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The National Presbyterian Church

Courage That Just Happens

Philippians 1:12-28

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Today is Mother's Day and I want to salute all the mothers in this large family we have here at the National Presbyterian Church, those who are mothers in our midst and those who have played the role of mothers in our lives. Sometimes we borrow mothers and that's marvelous, too. This is a day we're honoring you.

A few years ago I wrote a poem on Mother's Day in honor of the mother in our family and I'll read it to you right now. "Mother is more than a title, the statement of what someone is or is to be. Mother is a name that children say. Mother is a proud name and a quiet name in songs, a late-at-night name and a special name after school for someone who loves you like Mum, Mom, and Ma. Mother is a watchful name and a suffering name when the times require. Mother is the name of the one at every play, every meeting, every game, and best of all, mother is the name we say when a day too good to hide has set me free. Hey, Mom, look at me."

Today's text tells about Paul's imprisonment in Rome and his feelings about that imprisonment in the book of Philippians. The Philippians know he's in Rome. They know he's in prison there because they sent a young man, Epaphroditus, to go and help him and take care of him there. What Paul tells us will probably surprise us in a way, but it will definitely encourage us

at the same time. First, he says, "I want you to know, beloved, that what's happened to me has actually served to spread the Gospel. It's become known throughout the whole--"he used the word "Praetorian" now--"the whole Praetorian Guard, the Imperial Guard." Did you know that in 1st century Rome there are some five prisons? Ironically, one of those five prisons is under the very Villa Via where Nero himself, the emperor, lived at the edge of the forum.

One of the perverse things of antiquity that castles where kings would live had a dungeon where they would house prisoners, in the dungeons below. It was also true of the emperor. And so Paul is letting you know that that's where he's imprisoned because he says, "The Praetorian Guard knows of my imprisonment." The "Praetorian Guard" is a technical term to refer to the guards who are assigned to the emperor. In fact, at the end of this book, he'll say, "Those in Caesar's household send greetings to you." I mean, he's right underneath in Caesar's house and he's winning those guards to Christ. So he says, "It's been known to the whole Praetorian Guard that I'm here." He's bragging in a way, "I've been in most of the 2nd class prisons of the Roman Empire. When Philippi, where the earthquake was. I've been in prison after prison and now I'm in the first-class prison. I've got the Praetorian Guard guarding me." So he says, "I want you to know that; don't worry about me."

Then comes a curious paragraph. Interpreters have had trouble in a way, interpreting this next paragraph. He says, "Some proclaim Christ out of envy or pretense and others out of goodwill." We can understand the goodwill people who are preaching the Gospel out of goodwill. But the other ones, the pretense good, what's he getting at? Is he saying there are actually Christians who are preaching the Gospel with bad motives, and then there are Christians who are preaching the Gospel with good motives? The word "preach" here is an interesting word. It doesn't always mean "preach" as a sermon, like we're thinking about preaching a sermon. It's the Greek word for "announce" or "say out in the open," and some interpreters are wondering if he's referring to the guerrilla theatre reality that was happening in the first century world where street theater people would mock the Christians with imitations of preaching. A little bit like late night shows that had a lot of fun imitating televangelists. Is that what he's talking about? We know

what happened at Antioch. Remember, they made fun of the Christians at Antioch and called them “Christians,” making fun of what was distinctive about them. Their centeredness on the person Jesus Christ. And is that what he’s talking about? There are--people on the streets with false motives who are announcing Christ.

Well, whatever he means, his perspective is clear at the end of the paragraph. He says, “What then?” By the way, that’s a first century saying. So what? What then? No sweat. “Whether in pretense or in truth, in mockery or in genuineness, the Gospel about Christ is being announced and in that I rejoice.” That shows to us Paul’s world view, how durable his world view is that he would say that.

And then Paul becomes totally autobiographical. He says, “Yes, and I will rejoice, I’ll continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance.” Paul has a high view of prayer. He says, “I’m thankful because of your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus Christ, this will work out for my deliverance.”

I have to tell you about that word “help.” There are two common words for “help” in the first century language of Greek. The one, *sullambano*, means literally “to lift with.” *Lambano* means “to lift,” *sul*, “with.” To lift with. That’s a word he’ll use later in the fourth chapter when he tells the church, “Help these women that are having an argument.” Euodia and Syntyche are having an argument. He says, “Help them.” That’s the word he uses there. That’s the common word for help. Lift with them. That’s wonderful. That’s not the word used here. Here he uses a rare word. He uses the word, *epichorogus*. I’ll tell you about this word. I think every choir loves hearing this word.

Epichorogus is the Greek word *chorogus* from which we get the English word “chorus” or “choral” or “choreograph;” this word comes from that Greek word *chorogus*. It is used three times by Paul in the New Testament. In the other places it is translated “knit together,” which is a better translation than just simply “help.” But what he’s saying is this; he is saying “I am grateful, I’m rejoicing, because I know that through your prayers and the choreography of the Holy Spirit this will work for my deliverance.” That’s the word he

uses. Have you ever thought of the fact that the Holy Spirit choreographs your prayers? Your prayers have impact. He says so. "I am grateful through your prayers and the choreography of the Holy Spirit this is working out for my deliverance." That's what he prays; that's why he's rejoicing. And then he goes on to say, "It is my eager expectation," in this autobiographical part he's talking now about himself, "it is my eager expectation that I shall not be put to shame, but then, that I'll speak with boldness," by the way, the word translated "boldness" there literally means "out in the open", "openness." He's not speaking about himself as some great hero. He is saying, "I'm just praying that I'll speak out in the open." The RSV decided to translate this word with the English word "bold." The King James Bible translated it with "full courage." But it's the word "openness."

"With full openness, I'll preach the Gospel of Christ, that my life will show that either by death or by life." And Paul is in a prison where people are being thrown to the lions. After the fire of Rome in 64 A.D., Nero (who's a contemporary of Paul; he's the emperor during Paul's whole ministry really) tried to divert attention from himself because most people suspected that he started the fire at Rome because he wanted to rebuild the city, except it spread far beyond the slums that he was trying to burn Jews. And so he tried to divert attention. Tacitus, the Roman historian, tells us this: And so he threw Christians into the arena before lions and also before the gladiator games in order to divert the attention of the crowds. Paul refers to this in his Letter to Timothy, "Twice I've been spared from the lions." So probably that's how Paul finally met his end, in this lethal imprisonment, 'because he never gets out of this prison. He writes letters from there, thank God, but he never gets out. And so he says, "Whether by life or by death, I'm praying that my life will honor Christ. For to me to live is Christ, to die is gain." John Calvin translates the sense of the sentence, "I have my life and my death in my mind and I leave both in God's hands." And that's what Paul's saying. "But," he says, "I know I'm probably going to live because I'm needed for you. I'm needed to write letters. I am needed to continue my ministry with the Praetorian Guard. So I think I will continue living," he says.

And then he turns his attention to them. He says, "Only live your life worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So that whether I come and see you or I'm absent, I may hear that you're living it together in fellowship together and that you're not intimidated by your foes." Notice two more words. The word for your manner of life here is *polithuse* in Greek. We get the English word

“political” from that word. It means “your public life,” “your political life,” “your life in the public realm.” “Live your public life worthy of the Gospel.” I just have two more words that is for you. The word for “worthy” is the Greek word *axios*. *Axios* means congruent. Interestingly enough, in classical Greek, it’s the word for “equilibrium,” “congruency.” He’s not saying live your life perfectly in the Gospel. Live your life congruent with the Gospel, under the Gospel. He’s urging them to stay sane, be congruent. We get the English word “axiomatic” from that. “So that whether I hear of you in the distance or come, I will see that you live worthy of the Gospel.”

Now I have one more word for you. There are three fear words that Paul uses in the Letter to the Philippians. He uses the word *phobia*, the common word for fear. We get “phobia” from that word. He uses the word *trauma* a little later, which is the word “tremble,” which is the fear word. In this sentence he uses the word that only appears here in the New Testament, nowhere else. He uses here the word *pturo*. We get the English word “terror” from that word. I discovered that this word is used in classical Greek almost exclusively with reference to animals. As a matter of fact, Alexander the Great had a race that he created, it’s still held in Calgary, Canada every year, a race where horses are put to their paces and ride over blinds and over wood gates and over wood bridges that would ordinarily terrify or spook a horse. The test is to see if a horse can go to battle and not panic, and it cannot throw its rider but can stay with its rider and go through dangerous places. Alexander created that race which to this day is still held in the Calgary Stampede where horses ride over bridges and they go where ordinarily horses would not go in order to see if you can train a horse who doesn’t panic. This word is used, it means a “spooked” horse or a “panicked” horse or a “startled” horse. That’s the word Paul uses.

So let me read that sentence with that word in mind. He says, “I’m urging you to live your life congruent with the Gospel so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear and know that you’re standing firm in one spirit striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the Gospel and not panicked by those that challenge you. Not startled.” That’s the word he uses.

Can I make just a few reflections on this great text? The first reflection is this. Notice that Paul has such an amazing world view. The good news about Jesus Christ, it’s so true, it’s so durable that it can outlast even bad motives, even the faulty motives of people, either in the church or out of the

church. If it's guerrilla theatre in the streets, he doesn't care. Jesus Christ is not fragile. How do we feel about that? Is God fragile to you? Is God easily offended so that he would just evaporate if we said something bad about him? No, not the Jesus Christ who went to the cross. He's not fragile. And Paul wants us to know that. He says, "Don't worry. I'm in prison. But don't worry, I hear there are people out there making fun of the Gospel on the streets, I don't care." He says, "I'm grateful that Jesus Christ is being talked about. He is so true. He's so durable that he handles himself very well even in situations where he's being mocked." What a world view!

And then secondly, we hear Paul sharing with us the mystery of prayer. The mystery of prayer, have you thought about it? That when you pray, you become a part of the choreography of God, that God uses your prayers? It helps us to know how can we pray for people? We cannot pray, I thought a lot about this sentence? We can't pray, for instance, "I'm a father and I want to pray for my son, my daughters." I can't pray, "Lord, make my son good. Force him to be good. He's in school now and I want you to force him to be a good boy instead of a bad boy because there are a lot of bad boys around." Or a bad girl, "I want you Lord to force my daughter to be a good girl." Or children can't pray that for their parents, "Lord, force my dad to be a decent dad." You cannot pray that because it would take away their freedom. Remember, Martha tried that when she prayed to the Lord and said, "Lord, make Mary come in the kitchen and help me." And our Lord answered, "No, Martha. Mary gets to make her own choice, and you get to make your choice." That's how our Lord answered that prayer. He answered with "no." So, folks, we can't pray that. But I'll tell you what we can pray. We can pray, "Lord, bring good people into the lives of my children," because that doesn't tamper with their freedom at all. God doesn't have to break his own rules. He can answer that prayer. I have prayed that for my children while they're growing up. I still do. "Lord, bring good people into their lives." And then, of course, you could help make that prayer happen by bringing your kids to this church. Bring them to a place where they can meet good people. When I listen to the "Six Witnesses" that were given by our high school young men and women, and I was so touched with what an investment you at this church have made in the lives of youth right here in National Presbyterian Church. In thankfulness we are encouraging to pray that. Lord, bring good people into my children's lives, into my parent's lives. We can pray that. We're asking God for his choreography. That's what Paul says is what hap-

pened for him.

And then he tells about his goal to stay out in the open. I love it that he doesn't say 'I want to be more courageous or braver than anybody else.' Paul doesn't have delusions of grandeur here. He says, "Lord, help me to stay out in the open. With openness, I'll preach the Gospel of Christ." I figured out that that is what courage really is, that King James was not too far off when they said "full courage" for translating that word "openness," because if you think about it for a minute, what is the mark of a brave or a courageous person? Not that they were braver than anybody else in the room but a courageous person is a person who stays out in the open in danger just about three minutes longer than everybody else was willing to do. When everybody else was running for cover, the brave person, probably their knees were quaking, stayed three minutes longer than anyone else did out in the open, and that's what we rightly call "courage." That's what Paul prays for. "Lord, help me to stay out in the open, exposed in the open, just a little longer than maybe I would ordinarily do." May I, with openness, share the good news? And then he trusts in the trustworthiness of God to handle his life, whether he dies or whether he lives. I love that line, "Whether by life or by death, Lord, I leave it in your hands. My life, my death, I have it in my heart. I always think about it." Certainly, Paul's thinking about it when he sees people being thrown to the lions. "And I leave both in your hands, Lord." It's not a good thing that you know when you're going to die anyway. That wouldn't help you anyway. Our life and our death are both in God's hands and, therefore, we can live our life. Then he says, "But I have a feeling I'm going to live quite a bit longer because I have a lot yet to do." And I like that, too, from Paul. And then he calls on us to live our lives congruent with the gospel. Our public life, our life out in the open, live it under the Gospel, not perfect but under and within the Gospel of God's love and truth.

And then finally, don't panic. I got to thinking about--I've never ridden a trail mule, have any of you ridden from the rim of the Grand Canyon down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon? I haven't done it. You can ride a mule down. You could walk down, or you could ride a mule down. I got to thinking about the kind of animal I want to ride if I get one. I mean, I say that I want a mule that's not frightened of rattlesnakes because there are rattlesnakes in Grand Canyon. No, I don't think I'd say that. Is Paul saying, "I want you Christians not to be afraid of the Roman Empire?" There are things to be afraid of. Is that what he's saying? No. I don't want a mule that's

unafraid of rattlesnakes because he might just walk right into a rattlesnake and then the rattlesnake strikes me or strikes him. I don't want that. I want him to be respectful of rattlesnakes. But what I don't want is that when he sees a rattlesnake, he jumps over the cliff with me on his back. You see, I want what Alexander the Great wanted, some horses that would not panic in battle. I want a mule to be respectful of the rattlesnakes but one that doesn't panic, and that's what Paul is praying for. We don't need hysterical Christians today. We never did. We don't need fanatics for sure. They jump off the cliff all the time, usually, attacking people they're after. We don't want that. What we want are people that don't panic, that keep sane, that stay out in the open a few minutes longer and trust God and that's how Paul starts his book.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this book. May we be people who trust you with our life and our death; we leave both in your hands and we live out in the open as best we can. And then, Lord, protect us from panic, from fear that's bad fear. Enable us to live to your glory, congruent with the Gospel. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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