

Surprise? Surprise!

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Columbia Theological Seminary
Chapel Service
Decatur, Georgia
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Text: Acts 12.6-17

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be once again at Columbia, whose history has been entwined with Catherine's and mine for almost fifty years. It is not only a pleasure but also an honor and a challenge to be able to bring the word of God to you at this time of new beginnings for each of us as individuals and for all of us as a community.

The text that has been read is assigned by the lectionary for this coming Sunday. I must say that I have always had a love-hate attitude towards the lectionary. On the one hand, I love the lectionary because it forces us to study and to preach on passages that we would normally not have chosen. On the other hand, I dislike the lectionary for exactly the same reason: because it forces us to study and to preach on passages that we would normally not have chosen. I also dislike it because it calls us to preach on passages that we have heard multiple times, and on which we don't seem to have anything new to say. At the same time, I like it because it forces me to preach on passages that I have read and heard multiple times, and therefore to discover in them items that often go unnoticed.

Such is the case with the passage that has just been read. We all know this story: Peter has been imprisoned by Herod and is miraculously released by an angel. What does being miraculously let out of prison have to do with the beginning of an academic year? Would it not be more appropriate for commencement, or at least for the end of an academic year, when

many of us, professors and students alike, may be inclined to rejoice: “Free at last! Free at last!”?

And, why look once again at that story that we have heard dozens of times?

Those were my feelings when I first looked at this passage assigned by the lectionary this particular week.

But as I now read more carefully this story that is so commonly known, two surprises stand out that may be particularly relevant for us today. What now is most surprising to me is not so much that an angel freed Peter from prison, or that the gate opened for them of its own accord. What is surprising is that it is only after all of this has happened, and after the angel has left him, that Peter finally comes to himself and realizes the significance of what has happened to him: “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me.”

A stranger wakes him up in the middle of the night; a light shines in the cell; the chains fall from his wrists; ... and Peter has no idea that this is God’s work! Then the angel leads him past two guards and through an open gate, and even then, Peter still has no idea that this is God’s work. It is only after the angel leaves him that Peter finally realizes that God has freed him from prison.

The text tells us that Peter was out in an open lane when he “came to himself.” I don’t know about you, but I have never been freed from prison. I have never seen angels guiding me. But all too often I have been shaken out of my blind complacency and, coming to myself, I have discovered that angels had indeed been guiding me; that God had been freeing me in ways I did not even suspect, and from prisons I would never have recognized or acknowledged.

It is at times such as this, when we are settled into a new academic year, when we have unpacked our bags and buckled down for the work ahead, when trustees meet to plan for the future of this institution, that we must take the opportunity to come to ourselves, to realize and celebrate the mysterious ways in which the angel of the Lord has been guiding us to bring us to this place and this time. And I don't mean only us as individuals, but also us as a community. It is time that we come to ourselves and acknowledge that in all those times past when we rejoiced in what was happening, as well as in those times which we may well wish had never happened, the angel of the Lord was leading us to this place and this time and this community.

And it is time that we come into ourselves and open our eyes to see the miracles around us, to realize that even the very order of nature, which we are inclined to understand as the exact opposite of the miraculous, is in fact the most wondrous of miracles. It is time that we open our eyes and realize the miracles that God has been performing in ourselves, through ourselves, to ourselves, and for ourselves. It is time that we open our eyes and realize that this community is here not just because of the faithfulness of its donors, or because of the wisdom and commitment of its trustees, of its faculty, and of its administration, but because the angel of the Lord has been at work. It is time that we come to ourselves and break out in exultation, realizing that it is the angel of the Lord that has brought us here.

But then I said that there are two things about this passage that surprise me. The first is that Peter does not immediately recognize the miracle. The second is what happens when Peter goes to the house of Mary, where many have gathered for prayer. I imagine that among those many there would be some who had been with Jesus for years. They had seen him feed the

multitudes. They had seen him calm the storm. They had seen him raise the dead. They had seen him return from among the dead. If anyone in Jerusalem knew about Jesus and his power, it was precisely those who were gathered that night at Mary's house. They were praying. They were going about serious religious business. They were the very core of the church.

Now Peter knocks at the door and, while the disciples continue praying, a maid called Rosie answers the door. When she sees Peter, she's overjoyed. She runs to where the others are gathered to give them the good news. But they are too busy praying, they are too busy worrying about Peter, and they simply say to her, "You are out of your mind!" She insists, and they say it must be a ghost. Meanwhile Peter stands at the door, still knocking, ready to deliver his good news. Eventually, at the insistence of Rosie and hearing Peter's constant knocking, they open the door and receive the good news of what the mighty angel of the Lord has done.

So often God speaks, not as we expect, through the lips of the learned, the respected, the powerful, the religious, but through the lips of the Rosies of this world.

Some eight centuries ago there was in Italy a young dreamer boy whose name was Giovanni. He was so enamored of all things French that his buddies called him "Frenchy." One day, Frenchy had a profound religious experience and felt called to preach the gospel. So, he went to Rome to seek guidance and authorization from the most powerful Pope of all times, from a man respected and feared by nations and kings, Innocent III. The powerful and wise Pope was disgusted by Frenchy's appearance, and it is said that he told the young man, "You smell like a pig. Go and wallow among the pigs." Or perhaps he simply said, as the disciples had also said to Rosie so long before, "You are out of your mind"! But eventually Frenchy's

insistence ---like Rosie's thirteen centuries before, or like Peter knocking on the door--- forced Innocent to accept what Frenchy proposed, authorizing him to create a new monastic order that would live in poverty, sharing all goods and preaching the gospel.

In his native Italian language, Frenchy's nickname was Francesco. Today we know him as Francis ---Francis of Assisi--- and credit him and his early followers with one of the most significant and far-reaching reformations in the entire history of the church. Significantly, today's successor of Innocent III is called Francis (or Francesco, or Frenchy).

So here we have Rosey and Frenchy ---two people ignored by those who should have known better. But two people who were led by the angel of the Lord. Here we have Peter ---a disciple who, even after witnessing all the miracles of Jesus, was unable to see the miracle taking place in his own life. Here we have the other disciples at Mary's house ---people who are kept from learning of the miracle because they will not believe Rosie. People who are worried about Peter and, because they simply keep going about their usual religious ways, cannot hear Peter already at the door. The good news is there, but they need Rosie to call their attention to it.

And then, here we are. Some of us are here because, like Peter, we have come to ourselves and caught a glimpse of the powerful works of God. Some of us are here, like those in the house of Mary, to share and expand our knowledge and our faith. Some of us are here weeping and praying for this world as those disciples must have wept and prayed for Peter. We read the news and weep over a political system that seems to be bankrupt; and we weep over war, and destruction, and famine, and oppression; and we weep over a planet that we seem to

be unable to save from ourselves; and we weep over a church that yearns for the Reign of God and too often rejects the very signs of that Reign.

We weep, and we worry, and we pray.

We pray that God will do something. And God will do something. Actually, God *is* doing something. The angel of the Lord is doing something in each one of us. The angel of the Lord is doing something in Columbia Theological Seminary. The angel of the Lord is doing something in all of us as the body of Christ. The angel of God is doing something in the world.

But in order to see it we must, like Peter, come to ourselves and see the angel of the Lord at work in us and among us. We must come to ourselves, not just as individuals, but as a community and as an institution. We must come to ourselves and rejoice in all the things that God was doing without our even suspecting it, both in what seemed to be good times and in those other times that did not seem so good. We must work at creating a community that is able to listen to the Rosies of this world ---because without Rosie's witness, even the prince of the apostles is left knocking at the door; because without the faith and the witness of common people, even the best of theologians does not have much to say.

I said at the beginning that I like the lectionary because it forces us to deal with passages we would otherwise ignore. But the lectionary is also valuable in that it helps us connect passages that might otherwise seem unrelated. For this coming Sunday, the lectionary suggests that, jointly with the passage in Acts 12, we read Psalm 146.

Nobody knows who wrote this Psalm. Whoever wrote it, this Psalm was the Word of God for ancient Israel; it was the Word of God when Peter found himself freed from prison; and it

was the Word of God when Rosie insisted on the truth she knew. Therefore, I shall read the Psalm itself as the Word of God for us today. I would suggest that in listening to it you picture Peter on the street outside his prison coming to himself and singing these words. And I would also suggest that you imagine Rosie being ignored even when she has something important to contribute, and hearing in the Psalm a clear word of hope for herself. Let us then listen to this word of God for us today, as we come to ourselves and discover what God has been doing and is doing in us and in our community. And let us hear also what God is saying and doing through the many Rosies of today:

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

² I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴ When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.

⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

Praise the Lord, those who like Peter have experienced God's liberating power.

Praise the Lord, those who like Rosie are ignored and taken for granted.

Praise the Lord, Columbia Theological Seminary.

Praise the Lord! Amen!

