

In my childhood, as some of you may recall, there was a TV show I liked, “The Adventures of Superman.” There was also a second show, with a hero called, “The Lone Ranger.” Kids loved both shows. Both featured a hero come to protect us from those who would do us harm. Both seemed to invite young viewers to (by watching ) join with the hero in said adventure – we felt “called” to this by the network having broadcast the shows in the first place.

As each new week unfolded, we kids were ready to go. We knew the shows were coming, and we eagerly awaited the special sign that the adventure was about to begin. With Superman, the “sign” was a man’s voice intoning, “Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! With The Lone Ranger, it was a stirring sound: (imitate Wm. Tell Overture intro here).

The Lone Ranger show, however, was associated with a SECOND “call to duty” sign: the opening words of the radio version: “RETURN WITH US NOW TO THE THRILLING DAYS OF YESTERYEAR...”

The trumpet fanfare signals a call-to-action in the PRESENT. But the “YESTERYEAR” tag reminds us that the story also harks back to a time from our PAST, from our HISTORY.

Well, “Return with us now” to ANOTHER story. Another group of “children” – God’s children – “called” to assist a Hero, waiting for the “sign” to signal, “It Is time” to take up the mission. That sign had comes – the giving of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. They responded. Now, what lay ahead? Assisting the Lone Ranger meant more than riding around the range, saying “Hi-Yo Silver” and doing cowboy stuff.

There were bad-guys out there to face. Real bad-guys.

Here is today’s new installment from “those thrilling days of yesteryear”. (Read Acts 4:24-31.)

A bit of review, to put the new segment in context:

Jesus has been killed, raised, spent 40 days training His apostles about the Kingdom of Heaven. He then ascended to Heaven, leaving the Twelve to lead the small group of followers to stand in His

place, as His witnesses. To make disciples of Jerusalem, Judea, the rest of the World.

Peter, having failed the Lord at His Crucifixion, had been restored as a leader. After some initial reluctance to take the role, he boldly preached to a large crowd at Pentecost. Peter used both the miracle AND Old Testament Scriptures as authenticating proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, despite His death. He then moved to a call to action on the listeners, urging them to save themselves and flee from the wrath to come.

3,000 had responded that very day, and believed. Thus was born the Church, right there in Jerusalem.

A honeymoon period followed. The believers were well-received by the people of that city. They joyfully met together, house-to-house and at the Temple, selling possessions to care for one another, taking meals together, listening to the Apostles' teaching and seeing numbers grow daily.

But then, trouble and pushback erupted and the Church was hit with a frightening crisis.

You heard this begin, three sermons ago: Peter healed a beggar lame from birth at a gate to the Temple. The man leaped and danced around. And then –

Then, Peter responded to the crowd attracted by the miracle, just as he had done at Pentecost. He gave a sermon, making the case that the miracle just witnessed – and Old Testament Scripture – thus proved the murdered Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah, and was alive. Then came the call to action that made it personal: Judgement and Christ's kingdom were coming, and each one who had formerly resisted Him now needed to repent, before judgement arrived and it became too late.

Behold the humbled fisherman who once trusted in his own power and ability so much that he boasted he would protect his master Jesus all the way to death (and then disowned Him). Broken by this experience, Peter was now back in the saddle again, but this time powered by God's Spirit instead of by his own self-assurance.

So a notable victory was scored for the Church that day in Jerusalem. With the honeymoon

experience mentioned earlier, it looked like things were going pretty well for them

But pushback was inevitable. And it came.

With the crowd still rejoicing over the healing of the lame man, word gets back to the government big-shots of Jerusalem: a miracle has happened, and backwoods preachers are attributing it to the wannabe Messiah they themselves had just executed: Jesus of Nazareth!

Reaction is swift: A dispatch of Religious Cops, along with priests, rulers and Sadducees, descend upon the two Apostles. “And they laid hands on them, and put them in jail until the next day...” But folks go home talking about what they have seen and heard that day, and many believe; the number of the saved men alone now approached 5,000.

Meantime, the same gang that orchestrated the hastily-assembled secret trial that did away with Jesus now orchestrates a NEW hastily-assembled trial to shut the mouths of Peter and John! They huff and puff and demand to know who or what had given these two the power to heal a lifelong lame man.

Peter again seizes the opportunity. He goes back to the plan that by now was his standard response: 1) he denies taking the credit himself, but 2) passes it on to God as proof from Heaven that Jesus, whom they had killed, was alive and proved to be Messiah. 3) He adds to the miracle, Old Testament Scripture tying into these events,; and then 4) ties it all up with a call to action: “Jesus is the Messiah. This proves it. And if you want to be saved and escape the coming judgement for your sins, you must repent and surrender to HIS proven authority, which outranks yours – and claim His Name for yourself. For there is no other name given among men, by which we must be saved!”

Normally, words like this would have put the Rulers in a rage; Peter and John would then be on the fast track to execution. But this time, there was a new reality in the mix: the man who had been healed was still out there! The healing had taken place out in public, right there at the Temple – and a whole bunch of people had seen it happen (or seen and heard of the aftermath). And the man healed was probably known of by many -- formerly carried to the Temple to beg, now out and about, walking and

talking of what had happened to him. The miracle thus could not be denied.

(And the Leaders claim in denying Jesus of Messiahship – that there was a “lack of attesting miracles” – was looking emptier and emptier with each new public heavenly revelation.)

Too many witnesses! Too many to just kill off Peter and John! To proclaim the miracle a fraud would expose the leaders’ true animosity toward Jesus, and the common people would rise and depose them by force! No, all that could be done at this point was to utter some tough talk and demand the two Christ Followers cease and desist crediting Christ.

And then let them go (which they did).

Now, Peter and John knew this was not a lasting victory. Indeed, it had now become personal. The Rulers had been given notice. The apostles had dared to question their continued right to rule in God’s name, and then openly defied an order to quit acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and Lord and King. They painted the Pharisees and Sadducees as builders who had “rejected the Corner Stone of the God” in Christ; thus implying the end of the rulers’ authority. (This could apply as well as of all the others (Herod, Pilate, and the crowds) who had been part of the conspiracy to deny Jesus His Throne by engineering His death!)

That, of course, was not going to sit well. Without any Apostle raising a physical hand against Jerusalem or Rome, a shock wave was now sent out to the movers and shakers of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the world: the war was on!

Everybody would be coming for them now. Jerusalem. Rome. Annas, Caiaphas, Herod, Caesar, the works. To attack and take down this little clutch of Christ-Followers and the Twelve whom the Lord had appointed to lead them – including the 5,000-plus trusting souls who had believed their words and thrown in their lot with Peter, John, et. al.

These targeted individuals were just common people – fishermen, farmers, a former tax collector, a former two-bit revolutionary. How could they stand in a direct face-to-face with such a combined

enemy?

So they called a prayer meeting.

Don't you hate when you are put in like situations? When, after much waiting and anticipation, God starts a new work, moving among the people. People see miracles and Scripture fulfilled; they start to dare and hope and dream. They join the cause. The leaders God has picked to then take them forward, take heart. It looks like great things are about to happen...

...And then, you leaders find yourself up against a blind alley of dead-end brick walls with no way out. With a furious enemy (that you stirred up) closing in from behind. And the frightened band who had in faith responded to YOUR proclamations on the goodness of God now looking to you and saying "What now? What do we do now?"

Emotions beat at your door of faith: Fear. Panic. Resentment. And a following that may be inches away from saying, "We're going to die! Why did we ever let you lead us out of Egypt?" A temptation to bail on God, cut your losses, and run for your life.

But Peter and the others stood the course. It was all or nothing now. They had boldly identified themselves with Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the Christ. There was now no turning back.

So pray they did.

Jesus had warned them that difficult days would be coming. They just didn't expect them so soon.

But Scripture had heralded Jesus' appearance as the start of "the Last Days". So the Apostles led the followers in crying out to God, and using a Last Days Prophetic Scripture to do it: Psalm Two. (This psalm painted a picture of the end-times' final war when the whole world comes to attack and destroy Jerusalem and the newly-enthroned Messiah. To stop His kingdom rule on Earth in its tracks before it even begins.)

"Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things?" it said. "The Kings of the

Earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ.”

And the present-day prayers continued (if I may paraphrase a bit), “Lord, it feels a bit like being in that kind of place right now, with us, Lord!”

So, what did these prayers go on to request from the Almighty? ‘Deliver us from evil?’ “Send fire from Heaven and consume those big bad scary enemies?” Or even “Buy us a day or two so we can gather our families and scam”?

No. Having stated the situation, they stated their chief need to meet it: “FOR TRULY IN THIS CITY THERE WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THY HOLY SERVANT JESUS, WHOM THOU DIDST ANOINT, BOTH HEROD AND PONTIUS PILATE, ALONG WITH THE GENTILES AND THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL...” –

“...TO DO WHATEVER THY HAND AND THY PURPOSE PREDESTINED TO OCCUR.”

“AND NOW, LORD, TAKE NOTE OF THEIR THREATS, AND GRANT THAT THY BOND-SERVANTS MAY SPEAK THY WORD WITH ALL CONFIDENCE, WHILE THOU DOEST EXTEND THY HAND TO HEAL, AND SIGNS AND WONDERS TAKE PLACE THROUGH THE NAME OF THY HOLY SERVANT, JESUS.”

They didn’t ask for a rescue. They acknowledged that, even if He didn’t cause it, God knew the situation and would use the outcome to further His Kingdom and His glory and His Gospel of rescue and hope. So they asked for boldness and bravery to stay on task with the mission, so that He could achieve His purpose in it. Regardless of what happened to them. Period.

God expressed His pleasure with their prayer: He shook the building a bit. And then, He gave them their request: He filled them with boldness.

And you and I are here in this church today, two-thousand years later, because of the results of that prayer. The message of Jesus (Who He was and what that meant), survived the first century and came down through the years, even to us today – for us to hear the Gospel and be given a chance to

respond to it.

So, what is the take-away from all this?

Firstly, let's look at Peter, a common-man-turned-hero, that apostle of ups and downs. Fisherman. Chosen by Christ. Saw himself as too sinful to respond. Accepted by Christ anyway. Called "The Rock" by Christ. Later called "Satan" by the same. In for 100%. Chomping at the bit to be the best, loyal-est friend of the Lord. Boasted. Warned. Ignored the warning. Told to pray. Slept instead. Denied his Lord three times. Then felt eternally disqualified.

And, then as "the Gospels" rolled into "Acts", we see a man restored. Peter, now back in the leadership role, but with no quibbling this time. Peter, now a man fully convinced, with power and conviction. Now an example and role model for the whole little gang of frail and average men (and women), made of dust just like everyone else, sold out to carry out the Great Commission of their Lord by being witnesses, even if it meant taking on the whole world to do so.

If our Lord could accept and use Peter, whose frailties are well known and preached from pulpits even to the present day, He can use you and I. Even with our fears and insecurities and frailties.

Lesson Two: When the going gets tough, it takes out the middle ground.

One can't keep a low profile and preserve a private, untroubled life – AND preach the Gospel. Being forced to choose in hard times, a witness for Christ becomes real. Christ becomes Job One. And being His minister, both as a herald to the lost and as a comforter and a shepherd to the already saved – becomes one's greatest calling. In whatever form it takes. For each and every believer.

I must admit that I am not to the point of that level of commitment yet myself. I have one foot in Christ's camp and one foot in my private life. As the world darkens around us, I see it and remember Christ's words to the church people of His day ("You Hypocrites! You can read the signs of the weather – clouds darkening in the west as a sign of a coming storm -- can you not read the signs of the times?").

I should, as “the signs of the times” grow more ominous, be strengthening my soul with more regular time alone with God, And with more meaningful group time with fellow believers by church attendance and participation. And with more prayer – both individually and in the group -- to be made ready for the approaching storm, should God will it so that it breaks with me still here to experience it.

But I also cherish and guard my present life – just in case God proves merciful and the storm passes us by. “It isn’t raining today, nor was it yesterday. I think I’ll put working on the Ark of Faith off a little bit and do what I want to do with my own things today.”

Beloved, we need the Church now as much as ever before. We need to draw near to the Lord as never before, corporately as well as individually. We need to come together and build one another up in our most holy faith, and that is done by relationship. We need to acknowledge that, though God lead us into frightening situations, He is faithful and we are in it for the long haul. God knows our weakness. He gives the same Holy Spirit today to us as He did back then. And He gives us each other, as the Body of Christ. So “LET US HOLD FAST TO THE CONFESSION OF OUR HOPE WITHOUT WAVERING, FOR HE WHO PROMISED IS FAITHFUL; AND LET US CONSIDER HOW TO STIMULATE ONE ANOTHER TO LOVE AND GOOD DEADS, NOT FORSAKING OUR OWN ASSEMBLING TOGETHER, AS IS THE HABIT OF SOME, BUT ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER, AND ALL THE MORE, AS [WE] SEE THE DAY DRAWING NEAR.” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

Let us pray.