

This past week we finished our Parish Reading Project's readings through the book of Acts. In reading the final section of Acts, we've seen Paul going through arrest and a series of trials. And then he is taken under custody to Rome to stand trial there.

The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, under house arrest. It doesn't say anything about his final trials. It doesn't say anything about his eventual death, both of which had taken place long before Acts was written.

So, for many folks, the ending of Acts doesn't seem very satisfying. Things are still up in the air. Luke doesn't bring much closure to the book of Acts in the way that we would usually understand closure.

So, one of the primary questions about the ending of Acts is, is it a poor ending? Or is something more going on here? As is sometimes said, is the ending of Acts a crappy ending or a happy ending? We'll come back to that question in a bit.

The last section of Acts begins with Paul in Jerusalem. He's making a quick stop to meet with the leaders of the church there and to bring an offering for them that's he's collected during his travels.

After that, he plans to go to Rome and then Spain on yet another missionary journey.

But as I mentioned last week, in Jerusalem Paul's plans go out the window.

The church leaders tell Paul that some false rumors have started about him. I won't go into all the details. But they think it'd be good for Paul to be seen going to the Jewish Temple to worship God there. Paul has no problem with this, and he does so.

Again, there are more details, but eventually Paul's presence causes a riot in the Temple. The Roman soldiers stationed in the fortress next door arrest Paul, partly to take him into protective custody, partly to appease the rioting mob, and partly out of a sense of mistaken identity.

There's actually a funny exchange—Paul addresses the Roman commander in Greek. The commander says basically, 'How do you know Greek? I thought you were that Egyptian who led the 4,000 terrorist assassins into a revolt.'<sup>1</sup> Nope—that's someone else.

Then we have a series of trials for Paul. Some scholars have compared this section of Acts to the series of trials Jesus had during his Passion. Some have even titled this section of Acts as the "Passion of Paul."

But here's the big difference. Jesus' trials took place in less than a 12-hour window. But Paul's series of trials extends for a number of years.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 21:37-38

First there is a Jewish trial before the Sanhedrin that parallels Jesus' trial before that same body a quarter century before. But during Paul's trial, Paul ingeniously drives a wedge between the Pharisees and the Sadducees on the Sanhedrin. Paul talks about his own training as a Pharisee. Then he talks about the resurrection, an idea Pharisees accepted, and Sadducees rejected. And the proceedings dissolve as the two Jewish groups start violently arguing with each other. So, the Roman commander takes Paul back to the fortress. And then learning of a plot against Paul's life, the Romans transfer him from Jerusalem to the Roman provincial capital of Caesarea.

Just as Jesus was taken from the Sanhedrin to stand trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, Paul is also taken to the Roman governor, Pilate's successor Felix. But the trial before Governor Felix will not be quick. In fact, it will drag out intermittently for two full years. Felix keeps summoning Paul to appear before him to testify. And Luke tells us that part of the reason that Governor Felix is stringing Paul along is that he is hoping for a bribe.

After 2 years, Felix is succeeded by Festus. Festus asks Paul if he'd be willing to go back to Jerusalem to stand trial there. Paul instead invokes his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his case to Caesar, which means he will have to be taken to Rome to stand trial there.

But before he is taken to Rome, there is yet another trial, this time before the King, Herod Agrippa II. This Herod is the great-grandson of the King Herod from the Christmas story. He is the great-nephew of the King Herod who executed John the Baptist and who was part of Jesus' trials during his Passion. And this Herod is the son of the King Herod who killed the Apostle James, and who then died under mysterious circumstances in Acts ch12.

So, Paul appears before King Herod Agrippa II. And I mention this mainly because this is one of our 8 stained glass windows in this room. Paul tells Agrippa of his conversion. And then he utters the line that appears on our window:

"Whereupon O King Agrippa I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, after Jesus called Paul to become a Christian and to take the Gospel out into the Mediterranean, Paul basically says 'I wasn't disobedient—rather I did as Jesus commanded me.'

What Paul is doing in all of these trials is he is taking every possible opportunity to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. He's not quiet about it. He's very bold in continuing his preaching ministry. And if he can't go out on missionary journeys and preach, he will preach to those who are putting him on trial.

Jesus said to his followers in the Gospels, "They will haul you in front of governors and even kings because of me so that you may give your testimony to them and to the Gentiles."<sup>3</sup> And that's exactly what we see Paul doing here. He is giving his testimony, he is proclaiming the Good News whenever and wherever he can, even to those who are putting him on trial.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 26:19

<sup>3</sup> Mt 10:18 CEB, parallel statements in Mk 13:9 & Lk 21:12

And a few chapters earlier, after the Jerusalem trial, Jesus himself appeared to Paul in a vision and said, "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome."<sup>4</sup> And Paul seems to be doing just that—courageously proclaiming the faith in whatever venue or courtroom he's in.

And he will be taken to Rome. He appealed to Caesar, and so they ship him off to Rome. It's quite the epic voyage in chapters 27 and 28. It's late in the year, and the ship's captain engages in risky conduct, sailing in winter. They get blown around the Mediterranean in a storm. They get shipwrecked on the island of Malta. But eventually Paul makes it to Rome.

Acts ends with Paul in Rome, under house arrest. House arrest in those days meant you could live in your own apartment. But you had to stay chained up to the Roman soldier who was guarding you.

But it gives Paul the ability to receive visitors and to preach to them.

In fact, Luke wraps up the book of Acts with this statement in the last 2 verses: "Paul lived in his own rented quarters for two full years and welcomed everyone who came to see him. Unhindered and with complete confidence, he continued to preach God's kingdom and to teach about the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

So what kind of ending is this? Does it leave us hanging, or is it a good place to stop? In the terms I used earlier, is it a crappy ending or a happy ending?

From our standpoint, we might like to hear more. Acts was written 20 or 25 years after Paul's death. So why does Luke stop there? And what happened to Paul?

From what we can glean from the later Epistles, Paul was eventually released for a few years, and then re-arrested. And while scripture is silent, ancient church tradition speaks of Paul doing further missionary work, eventually making a trip through Spain. And tradition speaks of Paul's eventual martyrdom back in Rome during the time of the Emperor Nero. Peter was killed about the same time. Since he was a non-Roman citizen, Peter was crucified. But since Paul was a Roman citizen, they gave him a quicker death by beheading.

But why doesn't Luke mention this?

Two reasons, I think.

One, the early Christians would all know about Paul's death in Rome. Luke didn't have to narrate it. I've seen movies about President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis. But those movies don't feel the need to tack on a scene at the end of President Kennedy getting assassinated later in Dallas. Everyone knows that happened. And that's been more than 55 years ago now.

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 23:11

<sup>5</sup> Acts 28:30-31 CEB

Luke is writing only 20 or 25 years after the fact. I suspect he doesn't feel it necessary to narrate the details of Paul's and Peter's deaths because everyone would have known them.

But two, and I think this is the bigger reason, Paul arrives in Rome. Yes, he's under house arrest. But listen again to what Luke says in the last 2 verses:

"Paul lived in his own rented quarters (in Rome) for two full years and welcomed everyone who came to see him. Unhindered and with complete confidence, he continued to preach God's kingdom and to teach about the Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul is in Rome. Paul is preaching. Paul is teaching. The proclamation of the Good News is taking place in the heart and center and capital of the Roman Empire.

From Luke's standpoint, the ball has crossed the goal line. Touchdown.

We might think crappy ending. But for Luke, that's a happy ending.

After all, at the beginning of Acts, Jesus told his apostles, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."<sup>6</sup>

Luke has been showing us in Acts how the church has been moving out from Jerusalem to Samaria and then deeper and deeper into the Roman Empire. And now Christianity has gone from the fringes of the empire to its heart and center. For Luke, that's a touchdown. That doesn't mean the game is over by any means. But for Luke, that does bring this part of the story to a close.

Paul is in Rome. And he's teaching and preaching with boldness and without hindrance.

May God give us grace to have even a small touch of this kind of boldness in sharing God's love with others.

May we continue to help others experience the love of God made known through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the words of St. Paul:

"May the glory be to God who can strengthen you with my good news and the message that I preach about Jesus Christ... It is made known to the Gentiles in order to lead to their faithful obedience based on the command of the eternal God. May the glory be to God, who alone is wise! May the glory be to him through Jesus Christ forever!"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>7</sup> Rom 16:25-27