

“Praises, Foiled Again!”
 Acts 16:9-15
 Rev. David Hutchinson
 Sunday, June 2, 2019

In melodrama - - there IS - - a classic VILLAIN'S line.

Most of you probably know it.

If you do - - feel free to shout it out - - when I get to it.

The damsel in distress - - argues with the villain - - until the hero arrives...

"I CAN'T pay the rent"

"You MUST pay the rent"

"I CAN'T pay the rent"

"You MUST pay the rent"

"I CAN'T pay the rent"

"You MUST pay the rent"

"I'LL - pay the rent"

"My HERO"

And...ready to say it - the melodrama ends with the villain saying:

"CURSES - FOILED AGAIN"

That - - is the melodramatic version of life.

Everything is a CRISIS - and there is always a HERO - and a VILLAIN.

In REAL life - - however - - it is NOT always the VILLAIN who is FOILED.

In fact, in real life - a lot of times - the villain seems to win. / We PRESS on – and roadblocks pop up - - - regardless of whether we are pressing for good.

Another way to put it - - there are times when nothing seems to go right.

And many of us know - - the COURAGE it takes - - to stick to it - - during those times.

In the Scripture reading this morning - - from the book of Acts - - Paul's plans are foiled. / Over and over again.

Paul hears the call of the Holy Spirit - - after seeing a light on the road to Damascus - - and changing his life around. / You may remember a painting of the conversion by Caravaggio if you were in worship a few weeks ago when I preached on Acts 9. Paul is converted and then feels the call of that Spirit to spread out over the world - - and tell others - - of what God has done in his life.

But part of the call - - is also the frustration.

In Acts 15:28 there is church dissension. / A barrier that is ONLY overcome by the involvement of the Holy Spirit. / As it says in the Scripture, a solution, "which seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

Following this setback - - Paul gets into an argument with his best friend, Barnabas. / And THIS time - - the Holy Spirit, I think - - works toward their compromise to SPLIT UP for a time. / Time to cool down.

After these two events - - the Holy Spirit - - PERSONALLY - -

- - FOILS Paul's plans.

Paul is planning to visit Asia, but the Holy Spirit forbids it.

Then Bithynia, and again the Spirit intercedes.

Finally they end up in Troas - - and a vision - - from the Spirit to Paul says:

"Not THERE either."

The vision - - from the Spirit - - says, "Go to Macedonia."

I would think that - - by this point - - it would take a lot of determination - - and courage - - to STILL say YES to the Spirit. / But Paul says "Yes".

SO - - as we think about Paul - - ask yourself - - do WE have that kind of determination - to stick with it? / Whatever God is TRYING to do with us?

Remember back in the NBA conference finals when there were still FOUR teams left? / Both the Eastern and the Western Conference had the favorite up by TWO games: Golden State, and Milwaukee each were ahead 2 games to ZERO. / And it looked like the Blazers and the Raptors were both OUT of it.

Well, say what you will about Damion Lillard and CJ, but the man to point to this morning - - when it comes to an example of DETERMINATION in the face of CHALLENGES is: Kawhi Leonard. / The Raptors came back from a 2 game deficit as the underdogs to win it.

I remember a commentator analyzing what went wrong for the Blazers and at one point he said, at some point in this it is NO LONGER about talent - - or coaching - - or skill - - it is simply about the WILL to WIN. / Who has it more?

The will to win is what Leonard had.

And it is what Paul had. / Determination.

Do we have the determination to stick with it?

Do we have the courage to let go of control & follow God?

To Listen for the call of the Holy Spirit?

Common problems with doing what Paul did - - include our own stubbornness.

Or - - our own fear.

Or - - the conviction that WE know the right way.

For Example: Do you know how they catch MONKEYS in Africa?

They slice a coconut in two - - hollow it out - - and in ONE half - - cut a hole just big enough for a monkey's hand. / They place an ORANGE in the other half and then fasten the two together. / Put it up in a tree and wait.

Sooner or later - the monkey smells the orange and figures it is inside the coconut. The monkey slips its hand in the hole, and tries to pull the orange out. / The orange won't fit - - so the monkey continues to pull and pull - - never realizing the DANGER it is in. / While the monkey struggles - - the hunters just stroll over and NET him.

The ONLY way the monkey COULD have saved his life - - would have been by letting go. / But the monkey is like WE are, sometimes - - gripping to tight to the WRONG things.

So sometimes we hold on too tightly to the WRONG things.

At OTHER times - - another problem is - - RATHER than gripping to tightly to the WRONG thing - - we try to hard to AVOID the RIGHT thing. / Doing the right thing is a challenge - - so we AVOID it.

And - as we look BACK to our Scripture reading - - and AHEAD to our lives - - I find myself asking:

When is IT determination in the face of setbacks - -

- - and when is it stubbornness and not listening to the Holy Spirit?

How do we listen for the call of the Holy Spirit?

As Paul listened to the Spirit's call - - and to his vision - -

- - I imagine him asking the question, "WHERE should I GO then?"

- - If not Asia, Bythinia, or Troas - - AM I going SOMEWHERE?

In spite of setbacks - - Paul WAS determined to stick with his calling.

And that - - is the part of Paul's story that inspires me today.

Sometimes life is difficult!

Does anyone agree!!?

So think about the life of a missionary - - like Paul. / If we look to the MISSION field, there are all kinds of stories to support that truth.

When Marj Carpenter - former moderator of our national church - - talked about her trips through Presbyterian mission fields - - she said this about China:

"Once you're in a place, once you take the Gospel into any country, any location, anywhere, it's never lost. / Even if you do it WRONG. / One of the shining examples of that is China."

"We confused the Chinese" - - she said - - "by sending Southern Presbyterians to northern China - - and Northern Presbyterians to southern China." / We were sent BACK HOME on several occasions. / Missionaries were taken prisoner and put under house arrest. / Beheaded. / People would say, "Oh, WHY did we waste all that money on China - the church there is gone"? / But - the church in NEVER gone...

The first Sunday it went public - - there were 16,000 baptisms.

Phil Wickery - who was a professor of evangelism at San Francisco Seminary - - and a former mission worker from China - - told stories of a GROWING church.

A church where people are being HEALED.

A church led by people who once RISKED their LIVES - - to keep a box of Hymnbooks hidden.

Would YOU risk your life - - for a box of Hymnbooks?

Do WE have that kind of determination?

That's the question.

How do we - - listen for the call of the Holy Spirit?

AND - - when God alters OUR plans - -

- - maybe the best we can do - - is to be THANKFUL.

For the GOOD which may come from the change!

God - - may be doing good - - that we DIDN'T know was there.

Or - - maybe there is BAD - and PAIN - we may have avoided.

At Plymouth Presbyterian Church - -

IS there any place - - where we feel - like our plans are being foiled?

- People moving away - - - sickness, tiredness, stress?

Paul asks us, "Do we have the determination - - stick with it?"

Where do we feel the Spirit moving in unexpected ways?

- Our new relationship with Habitat for Humanity?

- A growing ecumenical relationship with our neighbors?

- Interruptions by people in need - - and a WORLD in need?

- Do we have the determination - - to help provide hope?

Paul says: follow the Spirit...

- Listen - - for the call of the Holy Spirit.

- Be DETERMINED - - in SPITE of setbacks - - even PRAISE God FOR setbacks

- - because they may be God's way of changing our course.

In your life - - at home - - or at work - - or at school...

IS there any place - - where you feel - like your plans are being foiled?

Paul asks you, "Do YOU have the determination - - stick with it?"

Where do you feel the Spirit moving in unexpected ways - - in your life?

The thing is - - when you have to become determined about something - - you also become committed to it. / Setbacks can solidify our commitment!

Challenges can help us clarify what things are worth sticking with, and what parts God is leading us to leave behind.

Having our plans "foiled" - - CAN strengthen us.

We might have the courage EVEN - to say - - instead of "CURSES":

"PRAISES"

Life is NOT a melodrama - - folks!

Life is so much MORE.

Life lived in faith - - with God - - CAN BE - - different.

So not "Curses, foiled again"

But "Praises, foiled again"

Amen.