

# 16th Sunday after Trinity 2024

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Date: 15 September 2024

Preacher: Rev. Daniel Avitan

[ 0 : 00 ] Father in heaven, we thank you for the writing and preservation of the Acts of the Apostles, how your church existed and lived and how you worked through it after your son ascended.

And Lord, we pray that we would be careful observers, Lord, that we would glean this truth from your word and Lord, help us to understand it by considering how Jesus illuminates it and also help us to understand Jesus in his fullness and in greater fullness as we read your word.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. We're looking at Acts chapter 12, the entire portion that Brad read up till actually verse 24, we'll hit 25 next week. But our text today begins with and ends with a reference to Herod being the king. It's interesting, this is Herod Agrippa, this is not the Herod that we read about that slaughtered the innocents in the early chapters of the gospel. This is his grandson, Herod Agrippa I. At first glance, it seems like just an ordinary narrative description of Herod. Herod's the king, we know that he's not an actual king, not the king of kings, he's not the emperor, but he was a king of sorts. He was made the emperor by, or he was made the king by the Roman emperor Gaius, and he had an expanding territory. He was the regional king, puppet king, but regional king of all of Judea and Galilee and this region called Perea.

He's not a just king. He's an opportunist. He seeks to harass the church in order to consolidate power and flex his political muscles. Luke here, he makes use of Herod's title. He could have just said Herod Agrippa. He could have just said Herod, but he says Herod the king. And he does this in two different portions of our scripture at the beginning and the end, like I mentioned. Biblical scholars, and you guys as well, as you read the Bible, whenever you see a section that is bookmarked at the beginning and the end with either a theme or a title, it's drawing our attention to what that thing is that bookmarks that portion of scripture. And then the middle part of the scripture helps us to understand what is happening. Biblical scholars call this an inclusio. I like to call it a hamburger.

It's a bit more understandable. There's, it starts with king, king Herod. It ends with king Herod. Why does Luke do this? Because Luke is going to juxtapose king Herod, king of Israel, with the real king, the king of all kings, the true king of Israel, who is Jesus Christ. Herod is not the one who directs history and commands true power.

[ 3 : 06 ] He is about self-promotion. He is not the one who lays down his life only to pick it up again, ascending to the ultimate throne. He is on a throne that was given to him that was never Gaius's truly to give.

He is not a kind king like Christ is. He is a selfish king. Interestingly, we're going to see how, how Jesus is the king, the, the most excellent king, the king par excellence.

And this is going to help us to, to understand what true power looks like and how to properly respect, but not to, and to properly fear, but, but never to fear earthly powers as if they were gods. This text is going to show us that Herod and Gaius and Trudeau and Pollyev and Harris and Trump and Putin and Erdogan and Schwab and Soros, none of these people hold true, eternal, cosmic power, but only Christ does.

The risen and ascended King of Kings, Lord of all and lover of his bride, the church who he bled and died for. This is, this is what our text unmistakably communicates to us this morning.

[ 4 : 37 ] And that this King of Kings, this Lord of Lords is gracious and kind and good to his people. His graciousness is extended to the church by sustaining the church.

These are the, the points we'll touch on. His graciousness is extended in building up the faith of the church. And finally, his graciousness as King of Kings and Lord of Lords is extended in defeating the enemies of the church.

Before we get into the text, an interesting point, and I think it's, it's something worth considering. A bit of a rabbit trail, but also it helps us situate the text. If you remember last week, Acts 11, Peter is before, really good look at it, Acts 10 and 11, but Peter is before the church in Jerusalem.

The Gentiles have just come to faith. The church is like, we're not sure about this. We don't like it. Peter explains very clearly that this is the work of the Lord and they say, praise God, who are we to oppose the salvation coming to the Gentiles?

Verse, sorry, chapter 14 will describe the beginning of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas. So it's, it's a kind of an interesting placement of Acts 13.

[ 5 : 56 ] It would seem if you took out Acts 13, just cut it out, Acts 12 flows really nicely into Acts 14. The Gentiles come to faith, faith en masse. Paul and Barnabas continue on with this missionary journey to the Gentiles, but Acts 13 returns back to Jerusalem.

So the question is why? I mean, was it a mistake? You say, no, this is the Bible. Why is it in there? And I think for two reasons, and I'm sure there are more, but two important reasons why Acts 13 is situated where it is.

And the first, and this is going to be critical for us today, is that God will ensure that his church will endure even the most aggressive and demonic oppression. And we see that with King Herod, that the church will endure and survive regardless of the amount of oppression upon it.

Often that oppression is state-sponsored. The second thing is that as the church moves away from its Jewish roots, I think Luke here, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is going to encourage the Jewish believers that God has not moved on from them to the bigger and greater Gentile world.

That he still has a heart for his church. He still has a heart for the people of Jerusalem. So as a bit of a backgrounder, let's turn to our first point. The graciousness of the Lord in sustaining the church.

[ 7 : 25 ] Apart from Stephen getting martyred, not a great thing, and a couple arrests, the church has been on a series of wins.

I mean, they're on a hitting streak. They are enjoying favor, answered prayers, miracles, love, joy. Again, there's this martyrdom of Stephen that is a problem, but what does it result in?

It results in more of an expansion of the church, more love, more joy, more growth. Acts 12 happens, and all of a sudden, James, he is the son of Zebedee, one of the sons of thunder, James and John, if you remember from the Gospels.

He's a pillar of the church, and he is taken by Herod, and he is put to the sword. Herod sees, as Brad read, he sees that this is going to curry favor.

So what does he do? He takes Peter into custody, and he's going to hold him until after a feast of unleavened bread, and then put him on a kangaroo, give him a kangaroo court, show trial, and then cut off his head.

[ 8 : 43 ] And all of a sudden, all of this momentum seems to be grinding to a halt in the church. Both pillars of the church will surely die. James is gone. Peter is next.

Has the church finally run its course? They've come up against Herod, and really, they've come up against the emperor himself. So what recourse does the church have?

What miracle, so to speak, do they have in their back pocket? Look at verse 5 with me. The church begins to pray. It says, So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

I don't want to downplay prayer. Don't, hear me out here. The people are praying well. They're praying to God. Always a good thing. It would imply that they're praying in Jesus' name. They're praying earnestly, like Jesus.

The term in the Greek, the fervent prayer, is the same language that is used to describe Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. They are praying well, and prayer works, and prayer is effective, but in this chapter, prayer, the people who are praying, they look helpless and weak.

[ 9 : 58 ] Again, prayer isn't nothing, but in this text, it communicates the helplessness of the people.

In fact, all of the human characters in this story are seen to be very helpless. Peter, we'll go back to James.

James is taken. There is nothing he can really do. His head is cut off. Peter is chained in prison. It's like a maximum security prison.

He has four sets of four guards guarding him at all time. He is chained to some. He is behind a giant iron gate.

There's, he's helpless. What can he do? He's one man. The church is afraid. They're gathered together. We'll see later on that they are actually quite helpless and afraid.

[10:53] The church has no power to wield. Again, prayer is powerful. In this case, though, they are truly helpless against Herod. Later on in the narrative, we'll see that even when Peter is released, these prayerful people, they don't believe that their prayer is answered.

Consider also how the escape from prison, Peter's escape from prison, is not because he memorized the blueprint of the jail and snuck a bone to unlock his shackles.

He plays almost zero part in his escape. Read with me verses 7 and onward. 7 to 11. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him. Remember, he is sleeping.

And a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, Get up quickly. And the chains fell off his hands. The angel said to him, Dress yourself and put on your sandals. And he did so. And he said to him, Wrap your cloak around you and follow me. It sounds like morning time at the Avatan home. It's, let's get back to the text.

[12:03] And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate.

An iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them on its own accord. And they went out and went along the street, one street, and immediately the angel left him. Peter is stumbling about.

What is he doing contributing to his escape? Waking up three in the morning, stumbling to get a glass of water. That's basically what Peter is doing.

Yeah, okay, cloak, sandals. Okay, I'll follow you. And then he's outside and he kind of comes to. He's like, that wasn't a dream. Peter, completely helpless in this scenario, prompted all the way through, makes his way out.

And what does he say in verse 11? When Peter came to himself, he said, now I am sure that the Lord has sent an angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.

[13:08] This is a beautiful and faith-building event. God is sustaining his church in the face of their demise and they are helpless. He is not mustering up an army in this case.

He is doing a divine miracle. It is very clear that this isn't, this isn't a human escape clothed in divine words.

It is, Luke wants us to know that it is a divine miracle that he is getting out and it is by the hand of the Lord. So it's a beautiful and faith-building event. I'm sure it was for Peter.

Yet, how do we make sense of Peter's rescue and not James? Why does, why does James see the sword but not Peter? God is sustaining his church but he allowed one of its pillars to die.

The Lord is gracious to his church in the power and wisdom of his providence. And I think that's the big thing in all of this, in his providence. He saves Peter and not James. He's answering some prayers and not others which is, it doesn't say that the church is praying for James but I, from all the, the commentaries I've read it seems to, we can assume that that's what's happening.

[14:29] This is a group of people that are fervently praying to the Lord for the sake of their leaders. So God answers, if that's the case, then God answers some prayers and not others. But here's the thing with all of this.

Peter is saved here in Acts 12 but some 20 years later he's going to be martyred by Nero in Rome.

In fact, not just him, 11 of the 12 apostles will die according to church tradition and scripture.

Only James' brother, John, will die die not by martyrdom but he is exiled to Patmos. And I think this helps us to understand something, that the gospel is far bigger and more resilient than any one person in the church, any apostle, any, even any group of, even any church or group of churches in a region or a country.

North Africa used to be a powerhouse for the gospel and the church by and large does not exist there today. But the church exists.

God forbid but if the church goes into decline in Canada and Canada looks more like North Korea, not North Korea, North Africa, God forbid but the church will always exist.

[15:52] Nothing will destroy the church. Not because the church is wonderful and great, it's because the church has been bought by Christ and ransomed by his blood and he is the king of kings and the lord of lords who will sustain his church.

The gospel is far bigger and more resilient than anyone or anything. And this is interesting because throughout history we've seen the church's life swing between advance and retreat but never annihilation.

That is a comforting thing for us and it's because the all-knowing, all-powerful God of love and justice who is mighty to save has intervened for all by sending his son to bleed and die on the cross of Calvary so that death and every kingdom and power has been cut off at the root.

It does not have eternal power but only temporal power. So Herod cannot destroy the church. Secularism cannot destroy the church.

Socially progressive ideologies that seek to undermine this divine vision of the complementarity between male and female will not destroy the church. There is no alternative gospel that rivals the gospel of Christ.

[ 17 : 12 ] Nothing will. And therefore when persecution comes and we feel the pinch and maybe even more than that we can trust that God will sustain his church because he is good and gracious and kind.

Friends, the biggest honor we have in this life is to faithfully trust in the good news that can never be robbed from us.

that the world, the flesh, and the devil can throw all of its fury upon us but the eternal power of Christ has conquered all.

He has won the victory. He has defeated all of our enemies. Not continually whenever a new enemy comes up but once and for all on the cross. You might not have that boldness now but when the time comes as we seek to follow the Lord his graciousness will sustain us in our hour of need.

One of, I think, the cheekiest bits of Christian history is of St. Lawrence. He's a third century deacon. He was martyred by a Roman prefect and his martyrdom was gruesome.

[ 18 : 31 ] A bed of coals was laid down and a grid iron was laid on top of it and he was laid on essentially a barbecue and after an enormous amount of pain and as time went on he looked up at the prefect and said, I'm done.

You better flip me over as if to say, what can you do to me? What can you do more than just harm and kill my body? Your power is neutered.

It's done. It's forever destroyed. Christ is my king. Whether that actually happened or not, I'm going to believe it happened because it's wonderful. It's like a big own you moment.

I'm done on this side. Turn me over. That is a picture of the graciousness of God sustaining his church in its hour of need. But who has this kind of faith?

I'll be honest, I'm not sure I do. That's why I hope that in the hour of need I will be given it. The next section actually communicates the Lord's patience and grace to us as we waver and stumble in our faith as we are trying to seek him and follow him and obey him.

[ 19 : 45 ] Look with me at verses 12 and following. When he realized this, this is Peter, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. And recognizing Peter's voice in her joy, she did not open the gate, but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.

They said to her, you're out of your mind. But she kept insisting that it was so. And they kept saying, it is his angel. It seems like the tradition at the time was that God would send guardian angels and that the angels would take on the appearance of those that they were looking after.

It's not necessarily a biblical bit. It's a traditional understanding. But that's where that whole bit about the guardian angel comes about. Verse 16, But Peter continued knocking and when they opened they saw him and were amazed.

But motioning them with his hand to be silent, presumably because he didn't want a big brouhaha and attention being drawn to them given that he just escaped prison, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison and he said to them, this is the second time Peter's going to say this, tell these things to James and to the brothers, or sorry, but then he said to them, described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.

[ 21 : 13 ] The second time he recognized the Lord's hand in all of this. And he said, tell these things to James and to the brothers. Then he departed and went to another place. That is another James, of course.

If you quickly read this chapter, it's easy to marvel at the faith of the church. They're up day and night praying to the Lord fervently. They're seeking the Lord's face even when James dies. They continue to pray for Peter. Whether or not they were completely overcome by grief, we're not too sure. Their devotion is admirable. It's incredible. I don't want to downplay it, but again, I want to draw our attention to the helplessness of these disciples.

For when Peter knocks on the door in the middle of the night, even though they've been praying for days upon days, they cannot believe that their prayers were answered.

I mean, I'll cut them a bit of slack. You get a knock on the door at three or four in the morning, is it ever good news? It's never good news. Usually it's somebody has got in an accident or there's been some sort of issue or they're coming to arrest you or something like that.

[ 22 : 25 ] It's never good news. Nevertheless, they've been praying and their faith doesn't seem to be that great, but kind of on the small end. You get this knock on the door and there's no chance it could have been Peter.

These people, they have faith, but it isn't perfect. It's shaky. It's riddled with doubt. But interestingly, nowhere in the text are they condemned for it. Peter does not scold them for being subpar in their faith.

He doesn't scold them for not believing Rhoda immediately. And I think this is indicative of who God is, for he is gracious and kind, knowing that we struggle to believe and to trust.

So we can pray like the apostles in Luke 17, increase my faith. Or we can pray like the father who has the unwell child, I believe, help my unbelief.

God knows that our faith is susceptible to fissures and cracks, that we do not have perfect faith, but God is still kind and gracious to meet us where we are at in taking the grain of mustard seed that is our faith and answering our prayers.

[ 23 : 48 ] In this case, you know, we see this beautiful answer to prayer in light of such small faith and it helps us to have great comfort to know a couple things.

The first thing, that the destiny of the church doesn't rise and fall on how pious we are. I mean, it certainly helps to be pious and to pray. Again, like I said, I'm not trying to downplay prayer.

Prayer is a mighty, wonderful thing. It sustains us. It is a privilege to go to God and ask him to do things that only he can do and trust that he, if we're praying according to his will, that he can answer prayers, that he will answer prayers.

But it is to say that if we don't pray, God's plans don't somehow crumble. He is not relying upon us to do our part and if we can't, then he is powerless to do what he desires to do.

God knows our struggles and thank God that his power and his will is not contingent upon what we do. We see problems from a very earthly perspective with increasing degrees of impossibility.

[ 25 : 09 ] But God isn't phased by problems. I want to say this to myself, but I want to say this to you. He is not phased by problems. He created the entire cosmos.

Everything that exists is created by him from nothing. Huge doctrine in scripture. From nothing. It's not like there was an existing cosmic Home Depot that he went to and got the materials and then fashioned everything.

From nothing. There is nothing that is too big for him. No problem that is too grand. No evil that is too dark. There is nothing that will scare the Lord the way it scares us.

He will intervene as he sees fit and he will use us as he sees fit so that his purposes and plans are never upended or redirected. This is the God we serve.

He does not live with perpetual contingency plans. I was listening to a conversation between a man named Ray Ortland and Sam Albury and it's an interesting series for young pastors.

[ 26 : 23 ] Sam I think is like a few years older than me. Ray is in his 70s and he's been pastoring for 150 years and there's just an absolute some gold from that from the ongoing conversation.

Sam has he's a single man he is an ordained minister in the Church of England although he's here in North America but he is same sex attracted.

He recognizes it he asks the Lord for strength it's one of the things he talks about often but he said this to Ray in light of God's power he says do you know how easy it is for God to restore a gay man?

That's what he said. My immediate reaction was I have no idea. I have no idea my faith is like this but then I thought about that phrase do you know how easy it is for God to restore a marriage?

Do you know how easy it is for God to save an unsaved loved one? Do you know how easy it is for God to bring back into the fold a wayward child?

[ 27 : 38 ] Do you know how easy it is for God to see the gospel spread across the world and to see tyrants fall and to see addictions mended and broken relationships mended?

Do you know how easy it is? And I respond like the same way I don't I have no idea my faith is this big but this text is telling us it is so easy for God to just upend the plans of the enemy Herod and turn it on his head and sustain the church and to bring salvation to all that would believe and trust in him it is so easy it's not like this is tough for God it is not tough for him it's easy for him it's a cinch God knows our struggles with faith he sees that we say it is not easy it is actually very difficult and yet he invites us to seek his faith his face in trust and dependence especially when the world seeks to convince us otherwise so if God is gracious in how he sustains the church and he is gracious in how he builds up our faith how does he bolster our faith when our enemies rage against us this is the last part verses 20 and following verses 18 and 19 situate the narrative but we're just going to jump into verse 20

Herod is in Caesarea and this is what it says verses 20 and following now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon and they came to him with one accord and having persuaded Blastus the king's chamberlain before I continue notice all of the the royal and regal language used to describe Herod okay they came to him with one accord having persuaded Blastus the king's chamberlain that is Herod's chamberlain they asked for peace because their country depended on the king's country for food and on an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes took his seat upon the throne and delivered an oration to them and the people were shouting the voice of God and not of a man and immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down because he did not give God the glory and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last Herod the all-powerful king who is the king of Jerusalem and Judea and all of the

Galilee and Perea he fashions himself as a god and he is struck down like a common man and what's interesting here again we're juxtaposing Herod the false king with Christ the ultimate king notice how as God was rescuing Peter in the dungeon Peter sleeping and he strikes him and he says get up and Herod who is not putting himself at the mercy of God but is claiming to be God himself is struck and falls down it is an inverse of what is happening and we're seeing a complete reversal verses 1 to 3 the strength and the bravado that the chapter opens with this bit about him dying and worms eating him and he breathes his last Josephus the historian records the death of Herod

Agrippa different descriptors but pretty sure the same event which is to say that Josephus he develops some kind of stomach issue and dies and that's but he was struck the same thing he comes out in these silver robes he claims he's God and then he gets sick and dies I think Peter's describing the same thing I don't think we need to think of it as on the spot he dies and all these worms eat him like a horror movie if you remember Psalm 16 speaks of Jesus being the holy one who does not see decay but people that are not righteous they are eaten by worms it is figurative language to describe the utter baseness the unrighteousness the evil of a tyrant and the what will happen to such people boils down to this anybody who opposes the church of Christ the true church of

[ 32 : 25 ] Christ opposes Christ himself we are his very body and as he goes we go the head of the church has defeated death ascended into heaven and is sitting at the right hand of the father and we too will join him in glory all of his enemies are defeated therefore all of our enemies are defeated and when people stand up against us they might succeed for a time but never eternally God in Christ is the one who is the eternal victor overall his church will endure forever that doesn't necessarily mean that any person that seeks to put pressure on us that they're going to get smited or that they're going to get dealt with right away but we can be sure that we will not be left to our own defense that God is in our corner in Christ we feel a bit of pressure these days if we're going to hold fast to the word and to the historic orthodox faith but we don't

I don't want to downplay it but we don't feel the pressure like our brothers and sisters in Pyongyang or in Beijing or in Kabul or in Beirut a text like this the death of Herod is a great comfort for them it means that the head of Hezbollah Nazarela he will not endure forever he will not be ultimately victorious the Taliban in Afghanistan they will not have the final word Kim Jong will not have the final word anybody that looks to oppress God's people will not have the final word it also means that the culture of death in Canada will not in the end win and endure forever the graciousness of the

Lord will prevail as he lays waste to his enemies and I'll wrap up with this  
Herod is eaten by worms but Christ does not see decay Herod's throne is no more Jesus reigns  
upon the eternal throne right this minute he is there he can't be supplanted he can't be pushed off  
Herod tried and failed to destroy the church brothers and sisters here we stand here we stand today  
not in our own power but in the power of the Lord and with all the pressures and the persecutions  
the text ends with verse 24 and this is what it says but the word of God increased and multiplied this  
is the third of I believe five they're called summary verses or summary statements that kind of  
redirect our gaze and our focus in the narrative towards what is happening with the mission of the  
church but in this case verse 24 is also a big giant you tried but you failed Herod you tried but you  
failed Satan but you you tried but you failed world verse 24 but the word of  
God increased and multiplied the cross tried to smite Jesus but he makes a mockery out of it he  
transforms this ugly disgusting Roman torture apparatus and he makes it the most beautiful picture  
of victory of all time so what do we do we trust however imperfectly in our Lord and Savior who is  
mighty to save and that is gracious to give us the strength we need in our time of need let's pray  
Father in heaven we thank you for Acts 13 we thank you that well we thank you that we aren't  
facing a Herod Lord we thank you that even our most aggressively anti-Christian leader leaders  
here in Canada in Ottawa in Ontario wherever they may be whoever they are they don't hold the  
candle to Herod or to some of the emperors for that matter  
Lord we thank you for that we thank you for the relative peace that we can worship you in here in  
Canada but Lord give us great courage and faith and hope in you when we feel the pinch and we  
feel the pressure to recant and to downplay and to go soft on our faith Lord remind us that you are  
the one who fights our battles and even if we do pray fervently Lord we are truly hopeless and  
helpless without you Lord give us great courage to to teach our children well to counsel each other  
well to love each other well and and Lord we pray that that as as verse 24 says that the word of the  
Lord would would increase and multiply here in our city and in our church and in our province and  
country we pray this in Jesus's mighty mighty name the King of  
[ 37 : 59 ] Kings and the Lord of Lords Amen Lord Amen you and Lord of ■eyler come on time to  
hear Son and gentlemen money you and family all Feylo and let lovely mira and and cha my Lord  
of■