

On Memorial Day every year we give thanks for those who gave their lives in the service of our country. The vast majority of these men and women who died while serving in our armed forces were relatively young. That means they weren't just giving up their lives. They were also giving up future hopes and dreams and plans of what might be. And their loved ones too, whom they left behind, also have to grieve the loss of these future dreams and plans and possibilities.

Of course, it doesn't always take something as dramatic as a death to make people alter their plans.

Sometimes changing plans is necessitated by a diagnosis of a disease. And sometimes a change in plans is simply necessitated by the changes and chances that life brings.

We're in the midst of our parish reading project, reading together the book of Acts. And we're at the point where Paul is making some definite plans. But the events that transpire will lead to a radical alteration of those plans.

We've been reading about Paul's Third Missionary Journey. He spends some considerable time planting a church in the major city of Ephesus. But then he has some definite plans about what he wants to do next.

We know from both Acts and Paul's letters that Paul wants to make a missionary trip to Rome.<sup>1</sup> But first he needs to make a quick trip back to Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been suffering from a time of famine. And Paul has been taking up a collection amongst the gentile Christians in Turkey and Greece to help the people in the mother church in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

So Paul wants to go back to Jerusalem, drop off the offering there, and then head to Rome to minister for a while there. And then he wants to use Rome as a jumping off place, a new base of operations for a missionary trip to Spain.

In fact, around this time, Paul has written the great Epistle to the Romans as a fund-raising letter. He's never been to Rome. So he writes to the 5 churches in the city of Rome asking for financial and spiritual support. Paul writes the Roman churches to ask if they would be willing to support him and equip him in his missionary venture to Spain.

So in our section from Acts this week, we see Paul on what is called his Third Missionary Journey. He's spending time planting the church in large city of Ephesus. Then he's making the rounds of other churches that he has previously planted in Greece to take up the offering for Jerusalem. Then he heads to Jerusalem, with the intention of turning around and going to Rome and then on to Spain.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 19:21 & entire Epistle to the Romans, esp Rom 1:8-10, & 15:23-33

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8:1-9:15; Rom 15:14-32

But things are not going to work out as Paul had planned. He does assemble his collection. He does take the offering to Jerusalem. But in Jerusalem his plans go off the rails.

Instead of making a quick turnaround and heading to Rome and then Spain, Paul is arrested. And he goes through a series of trials. And he ends up spending years under arrest as his trials grind VERY slowly through the Roman judicial system. I'll say more about that part next week.

But the arrest and trials and imprisonment mean that Paul's previous plans are out the window. Voluntary trips to Rome and Spain won't be happening. Paul will eventually be taken for trial in Rome, but that's not the way he was planning to go there.

What's helpful here is that Paul does not seem devastated or depressed about any of these events. There have been some prophecies and premonitions that he would have to suffer.

We see this poignantly in Acts 21. Right before Paul goes to Jerusalem, the prophet Agabus tells Paul that he will be bound and arrested and handed over to the Romans. When the Christians hear this, they try to dissuade Paul from going.

But Paul replies, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

And these events come to pass. Paul is arrested. But he is not deterred from his primary mission of proclaiming the love of God through Jesus Christ. It seems that he would prefer to do it in freedom. But if it's while he's on trial, so be it. And if it is while he is imprisoned, so be it. And I'll say more about these trials next week.

But I want to try to tease out Paul's mind-set for a moment. Acts doesn't reveal what Paul is thinking. It just shows him moving forward faithfully, even when plans are going awry, even when he is arrested and imprisoned.

But I mentioned the Epistle to the Romans a few moments ago. At this point in Acts, Romans is probably Paul's most recent letter written just before his final trip to Jerusalem. And I believe Romans can offer us a couple of insights into Paul at this point in his life.

Specifically I'd like to briefly dip in to chapter 8 and chapter 12 of Romans.

First chapter 12. Paul writes,

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 21:13

<sup>4</sup> Rom 12:9-13

This is Paul's advice to the Romans. But it also seems to be the way he is dealing with the events in his own life: rejoicing in hope, patient in suffering, holding fast to what is good.

But Paul is not adhering to these attitudes out of stoicism or some kind of wishful thinking. Instead, it is grounded upon his understanding of God's love.

And God's love and faithfulness are spoken of powerfully in what is arguably the pinnacle of Romans, chapter 8.

Romans speaks over and over again about the importance of trusting in God, the importance of faith in God. And Paul leans on this understanding when he says, "If God is for us, who is against us?"<sup>5</sup>

That's such a crucial perspective. If God is for us, and since there is nothing greater than God, then there is nothing ultimately to fear.

Paul says,

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>6</sup>

It's an amazing statement. Nothing gets between us and God's love. Nothing in life. Nothing in death. No evil power. No earthly power or ruler. Nothing in the present. Nothing in the future.

And if we truly believe that and lean into that, then there is nothing ultimately to fear. God's love ultimately trumps any suffering or difficulty or disappointment we might have.

The more we lean into God's ultimate, enduring, and permanent love, then the less we will be derailed by anything that happens to us in life.

We see Paul living this way in this week's readings from Acts. And we will see it in our final readings from Acts this coming week.

His plans are completely derailed. But his faith and his hope in God are not derailed.

And Paul would encourage us to live in the same way. To put our ultimate trust in God. Nothing is stronger than God's love for us. And nothing can separate us from that love.

Yes, in life there will be changes and chances that we have to deal with. There will undoubtedly be times of disappointment.

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<sup>5</sup> Rom 8:31

<sup>6</sup> Rom 8:38-39

We may have to revise our future hopes and dreams and plans. But one thing that does NOT have to be revised is our ultimate hope, the ultimate reality of God's love for us. Nothing in the present, nothing in the future can alter that.

As Paul says,  
"From (God) and through (God) and to (God) are all things. To him be the glory forever."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rom 11:36