

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**Fifth Sunday After Easter, May 1, 2016**

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)  
Hymns: 261, 283, 263, 521, 651:1.  
Lessons: Psalm 50, Acts 11:19-21, Matthew 10:17-33.  
Sermon Text: Acts 12:1-24.  
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Today we find Peter in trouble with the civil authorities. You heard *“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.”* But this execution wasn’t enough for this evil man. *“When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.”* This was during the Passover, when many Jews would be gathered in Jerusalem, so that Herod’s popularity with those who did not like or even hated the followers of Jesus Christ could grow. *“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.”*

This Herod is Herod Agrippa I. His grandfather, Herod the Great, was the king who had the infants of Bethlehem slaughtered in an attempt to kill the King of the Jews, Jesus. His uncle, Herod Antipas, was the man who beheaded John the Baptist and who wanted Jesus to do a miracle at his trial. This Herod was Rome’s “puppet” ruler in Judea from 41 A.D. to 44 A.D., so this is at least 8 years after Jesus was crucified. His persecution of the Christian Church followed in the footsteps of others in his family.

There is a lot crammed into the verses of our sermon text, so please follow carefully as we see

**PETER’S MIRACULOUS DELIVERANCE FROM PRISON**

- 1. Peter’s miraculous deliverance.**
- 2. The gratefulness of the church.**
- 3. Herod’s rage and God’s judgment on him.**

Did you notice that *“the church was earnestly praying to God for him”*? And, of course, we know, as James tells us *“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”* James 5:16(KJV)

This is what the church and individual Christians always do in time of trouble. They prayed earnestly, in this case for a fellow believer. They didn’t know whether it would be God’s will to free Peter as he had done previously or not. Well, God answered their prayers by rescuing Peter from the death that this evil man intended for him and that other unbelievers surely wanted.

This is surely, absolutely, a miraculous deliverance!

When we think about prison today in the United States, we may think of an unpleasant place to be, but a place in which prisoners must be treated humanely, provided food, and certain legal privileges.

But look at what this prison was like for Peter. *“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.”* Two soldiers had Peter chained between them. It was Roman practice to attach each of the prisoner’s two chains to each of two guards. There were two more guards standing watch, and a total of 16 soldiers on duty to lock up this one man, so security was tight, and no prisoner should have been able to escape.

But God had other plans for Peter. Look at the remarkable escape! *“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."*

Peter lived by the Lord's promises and committed himself into the Lord's hands. Peter was sleeping, not spending the night worrying about what would happen to him the next day. He was sleeping so soundly that he did not realize that the angel's rescue was actually taking place. The iron gate to the city **"opened for them by itself"**. Surely this is totally miraculous! God, of course, had heard the prayers of the church, and his answer was to miraculously deliver Peter in such a way that the guards were not even aware of what was happening.

After walking quite a distance, the angel left Peter. **"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 Peter finally realized that he was not seeing a vision but had actually been rescued, he acknowledged the miracle. Herod and the Jewish people would be disappointed in their desire to put him to death.

Now that he was fully awake, Peter **"went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying."** Luke, the writer of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, introduces another man, John Mark, about whom he will write later in the book. At this house many Christians were gathered praying, even at this unusual hour.

**"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!'"** Notice her excitement. She didn't even open the door. She was surprised and overjoyed that Peter was at the door. But her fellow Christians didn't believe her.

**"You're out of your mind,' they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, 'It must be his angel.'"** No one could believe her. We don't know exactly what they were thinking of when Scripture says they thought it was Peter's angel. But remember that angels are invisible spirits, sometimes made visible for God's special purposes. They are not the spirits of dead people. When someone dies, their soul is immediately taken to heaven or to hell, to be joined by the body at the resurrection of the body on judgment day. The job of angels is most commonly to guard, protect, and preserve us. We are assured in Psalm 91 that when we put our trust in the almighty God, **"he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."** Ps. 91:11 (NIV)

**"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."** When they finally let him in, he told the whole story of how he was freed by the angel. No one could believe Peter had gotten out of prison. He tells them, the church, how the Lord had brought him out of prison.

Surely this was a fantastical story, something hard to believe. But when God tells us something in his holy inspired Word, we accept it as true and believe what God tells us.

This good news of Peter's miraculous release from prison and God's sparing his life isn't just something they should keep to themselves. He says **"Tell James and the brothers about this, he said."** Now this is James the brother of the Lord, not James, the brother of John, who had been killed by the same Herod who had taken Peter prisoner.

This history of Peter closes with the words **"and then he left for another place."** There is only one further mention of Peter in the book of Acts, when a dispute arose over following the Old Testament laws. At that time, Peter said **"Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."** Acts 15:7-11 (NIV) In our next Sunday sermon

we shall hear of that history lesson in which God had made it clear that Peter should also preach to the Gentiles; when he is commanded to go to a man named Cornelius.

But we can't leave today's history without following up on what else happened as a result of Peter's miraculous escape from prison. ***"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."*** Herod was convinced that his soldiers had somehow released Peter, or that they were responsible for his escape, and had them killed.

That would conclude this history lesson except that God tells us more about this evil, wicked man who killed the Apostle James and wanted to also kill Peter. We read next: ***"Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.' Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread."***

This tells us a great deal about this pagan unbeliever. He just couldn't get along with the people whom he was supposed to be ruling over. There were people from Tyre and Sidon, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea who tried to make peace with King Herod. Of course, they were dependent upon him as ruler of the rest of the Palestinian area for food, so they had to get along with him.

Notice how the people praised him. He appeared in all his splendor and gave a speech, and the people praised him excessively. They claimed that they heard the voice of a god, not a man, when they heard him speak.

Now today we could look around the world and see how it is that men glorify human leaders. We might think, as one example, of all the glory of the Pope of Rome and how people honor him. They think and speak of him as the vicar of Christ, as God's personal representative on earth. Yet for nearly 1900 years the papacy has endured and received a great deal of praise from people around the world, despite all the anti-Christian teachings and activities of the Papacy and the Roman Catholic Church. Such mockery of the truth of God's Word has gone unpunished – until now. But we know that on judgment day all falsehood, hypocrisy, and all anti-Christian behavior and all antichrists will be revealed and condemned eternally.

Yet in our text is an example of how God sometimes does, in a very public manner, strike down those who reject, mock, and despise him and his Word. We read ***"Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died."*** Even the secular historian Josephus records the horrible death of this King Herod, who did not give glory to the God of heaven for his fame, but let others claim him to be a god.

So what can we take away from today's lessons?

We, too, are to pray fervently, without ceasing, especially for our leaders in the church. They, after all, are humans, too, and must rely on God for their help and guidance.

Also know that God can, if he chooses, miraculously help his people, just as he did Peter. And God can, if he chooses, immediately strike down those who mock and reject and despise him. That should serve as a warning to us – and to all unbelievers!

Our text closes with the encouraging words ***"But the word of God continued to increase and spread."*** That is our joy and confidence regardless of what may happen to us. God's Word shall endure! May he use us in every possible way to help spread all the truth of his Word! Amen.