

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, Wash.
April 18, 2010**

Acts 12:1-19

Displays of Power from Acts 12

- 1. The power of prayer*
- 2. The power of angels*
- 3. The power of God's plan*

**Hymns: 141 – 148 – Distribution: 147, 161 –
Closing: 162**

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

Acts 12:1-19 –

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Who's your favorite superhero? If you come from an older era, you might enjoy the Lone Ranger or Superman. Maybe Batman & Robin or Spiderman are your favorites.

What attracts us to superheroes? I think people are enchanted by the powers that superheroes possess. Some can flat out overpower you. Another can climb buildings. Another can shine his hypnotic light. Power attracts us! People in our times seek it. They strive to go faster, jump higher, lift more, and outduel their competitors. Power is viewed as an asset in business, in sports, and in politics.

During the season of Lent, I think you'd agree with me that we did not see great displays of power from Christ. We recounted:

- His submission to his Father's will
- His arrest and two trials in Jerusalem
- His suffering and crucifixion
- His burial

It seems like Lent displayed a power shortage in our Savior.

However, the Easter season has changed all that! Christ's seeming defeat has been revealed to be a victory. In the accounts we hear after the Easter story, we have glory and power displayed in Christ. In the stories of the early Church in the book of Acts, we see vivid glimpses of our Lord's power on the dark pages of persecution. Today we have such a story. **Let's see three displays of power that Luke writes about in Acts 12:**

- 1. The power of prayer**
- 2. The power of angels**

3. The power of God's plan

1 – We read, “*King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*”

When did these events happen? The early Church was still at a relatively young age, about ten years old. The Apostle Paul had been converted already in the book of Acts but had not made one missionary trip yet. The apostles had fled Jerusalem due to the direct persecution of the Christian Church there. And Herod was now king in Palestine. This was not Herod the Great, murderer of the infants of Bethlehem. It was his grandson, Herod Agrippa. He was the puppet ruler for the Romans, and strove to keep control over the Jewish subjects with a bizarre mixture of abject cruelty and acts of endearment.

To please them, he arrested and murdered the apostle James. Perhaps James had paid a visit to the believers gathered in Jerusalem and had been discovered by enemies. Can you imagine the shock this must have caused the early Church? This was one of the three inner disciples – Peter James, and John. He had been specially trained by Jesus during his earthly ministry. What a short ministry this apostle had, and many may have wondered why God cut his life short after so much training and preparation.

Herod saw how this pleased the Jews who were enemies of the Christian Church, so he also arrested Peter for the same purpose. Peter naturally would have been one of the leaders of the Christian Church at that time. Ironically, we hear that it's the same time of year as when Jesus was arrested and put on trial. Herod intended to have Peter brought out for condemnation after the Passover, just as Jesus had been. Perhaps he diabolically had in mind to execute Peter on Good Friday in mockery of Christ, his leader. Luke writes about his dire situation in prison. Peter was guarded by four squadrons of four soldiers. Often the practice was to rotate the guards every six hours for 24-hour confinement. Peter was constantly chained to two of these soldiers. Additionally, sentries were posted outside the door. Luke tells us that it is the very night of Peter's impending trial and execution. He has run out of time.

However, we begin to see the Lord's power! Where do we first see it? “*The church was earnestly praying to God for him.*” The believers

were gathered together at Mark's mother's house in Jerusalem and praying for him during the early morning hours. They were praying earnestly. Perhaps we could compare their night to Jacob spending night hours wrestling with God in prayer.

Was there power displayed from their prayers? Most certainly, for we see God answer them! We see a miraculous result! The Lord saw fit to answer their prayers with a resounding “Yes!” and deliver Peter from maximum security. I wonder if it's possible for us to downplay the power displayed in this answer to prayer because this is the God we have heard created the world from nothing, sent a great Flood, and parted seas. Yet can you imagine your surprise if we were praying for one of our own who had been unjustly imprisoned and was personally guarded by a posse of policemen? You've most likely seen criminals brought to trial in orange jumpsuits with chains all over them. Can you imagine praying for one of our own in that situation unjustly and having them show up at the door?

We can hardly miss the early believers' surprise in Acts 12. Peter knocked on the door of the porch in the middle of the night, and Rhoda the servant girl was so overjoyed that she left him out there and ran to tell the rest of the group. And what did they say? One word in Greek = Literally, “Crazy!” We wonder why they had such great surprise! Wasn't this what they had been praying for? Or had they given up hope that God could powerfully answer their prayer and just prayed for God to generally guide the situation or for Peter to be able to bear his fate? **God shows them the power of prayer quite clearly!**

What about our prayer life today? Does prayer change things? Or is it more for therapeutic purposes? James 5:16 says, “*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*” James 1:6-8 tells us, “*When (the believer) asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.*”

God tells us our prayers do have a powerful effect and make a difference!

If we wonder if this is really so, we have many Bible stories that show this:

- Joshua 10:12-14: “*On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: ‘O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.’ So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies... The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed*

going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!"

- Exodus 32 (immediately after the Israelites forsook God to worship the Golden Calf): *"I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.' But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. 'O LORD,' he said... "Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self... Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."*

How remarkable that God powerfully answers prayer, granting requests of ours that are within his will! Perhaps there are some here today who could even give a personal testimony to that fact.

How tragic that we can neglect this blessing of God. How sad it is when we neglect our prayer life. How tragic that we do not pray boldly to our God, who chooses to listen to our prayers and answer them. How sad that we can even pray with boldness, yet lack the trust that God has the power to answer. May we learn a lesson from Acts 12, and see that if our prayer is not a violation of God's good and gracious will he stands ready to answer his children's prayers.

How will learning this change your prayer life?

- What have you been praying for personally? What can or should change in your prayers and requests?
- What about your prayers for Holy Trinity? Have you prayers for your congregation and your pastor? How can we all pray boldly for the mission and future of our congregation?
- What about our prayers for Evergreen Lutheran High School? What are you praying for? How can you pray boldly for their ministry, mission, staff, and facilities?

God has given prayer great power. May we be earnest in prayer and may God answer us!

2 – Other power is evident in Acts 12. Let's focus briefly on the means through which God delivered Peter that night. How exactly did he do it? *"Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. 'Quick, get up!' he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Then the angel said to him, 'Put on your clothes and sandals.' And Peter did so. 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,' the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him."*

God chose to use one of his holy angels to rescue Peter. God's angel was stronger than sixteen soldiers plus sentries. His holy angel did not awake them, nor did that matter, for God's angel would be powerful enough to subdue any amount of mere mortals.

What do we know about angels? At the Men's Retreat last weekend, the topic taught by one of our seminary professors was, *"Angels and Demons."* Scripture tells us:

- *"Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14)* Angels stand ready to serve God's people.
- *"Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word." (Psalm 103:20)* Angels are mighty creatures!
- *"He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." (Psalm 91:11-12)* Angels guard us from physical harm. Why does God choose to use angels when he could act himself? We don't really know. It's another one of his ways of doing things.

In my years of pastoring, I have heard more angel stories than I ever thought I'd hear! I've heard stories from sane people of all ages of how they have seen angels that helped them or knew that they had been assisted miraculously by one. We know they surely exist. I heard a quote once that stated that a

toddler wouldn't make it to age three without God's holy angels intervening in that little one's life.

Yet do we always appreciate God's angels that watch over us? I'm afraid that many days we unthankfully live in oblivion. For me, I usually don't think of angels or thank God for them until I'm driving by a wreck on I-5, wondering how many days God has spared me when I've been in a vehicle. Many days I look up and see countless airplanes land as they head for SeaTac Airport over our property. How many crashes have ever happened in the neighborhoods around us? How many times have you been spared from harm and others would chalk it up to "blind luck?"

May our account in Acts 12 give us the chance to marvel at the power of God's holy angels and lead us to be thankful for their service to us!

3 – Our Scripture reading gives us one more display of power in this account. It is the most power of all. We see it as we look at this account through someone else's eyes besides the believers' perspective and Peter's perspective. What about God's perspective?

We see it as we look again at the different fates of two of God's apostles: Peter and James. What did Peter do after this account? Acts 12 simply tells us, "*Then he left for another place.*" There were more places for Peter to go and other ministry that God had planned for him. We don't know much about the rest of Peter's life. Perhaps he spent time in Antioch, Corinth, or Rome as some legends tell us. Regardless, we know that Psalm 139 applied to him as well: "*All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*"

It is interesting that Jesus had said to Peter in John 21, "*I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.*" Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "*Follow me!*" Jesus knew that the time would come when Peter would be arrested and imprisoned permanently. But the time of Acts 12 would not be that time. The plan of God included Peter's service to continue beyond this time. Peter shows us his trust in God's plan as we find him sleeping on that last supposed night of his life. Psalm 127 says, "*The LORD grants sleep to those he loves.*"

What about James? Had prayers gone up to God for James? Didn't he have the power to deliver him? We know that God certainly did have the power, but God's plan did not include having James continue on laboring for the kingdom of God. What

has the most power of all? **We see the power in the plan of God that allowed Peter to live on and that would not let his plan be thwarted. That same plan brought James to take his place among the believers in heaven.**

We thank God for his good plans and purposes, for this is the same God who planned his master plan of winning our salvation. It's the same God who chose to save us in Jesus despite our utter sinfulness by sending his only Son to die on the cross and rise victoriously.

That plan of God continues. It's comforting that God invites our prayers and requests, and that he bends his ear to hear our requests and even grant them. Even more comforting is the fact that he knows the complete plan and he will let nothing foil his plans and purposes. When a bold prayer of ours is answered with a "No," we realize that our bold request was not within the bounds of his good and gracious will and we give our respect to him, accepting his good and gracious will for us.

Until the Last Day arrives, we all continue working hard for God's kingdom among us. After all, we're "Peters" here today, granted more time on this earth. We will work hard in the vocation God's given us. We will witness to those around us. We will offer our talents in service to our congregation.

So today, may we rejoice in the power that we have seen in this account from Acts 12, power that is greater than any superhero ever invented.

God has shown us:

1. **The power of prayer**
2. **The power of angels**
3. **The power of his plan**

Rejoice in his power! Amen.