

INTRODUCTION

Three months on an island nobody had planned to visit. Fourteen days without sun or stars before that. A shipwreck, a snakebite, and a promise that had never once rested on the ship surviving. And now, finally, Luke tells us Paul arrives in Rome.

I want you to remember how long this promise has actually been in motion. Back in Acts 23, years earlier, the Lord stood near Paul at night in a Jerusalem prison and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the truth about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." That word has been carrying Paul through every single thing we've watched him endure since — Caesarea, the trial before Felix and Festus, the storm, the shipwreck, Malta. Every step of it has been leading here.

So this should be the triumphant chapter, right? The arrival. The victory lap. If you were writing this story, you might imagine Paul walking into Rome to some kind of grand welcome, perhaps even an audience with Caesar himself, finally vindicated after everything he'd endured to get there.

That is not what happens. Paul arrives in Rome as a prisoner, under guard, permitted to live by himself with a soldier assigned to watch him. His first act isn't a grand entrance. It's summoning the local Jewish leaders to come to him, because he can't go to them. The promise God made years earlier has been completely, exactly kept. And it looks almost nothing like anyone would have pictured.

I think about my own first Sunday walking into St. John's, and how little it looked like anything I had pictured either. Honestly, the reason I walked in that first time had nothing to do with theology or denomination. It was simply the closest church, within walking distance of my crash pad at the time, that happened to belong to an Open and Affirming denomination. Nothing about the liturgy, the style of worship, the rhythm of the service, was familiar to me. I just wanted to be in church, the way I had been every Sunday for decades before that.

The sanctuary was quiet that morning — only a handful of people scattered around. Bonnie was scurrying about, the way she still does every Sunday, taking care of whatever needed taking care of. Gary was outside, cleaning up the entry garden. Salina was setting up a Bluetooth speaker to play the music. It was eerily quiet for a Sunday morning. Then the service began, and even though almost everything about it was different from what I was used to, I sensed the Holy Spirit present among us. And then came an announcement: next Sunday would be the retirement service for Pastor Champ, who had served this congregation faithfully for more than fifty years.

It didn't click yet, not fully. But I remember a small, quiet thought passing through my mind in that moment — "why would You lead me here?" After the service, I noticed the piano sitting on the platform, clearly aching to be played. I asked if I could, sat down, and began playing a hymn from that morning's service — "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear... oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." Playing that piano, in that quiet, unfamiliar sanctuary, felt like coming home. I had absolutely no idea, that morning, how completely true that feeling would turn out to be.

I think that's precisely the lesson this passage has for us this morning. God's purposes are never thwarted by delay, or detour, or a form that doesn't match our expectations. They are simply fulfilled — often in a shape none of us would have designed ourselves.

I. EMPOWERED WHEN THE FULFILLMENT DOESN'T MATCH THE PICTURE (vv. 17–20)

Notice what Paul actually does once he's settled in Rome. He calls together the local leaders of the Jewish community and explains his situation to them plainly: he has done nothing against the people or the customs of their ancestors, yet he was arrested in Jerusalem and eventually appealed to Caesar — not because he had any accusation to bring against his own nation, but because it was the only way left to him to keep testifying to the hope of Israel. And then he tells them directly why he called them together: "For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain."

Sit with that sentence for a moment. Because of the hope of Israel, he is wearing a chain. Not despite it. Because of it. The promise God gave him — you will testify in Rome — has been completely fulfilled. He is, in fact, testifying in Rome, in this very moment, to these very leaders. And it is happening from inside a Roman guard's custody, in a rented room, at his own request, rather than anyone else's invitation.

I think this is one of the most important things we can carry into whatever comes next for St. John's. We have spent this entire year, through Nehemiah and through Acts, learning to trust God's promises even when we cannot yet see how they'll be fulfilled. This passage adds one more layer to that lesson: even once a promise is fulfilled, it may not look anything like the picture we had painted for ourselves. That does not mean the promise failed. Paul's chains were not evidence that God had broken His word. They were, in Paul's own words, the very reason he had the opportunity to keep it.

I mentioned once, early in this series, that this congregation was founded in 1918 by families with roots in the Evangelical and Reformed tradition — the same tradition that shaped my own family for generations back in Kaiserslautern, Germany. What I haven't told you is just how close that connection actually runs. My grandparents were members of the Stiftskirche in Kaiserslautern — the very church where, in 1818, Lutheran and Reformed believers chose communion over division and became simply Evangelische. My mother was born in that church's basement in 1944, during an air raid. My parents were married in that same sanctuary in 1965.

One hundred and seven years after St. John's was founded by first-generation immigrants from that same Evangelical and Reformed heritage, a first-generation immigrant from Kaiserslautern stepped in to pastor the church they had planted. I did not plan that. I could not have engineered it if I had tried. God was weaving that connection across oceans and generations long before I ever knew San Bruno existed.

And the road that actually got me here looks, in hindsight, almost as strange as Paul's road to a rented room in Rome. God let me first learn about Jesus riding a Sunday school bus to a small independent Baptist church as a child. He gave me my spiritual formation and my theological education in the Assemblies of God. He led me through a long, hard season of coming to terms with who I am, and then gave me practical ministry experience by placing me at an established, affirming Pentecostal congregation. He walked me through thirteen years of planting and pastoring Gateway of Hope, teaching me how to trust Him when the

road ahead was not remotely clear. And then, almost as if to make absolutely certain I would leave Houston, He led me to an airline career that just happened to base me in San Francisco.

At the time, none of it looked connected. A Baptist Sunday school bus, Pentecostal seminary training, an affirming congregation, a church plant in Texas, a flight attendant's uniform. I could not have drawn a straight line between any of it. But I can see the line now. All of it — every piece I never would have chosen, none of which I could have foreseen — was leading here, to this pulpit, to this congregation, to a church planted by people whose spiritual roots run back to the very same sanctuary where my mother was born. The God who works across generations through what I can only call the invisible finger of providence guided every single one of those steps to bring me to exactly where I am standing today.

II. EMPOWERED TO STAY CONSISTENT REGARDLESS OF THE ROOM (vv. 21–23)

The Jewish leaders tell Paul they've received no official word against him, though they've heard this new movement, "the sect," is spoken against everywhere. They ask to hear what he believes directly from him. And Luke tells us that on an appointed day, even more people came to him at his lodging, "and he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning till evening."

I want you to think back with me over everything we've watched Paul do this entire series. In the synagogue in Corinth, reasoning from Scripture every Sabbath. In the Areopagus in Athens, quoting Greek poets to build a bridge, then pivoting straight to the resurrection. On a storm-tossed ship, breaking bread in front of pagan sailors and giving thanks to God. And now, in a guarded room in Rome, from morning till evening, testifying to the same kingdom, pointing to the same Jesus, from the same Scriptures.

The venue keeps changing completely. Synagogue, marketplace, ship deck, rented Roman lodging. The audience keeps changing completely. Devout Jews, skeptical philosophers, frightened sailors, curious Roman leaders. But the message never changes at all. Paul doesn't reinvent what he believes to fit each new room he finds himself in. He simply stays anchored to what is unchanging, and lets the form of the conversation adapt to wherever God has placed him.

I think that's an important distinction for us to hold onto as St. John's considers what its own future might look like. Whatever shape this congregation's ministry takes in the years ahead, the room may change. The form may change. Even the address may change. But the gospel we testify to — the hope of the kingdom, the person of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures that point to Him — never has to change at all. Faithfulness has never meant keeping every room the same. It has always meant keeping the message the same, no matter which room we're given.

I think about the string of very different rooms I've already told you about this morning — a Baptist Sunday school bus, an Assemblies of God seminary classroom, an affirming Pentecostal sanctuary, a rented hall in Houston, a jumpseat thirty-five thousand feet over the Atlantic, and now this sanctuary in San Bruno. Each of those rooms had its own language, its own style, its own set of assumptions about what faithfulness was even supposed to look like. What I said in a fundamentalist Baptist Sunday school as a child sounded almost nothing like what I said years later in an Assemblies of God classroom, which sounded almost nothing like what I say now, some Sundays, to a coworker on a jumpseat who has never

set foot in a church in years. The vocabulary shifted. The audience shifted. The level of formality shifted completely.

But underneath every one of those rooms, one thing never moved: Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, the friend who bears our sins and griefs, the same yesterday, today, and forever. I didn't have to reinvent Him for the Baptist bus, or for seminary, or for Gateway of Hope, or for a skeptical flight attendant on a long haul to Frankfurt. I only ever had to be faithful to Him in whatever room I happened to be standing in that day. That is exactly what I believe this congregation is being asked to trust as well — that whatever room St. John's finds itself in next, the message we carry into it never has to change, even if almost everything else about the room does.

III. EMPOWERED TO LET THE RESPONSE BE MIXED (vv. 24–29)

After a full day of Paul testifying "from morning till evening," Luke tells us plainly what happened: "And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved." That's it. That's the whole result. No mass conversion. No dramatic unified response. A room full of people who heard the exact same testimony and walked away believing two completely different things.

We've actually watched this pattern before, more than once. In Athens, some sneered, some deferred politely, and a few believed. Here in Rome, the room simply splits, and Luke tells us they began leaving "after Paul had made one statement" — quoting Isaiah's ancient warning about people who hear without understanding and see without perceiving — "disagreeing among themselves."

I don't think Paul is troubled by that outcome, and I don't think we're meant to be either. He doesn't chase the room down the hallway trying to win over everyone who left unconvinced. He doesn't soften what he said to make it more palatable next time. He simply states plainly that this same salvation, offered first to Israel, will go now to the Gentiles as well — to whoever will actually listen.

I think that's a critical thing for this congregation to hear as we consider our own future. Even Paul, even standing at the very place God had promised he would arrive, even after faithfully testifying for an entire day, did not receive a unanimous response. The fulfillment of God's promise was never measured by everyone in the room agreeing. It was measured by faithful testimony, offered plainly, regardless of how it was received.

CONCLUSION

I think about everything this promise carried Paul through to get him to this room. Caesarea. The trial. The storm. Malta. Years of waiting, uncertainty, and detours nobody would have chosen. And when the promise was finally fulfilled, it arrived in chains, in a rented room, with a mixed and divided response waiting on the other side of the door.

That is not the ending any of us would have written. It is, however, exactly the ending God had promised — testimony in Rome, delivered faithfully, regardless of the shape it took or the response it received.

INVITATION

So let me leave you with this question this morning. Is there a promise in your own life that you've assumed must have failed, simply because its fulfillment didn't look the way you pictured it? A door that opened in chains instead of triumph? A room that turned out smaller, or harder, or more divided than you expected?

And for us, together, as we look toward whatever comes next for St. John's: are we willing to trust that God's promises can be genuinely, completely kept, even if the shape they take looks nothing like what any of us currently imagine?

The message never has to change. The room might. Let us trust the One who has never once failed to bring us exactly where He said He would — even if we don't recognize it as arrival until we're already standing inside it.

Let us pray...