

February 25, 2018

A Sermon Preached by  
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## “Overwhelmed”

Acts 12:24 (Common English Bible)



### **Listen for God’s Word:**

*“God’s word continued to grow and increase.”*

Acts 12:24

The late Pittsburgh astronomer, John Brashear, wrote his own epitaph: “I have loved the stars too fondly to ever be fearful of the night.” What a beautiful and encouraging thought! As I have pondered those words over the years since I heard them, it seems to me Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples, could have written them. As Jesus’ disciple, Peter did not always live in the sunlight. Peter’s ministry was not always filled with the brightness of success and victory. Peter knew days of darkness and despair. He knew times of trouble and tragedy. Here, in the twelfth chapter of Acts, we learn that King Herod has begun to make life difficult for the Christian Church. James, John’s brother, is killed with a sword. Then Herod has Peter arrested and placed in prison. What is remarkable is that Herod then places sixteen guards on duty simply to watch Peter! Then notice what happens next. The church begins to pray for Peter. In the midst of trouble and difficulty, the church does what it does best; the church clings to hope.

I wish we had access to Peter’s

thoughts while he was chained in prison. Did Peter ever doubt the ministry that he has now given his life to? Did Peter ever question the existence of God when things became really difficult for the church and for him? The church of Jesus Christ is now under a most severe persecution and its continued existence seems doubtful. King Herod is on a rampage to stamp-out the church by destroying its leaders. Disciples are either being killed or placed in prison and the church is under constant attack and is being scattered everywhere. The night is very dark and it seems that Peter must be feeling overwhelmed.

The day that is described in this chapter of Acts is not unlike today. On our streets, in our neighborhoods, and our places of work, the prevailing mood of the day is, overwhelmed. The world today seems to be more complex, more massive, and more unmanageable than our individual and corporate memory can recall. The magnitude of the problems we face as a nation – particularly the gun violence we have seen in the past two years – leave us exhausted and frightened. It seems that we are up against a new level of massiveness and everything now appears to be beyond the power of ordinary people and governments to

solve or control. Confronted with the overwhelming complexities of life today, the question presses against our hearts and spirits, is there hope?

What is disappointing to me is that we have no record in Scripture of Peter asking these questions or doubting his call from God. If Peter ever felt overwhelmed by the circumstances of his day, as we feel overwhelmed by the circumstances of our day, there is simply no record of it. What the Bible does tell us is that after Peter was chained and placed in prison – with sixteen guards watching him – Peter simply went to sleep. And, the church held onto hope. The church prayed.

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frightened and angry,  
you are essentially choosing  
to always be overwhelmed  
and to be a victim.  
It does not matter  
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from day to day,  
or what people may do  
or fail to do.  
You will continue to position  
yourself to always be  
overwhelmed,  
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When we are in a dark place on our journey, hurt because we are frightened

by the senseless evil we see in our own communities, disappointed by people who don't share our political or religious convictions, or angry at people who don't seem to do what we believe is the right thing, we face a great choice that will determine the rest of our journey. If you choose to remain frightened and angry, you are essentially choosing to always be overwhelmed and to be a victim. It does not matter where else you go, or how the news may change from day to day, or what people may do or fail to do. You will continue to position yourself to always be overwhelmed, to always be powerless and helpless. But look at the church here in Acts. The church refuses to give-in, to become powerless, to be a victim, and to abandon hope!

In his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela said that in his twenty-seven long years in a South African prison, the singing of the prisoners was essential to his ability to survive. That is because as they sang, the prisoners protested that their souls were still free. A prison cell and chains cannot imprison the human spirit. That can only be done when we abandon hope.

When we gather in this beautiful Sanctuary week after week, coming in from an uncertain and dangerous world, and open our hymnbooks and sing, *To God Be the Glory*, as we did this morning, we are not pretending that everything “out there” is OK. We are making a holy protest against the evil “out there.” We are announcing

that there is still God and that God is present and active in ways we may not always be able to see. And when we close our worship with the hymn, *Called as Partners in Christ's Service*, we are stepping forward and announcing that we intend to be used by God in a mighty way to change what is now unacceptable in the world.

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Since the world tends to  
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Peter is in chains, guarded by sixteen soldiers and the church prays. The church refuses to give-in, to give-up and to be powerless. In his book, *Facing Death*, Billy Graham shares a story about Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of America's leading Bible teachers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cancer took Barnhouse's first wife, leaving him with three children, all under twelve. The day of the funeral, Barnhouse and his children were driving to the service when a large truck passed them, casting a noticeable shadow across their car. Turning to his oldest daughter, who was staring sadly out the window, Barnhouse asked, "Tell me sweetheart, would you rather be run over by that

truck or its shadow?" Looking curiously at her father, she replied, "By the shadow, I guess. It can't hurt you." Speaking to all his children, Barnhouse said, "Your mother has not been overridden by death, but by the shadow of death, that is nothing to fear."

As a church, as members of the body of Christ, we have a moral and faithful obligation to reevaluate our mood. Since the world tends to magnify the negative, a Christian mood of hope is vital. When someone asks, "What is this world coming to?" the church must answer, "Christ has come into the world." It is that response that changes the prevailing mood. It may not be within our power to control the news or the conditions of life, but we do have a choice for our attitude toward them. The world is hungry today for the witness of the church in a time like ours. The church's high calling is to strengthen people by our unwavering confidence that, in the midst of unsettling news, God is not absent.

Amen.

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