

“Rediscover Church: Demons Tremble”

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But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.’

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Acts 4:19-31

We’re about halfway through our Fall series “Rediscover Church,” and if you’ve missed a part of it, we’re working through a section of the Book of Acts, chapters 3-5, which covers the earliest days of ministry for the church after Pentecost. Throughout it, a question you could have asked yourself might have been, “What is there possibly to learn from a group of people 2,000 years ago?” And even though the church then looks very different than it does today, what I hope we find each week is that some of the challenges the church faced then aren’t all that different, and in some cases, like in today’s passage, some of what these early Christians did can remind us perhaps of what we’ve overlooked or even forgotten as a church.

In particular, we’ve tracked a series of events, one right after the other, following the healing of a man in the temple courts by two of the apostles, Peter and John. In a clear-cut case of “no good thing ever goes unpunished,” they’re arrested and brought before a religious council known as the Sanhedrin. This council is none to happy that they’ve been proclaiming a message of new life in Jesus, but because they’re worried about what the crowd would do if they punished Peter and John, they don’t punish them directly, but instruct them to keep silent from that point further.

It’s right on the heels of that instruction, here as Peter and John still stand before the Sanhedrin, that we pick up today. Let’s read God’s Word together.

[Read passage.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Obviously Peter and John never heard of the phrase, “Go along to get along.” I mean when you’re being pressed, even arrested and threatened with further retribution, maybe you take things down a notch, maybe build up some trust by just laying low for a little bit, play the long game, that sort of thing.

So when the Sanhedrin, not exactly known for their understanding and relaxed approach to noncompliance, tells them to keep quiet on all this Jesus stuff, you might think that it would’ve been a smart play to build up some good will by lying low for a little bit. Definitely would’ve been more convenient and more comfortable. But they don’t go for it. They’re not about comfort and convenience. They don’t even need a minute to think it over. They just come right out and say, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

The council threatens them again, but before too much longer they are released. Where do they go after that? To “their own,” as the text tells us, to their friends, to the church. And they shared with them just what had happened before the council.

And when they had heard it, did you hear what happened? What did they do? They spontaneously burst out in worship. “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.’”

I got to say, I have to hand it to Peter and John and the rest of the folks there, because if I had had a night and a morning like they had had, my response probably would have been just to go home and go to bed. I’ll catch up with y’all later. But that’s not what they did. They couldn’t *wait* to get back to their church, to tell them what had happened, to join again in worship together.

If you read more of the Book of Acts, this is something that happens over and over, a cycle of sorts. One writer noted how the life of the early church could be seen as a rotation of, on one hand, the church branching out, extending, always being sent out by the Spirit and, on the other, being called back to be refreshed, encouraged, renewed, in worship. And here’s the kicker: it’s not because they like it. It’s because they need it.

Have you ever thought about worship that way? That our lives in faith are a rotation of being sent out throughout the week, being led by the Spirit to follow Christ, and of being gathered back in to be encouraged and renewed in worship. Have you ever thought of it that way? Do we do that because we just like it, or is it because we need it?

That’s kind of a hard thing to look at, isn’t it? What are our motives for “coming to church”? Do we gather for worship just because we like it? Or is it because we need it? What are the answers you think you would find?

When we were planning out this series, Pastor Rachel was reminded of these words from a minister named Robert Halverson, who was at one point Chaplain to the US Senate. He wrote, “In the beginning, the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next, it moved to Europe, where it became a culture. And finally, it moved to America, where it became an enterprise.” It moved to America, where it became an enterprise. Does that shock you to hear? It’s convicting for me, that’s for sure. Because it can be so easy to get

sucked into it. When we do things like worship planning, we put a lot of thought and effort into what we include. What do we include in the prayers, what do we use for the Affirmation of Faith?

For example, you may have noticed that Andrew, Eunsuk, and Amara are masters at picking the hymns that we sing together, and they pay attention not just to what might tie in to the Scripture passages each week, but they also look at how often we sing hymns that might be more familiar, how we introduce new songs, how do we balance familiar songs with new ones. Because it's good for the church to learn songs that we may not know already. When we go to the bulletin, and there's a song we do not know, that is a good thing. Our hope is that we join with the psalmist saying "Sing to the Lord a new song!" But you know what happens if we do too many of those? We start to hear about it. But then if we never learn new songs, worship quickly becomes stale. So, we try to make sure there's a balance. And all that can be good. Gathering for worship shouldn't feel like a music seminar. It should be renewing and encouraging, and part of that can be its familiarity. But how easy is it for us to turn from planning worship that is renewing and encouraging and toward planning worship that instead tries to be what people like?

This is what the church can play into all too often. We do it just because people like it. Obviously, we want worship to be renewing and encouraging—that's the whole point. But something can switch when we stop looking at how worship can renew and encourage and send us out with boldness, because then it becomes about manufacturing a product, a spiritual product. What do you call it when you look for a new church, kind of tongue-in-cheek? Church *shopping*. As Robert Halverson said, the church went to America, and there it became an enterprise.

Over the past few months, some of you already know there's been a podcast series from *Christianity Today* called "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill." Mars Hill Church, if you're not familiar, was at its peak a multisite megachurch based in Seattle. It grew explosively from just a handful of people in a room in the mid-90s to thousands and thousands coming every week across multiple sites just 15 years later, all this is a city that everyone said could not experience growth in a church.

Maybe one of the biggest markers of this church was its lead pastor, a guy named Mark Driscoll, who was a singularly gifted communicator. In a context where you might expect sermons to be brief, just to not overwhelm a group of largely unchurched people with too much too soon, instead the messages each week were often over an hour long, filled with winding exposition of Scripture, off the cuff illustrations, and at times irreverent humor. Really struck a chord with a lot of people, and Driscoll was the darling of many church-planting networks and church growth think tanks.

But there was trouble in paradise. Through interviews, the podcast unpacks how Driscoll could be overbearing, defensive, even abusive. As the church grew, the tactics used in designing and preparing worship and ministry were justified because more people were coming to Christ. Obviously we should spend thousands on new sound, lighting, and recording equipment, because this is what is attracting people in.

But then the means became an end to themselves. Mars Hill started to feel more like a brand to be maintained, with attendance and growth numbers monitored and recorded like they were part of a stockholders' report. Internally there were rumbles that things were not well, but the church was growing so it couldn't be that bad.

Until it was. As the title of the podcast, "The Rise *and Fall* of Mars Hill," tells you, the church experienced a fairly sudden implosion due to its toxic internal culture, and it's a sad, tragic, and cautionary tale about a church

losing sight of its calling, the sort of calling and identity that we see in the early church, a calling to be a place of renewal, encouragement, and sending out, rather than as a spiritual product to be consumed.

When Peter and John 2000 years ago went back to their own, back to their friends, back to their church, do you think they did so just because they *liked* the music they would sing? Do you think they did so just because they *liked* the kind of preaching they heard? No doubt they liked it a great deal. It was renewing and encouraging, as it's supposed to be. But when they got out of crisis, the church wasn't the first place they went to because it was something they *liked*. It was the first place they went to because it was something they *needed*.

At various stages over the past few months, we have been coming out of crisis. And much of ministry in the past year through the pandemic has been figuring out what works and how we continue in the ministry of fellowship, worship, and service even when the manner of gathering together is much more complicated. And for some, for any number of reasons, it's been a reason to be cautious, to refrain from coming, to tune in over our livestream instead, which has been and continues to be a good way for our congregation to stay connected.

But something's emerging, not just in our church, but in churches nationwide. The convenience of tuning in just whenever you can, say if you've got something else going on, or just to worship in your pajamas with a cup of coffee, may for some be the preferable way to "go to church."

Now what I'm about to say has a targeted audience, so a few caveats first. If gathering for worship or just church or faith in general is something that you're just skeptical about to begin with, then I am so glad for whatever way God may be leading you to join us. This doesn't apply to you. Or if you still have concerns about health and safety or mobility, whether for yourself or a family member you live with, may there continue to be declining cases so that one day you will feel safe in gathering again for worship. This doesn't apply to you.

But then there's the group, and we can all fall in and out of it, that has gotten used to the rhythm of church whenever you want it, church as something you can watch whenever you want, church as something you can "do" in your pajamas with your morning coffee. For this group, which I suspect is a good number of people, I want you to ask yourself a question, "Is gathering as the people of God for worship something you do just because you like it, or is it because you need it?" If you want it to be the latter, come back. It's time.

And if you needed a nudge, let me offer two glimpses of life when worship is something we need.

The first, when Peter and John go back to their own, and they all join in song, the text tells us that whole place shook; they were filled with the Holy Spirit; and they were sent out, speaking the word of God with boldness. This is the power of the people of God, gathered in his name and sent out in his Spirit, a people who come together not because they like it, but because they need it. And when the church of God goes out in boldness, demons tremble.

The second is a memory I'd share from about 15 months ago. You might remember there was a stretch of time when we did what we called "Summer Caroling," going to various homes to offer a few hymns. And I remember at one home, we sang a few hymns, closing with Amazing Grace, and I looked up at the end to see the person we were visiting with tears in his eyes. He said he just missed church so much, that hearing those songs again, person to person, just overwhelmed him.

May you feel the exact same way.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.