, whether they were big ones or small ones, but I am sure God used "the lesser of the two weevils." Surely I digressed!

But whether there are people or circumstances that are unfair in your life, know that ultimately God will judge them. That's His job, not ours. Vengeance is the Lord's, not ours. Don't waste your time hating or fearing these people.

When we pray, God will take care of the Herods in our life. He will bring justice in the end. Prayer works. Prayer can make any circumstance better. Prayer can make you better. Prayer is basically always talking to God about what you are feeling, so pour your heart out before God.

But prayer should also include asking Him, "What do you want me to

do Lord?" It's not just about us. Ultimately, prayer centers us on God, and how He wants us to live our lives. Prayer helps us find our destiny in Him, not the other way around.

It might mean we need to forgive someone, or say that we are sorry for what WE have done. Prayer will help us discover if it's time to change jobs, or give money away or to just hang in there knowing that God AND His Son AND His Holy Spirit AND His angels are working on our behalf. And that's a mighty army on our side! Yes, a MIGHTY army available to all of us when we pray. Amen? Amen! Let's pray.

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Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version at fpchkoolau@gmail.com.