



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 11, 2014

"Redeeming the Time" - Acts 23:11; 24:1-27

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

**A** video clip, "Grace", is shown.

It was a personal experience of the grace of God, like that one, that began to change the Apostle Paul's life. Paul's story of transformation, the story of the redemption of Paul's life is front and center here in the Book of Acts. It's the grace, the love, the forgiveness, and the acceptance that Paul discovered in Jesus Christ that revolutionized his life. And all he wants to talk about is that experience of God's mercy.

It was this good news that Paul wanted to share with his friends in Jerusalem that drove him there, and it was this message of hope and liberation that he would share with the Roman officials in Caesarea and would ultimately share in the capital of the Empire.

We've been talking about waking up to God and what God cares about. Last week we looked at the courage we need to keep doing what God has called us to do, even when it gets difficult. And today, we're going to talk about redeeming the time God gives us, even when our lives aren't turning out as we had planned or had hoped.

As we'll see here in a minute, the Apostle Paul's life is not turning out like he had planned and yet this season of his life is not wasted. God is present in it and God

continues to use him, even though he is living a life he did not want or plan. And in the process, Paul is becoming more like the person God wants him to be. God continues to redeem Paul's life. God continues to transform him while the circumstances of his life are not ones that he would want.

Bobette Buster, is an Adjunct Professor at the USC Film School. She is a renowned expert on how to tell a story well. Bobette is a guest lecturer at top international film schools and is a consultant with a number of major companies, including Pixar Animation, Disney, Sony Animation, and Twentieth Century Fox.

In a lecture I heard her give in Los Angeles last year, she began her talk by outlining some amazing observations about the films we all love to watch. Bobette asked us this question, "What do all the highest grossing films have in common?" Her answer: "They are about people who face something they fear." These films are about a person who discovers the courage to overcome that fear and become more fully alive. Or, our most popular films are about people who fail to overcome their fears and we watch them join, what she called, the ranks of the "living dead".

We want to see transformation. We want to watch a person

make a decision, or a series of decisions, that results in them becoming more fully alive. Or we want to watch a cautionary tale about a person who makes an ill-advised decision that results in them becoming the living dead.

One of the things I love the Book of Acts is that it is a story about the transformation of people's lives. And what I love about this part of the book is that it's about what Paul decides to do when his life does not turn out how he had hoped. He has some decisions to make as he finds himself in prison. Will he become even more fully alive or will he chose the way of bitterness and join the ranks of the living dead?

Paul was a dynamic, powerful leader who liked to be on the move. His life was first and foremost about sharing Christ with people who had never heard about Jesus. He and his companions planted churches all around what is modern-day Turkey and Greece. His dream was to take the gospel all the way to Spain. That dream did not come true. His life ended up being much different than he had hoped or planned.

When I served on the staff of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, I got to know a number of people who work at Pixar Animation, which is in Emeryville.

**E**meryville is right next to Berkeley. One of the members of First Pres Berkeley is a great guy by the name of Pete Docter, who is the writer and director of a couple of Pixar's most successful films, including "Monster's Inc" and "Up". "Up" is a story about transformation and redemption and it is also a cautionary tale.

Early in the film there is a poignant, four-minute sequence that tells the story of how Ellie and Carl Frederickson fall in love and begin to dream about their future together. They buy the house they used to play in as kids when the two of them were first caught up in the adventures of a world explorer named Charles Muntz.

Brilliantly, in that four-minute sequence, Pete, and the animators at Pixar, were able to capture the real joys and disappointments of life. We see Carl and Ellie grow old together until Ellie dies before they have the one great adventure they had focused their entire lives on. Ellie dies and Carl thinks he's failed her because there was always something that kept them from having that one great adventure.

As a widower Carl meets a young boy named Russell whose father is not involved in his life. Russell is in a cubscout-like program and he has one final badge to earn and that is the badge for helping the elderly. That's how Mr. Fredricksen's story and Russell's story come together.

There is one scene in "Up" that brings into focus the decision Mr. Frederickson must make that will determine whether he ends up being more fully alive...or joins the ranks of the living dead. His life has not turned out the way he and his wife had planned. In a pretty creative way, Carl gets

himself AND the house he and Ellie had lived in to Paradise Falls. That had been their dream since they were childhood friends. But this is not the way Carl wanted his life to turn out. Let's watch this scene from "Up".

All this time Carl thought he had failed to give Ellie the adventure he had promised. But the real adventure for Ellie was not making it to Paradise Falls. The adventure was the life they shared together. That was all the adventure she needed. When Carl reads her note on that final page in her adventure book he is transformed by her love and he's set free. Those Pixar guys are geniuses.

The Apostle Paul is going to have one of those moments of transformation while his life is not turning out the way he had hoped. Like Paul, we have a decision to make. Will we say, "Yes", to the transformation and redemption Jesus Christ wants to accomplish in our lives and become more fully alive to God and what God cares about? Or will we reject that offer of transformation and redemption and become a part of the living dead, lost in bitterness and resentment? Sometimes it's during those seasons that were not part of our plan that God does his deepest work in our lives, freeing us to see what is most important.

I left you hanging last week with Paul about to speak to an angry mob in the Temple precincts in Jerusalem. The Tribune, who is a Roman military leader in charge of a large number of soldiers in Jerusalem, gave Paul permission to speak to a crowd that was ready to tear Paul limb from limb. We don't have time to read it so I'm just going to walk you through what happens.

Paul gets the attention of the crowd and he starts to tell them how he became a follower of Christ. When he gets to the part of his speech when he tells them that he was baptized so his sins might be washed away and that God then sent him to proclaim the good news of the gospel to the Gentiles, the people explode in anger. Why? Why are they so mad? They will not listen to Paul because they cannot accept that they too, like the Gentiles, are people in need of a Savior. So they erupt in rage. The people will not listen to this.

The Tribune brings Paul into the barracks and he intends to whip Paul within an inch of his life to find out what he said to illicit this reaction from the people. Paul wisely appeals to his Roman citizenship and that saves him from a severe beating. The next day, the Tribune brings Paul before the Jewish religious authorities so he can hear their charges against him. As Paul begins to speak, the High Priest, Annas, has Paul stuck, and Paul responds with indignation and anger, threatening the High Priest with God's judgment and calling him a whitewashed wall. I love this very human moment from the life of the Apostle Paul.

Paul then performs an oratorical judo move on the Sanhedrin. Knowing that the Sanhedrin was made up of both Pharisees (who believe in the resurrection from the dead) and Sadducees (who did not believe in the resurrection, which makes them sad, you see), Paul makes the statement that the real reason he is standing before this ruling council is because of his belief in the resurrection. That oratorical judo move sparks a huge argument among the members of the Sanhedrin.

**T**hat discussion became so violent, that the Tribune had to rescue Paul once again.

He takes Paul back to the barracks. The next day a conspiracy to kill Paul was hatched by some of the religious leaders. Paul's nephew, hears about the plot and goes to the Tribune to warn him that there is a group of men who are planning to kill Paul when he is brought back to the Sanhedrin. More than 40 men are in on the plot and they have the approval of the chief priests and the elders. This is a wild story. The life Paul is living is not the one he had planned.

**Acts 23:11** - *That night the Lord stood near (Paul) and said, "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome."*

Paul's life was not working out the way he had hoped but the Lord, Himself, stood with Paul and reassured him that these are not wasted days. He has testified about Jesus in Jerusalem and he will do so in Rome.

The Tribune secretly evacuates Paul, at night, from Jerusalem and takes him to Caesarea. Paul is spirited away to the coast, guarded by 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 other men with spears. Paul will be confined in Caesarea for at least two years. What will he do with that time? How will God use him to advance his kingdom even though Paul is confined and unable to do the things he loved to do and had been so effective at?

Five days later the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and an attorney, a certain Tertullus, and they reported their case against Paul to the governor. When Paul had been summoned,

Tertullus began to accuse him, saying (you might want to grab an airsickness bag as you listening to this blowhard speak on behalf of Paul's accusers):

**Acts 24:1-9** - *"Your Excellency, because of you we have long enjoyed peace, and reforms have been made for this people because of your foresight. We welcome this in every way and everywhere with utmost gratitude. But, to detain you no further, I beg you to hear us briefly with your customary graciousness. (I hope everyone had hip-waders on as their lawyer made his opening remarks).*

*"We have, in fact, found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple, and so we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to learn from him concerning everything of which we accuse him. The Jews also joined in the charge by asserting that all this was true."*

When false accusations are made against him, Paul will assert his innocence, exposing the hypocrisy of his accusers. When given the opportunity to speak, he will speak about the hope he has in the gospel of Jesus Christ. When invited by Governor Felix and his wife Drusilla to a private audience, Paul will courageously put his finger on issues that are preventing Felix and Drusilla from experience the hope of the gospel.

Antonius Felix was the first slave to become the governor of a Roman province. That would have been an impressive accomplishment if he had earned the position. His brother was a friend of Prince Claudius, the man who

would one day become the Emperor. Felix's brother convinced Claudius to give his brother a government position in Palestine.

During his governorship insurrections and anarchy dramatically increased throughout Palestine because Felix was so brutal. He crucified the leaders of various uprisings. The Roman historian Tacitus described Felix as, "a master of cruelty and lust". He was an unscrupulous, brutal, scheming politician.

Drusilla was his third wife and Felix was her second husband. She was the youngest daughter of King Agrippa I. She had been married to the king of small kingdom in Syria but she got bored with him. She was apparently incredibly beautiful and won the affections of Felix who took her as his lover and eventually as his wife. She was barely 20-years old at the time. Her ambition and her lust equaled her new husband's appetites. Drusilla had been raised as a Jew but she no longer had any active faith in God. These are the people Paul is talking to.

**Acts 24:10-23** - *"When the governor (that's Felix) motioned to him to speak, Paul replied: 'I cheerfully make my defense, knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation.*

*"As you can find out, it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem. They did not find me disputing with anyone in the temple or stirring up a crowd either in the synagogues or throughout the city. Neither can they prove to you the charge that they now bring against me.*



**B**ut this I admit to you, that according to the Way (that's the Christian Church), which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets. I have a hope in God—a hope that they themselves also accept—that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people.

*“Now after some years I came to bring alms to my nation and to offer sacrifices. While I was doing this, they found me in the temple, completing the rite of purification, without any crowd or disturbance. But there were some Jews from Asia—they ought to be here before you to make an accusation, if they have anything against me. Or let these men here tell what crime they had found when I stood before the council, unless it was this one sentence that I called out while standing before them, ‘It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.’*

*But Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way, adjourned the hearing with the comment, ‘When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.’ Then he ordered the centurion to keep him in custody, but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs.”*

Paul is a centered, focused follower of Christ. His life is not turning out as he had planned but nevertheless he will be a witness to the hope of the Gospel.

**Acts 24:24-26** - *“Some days later when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak*

*concerning faith in Christ Jesus. (Now watch what Paul courageously says to Felix and Drusilla.)*

*“And as he discussed justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, ‘Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you.’ At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him.”*

Paul speaks to the Governor and his wife about justice, about self-control and about the coming judgment. Paul knows what Felix has done as Governor and he knows how Felix and Drusilla ended up together. Paul does this not to embarrass the Governor and his wife but that they might come to see their need for a Savior. But Felix is afraid.

This is Felix's moment of decision. Will he face his fears? Will he make a decision to say, “Yes”, to God's work of transformation and redemption and become truly alive? Or will he reject the offer of redemption God is offering him through Paul and join the ranks of the living dead? Sadly, it appears that we know the answer to those questions. Felix and Drusilla will not face their fears.

**Acts 24:27** - *“After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.”*

Paul's life did not turn out the way he had planned. It turned out better than he had planned. God used those years of his life to shape Paul into the man he wanted him to become. These years in prison are not wasted

years. Paul accepts the limitations of this season of his life and makes the most of the opportunities he has. God uses him to advance his kingdom and to grow Paul into the person he wants him to be. Sometimes we need to have things stripped away so we can find that what we really need is Jesus Christ. Sometimes we need to let even some of our most cherished dreams go so that we might see what we really needed, what is most important.

I love the scene that follows Carl Fredericksen's decision to choose transformation and become more fully alive. He could have rejected transformation and redemption and joined the ranks of the living dead. He was almost all the way there. But in response to the gift of love he chose transformation and a new adventure.

Is this season of your life not ending up to be what you'd planned or hoped? Is it time to jettison some things from your life that just might be keeping you from being more fully awake to God and what God cares about? Do you have some decisions to make? I'm going to pray for all of us that we will say, “Yes” to the transformation and redemption that God wants to work in our lives even if this is a season we did not plan or want. God loves you. God is present and at work. Trust Him. Living life as the living dead, lost in bitterness, resentment and anger or living a life that is waking up to who God is and what God cares about. That choice is up to us.

*Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or [fpc.posterous.com](http://fpc.posterous.com). It can also be sent to you by e-mail.*