

UNHINDERED: See What Love Can Do
A Knock at Midnight – Acts 12:1-17
Rev. Hannah Coe - First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/unhindered-a-knock-at-midnight

Back in my youth ministry days, we took a trip from Athens, Georgia down to Atlantic Station in Atlanta to participate in something called Dialog in the Dark. Dialog in the Dark is an experience where participants are guided through daily places and activities—shopping for groceries, walking on the sidewalk, and grabbing a coke in a diner—all in total darkness, led by a guide who is visually impaired.

After we checked in at the registration desk, we were led into a small room—about the size of a walk-in closet. The walls were covered with thick, black velvet curtains. Small, soft cubes with lights in them lined the room. Our visually impaired guide instructed us to sit on the cubes. The lights in the room dimmed. The final lights were in the cubes on which we sat. The room became so dark that I could not see my hand in front of my face. I began to doubt which way was forward and which way was back.

Our guide prepared us for the de-stabilization and disorientation we would experience when the lights went out. Even so, it was quite uncomfortable. I felt the parent chaperone sitting next to me quickly stand up beside me as she said, “I don’t think I can do this.”

Her daughter quickly said “It’s going to be okay, Mom. I will stay with you. You are safe.” I am sure they held hands. I was privately grateful when I felt the chaperone sit back down next to me because all I could think was, “You cannot leave me here to do this without you!”

Many of us feel like we are walking in the dark right now in way that is de-stabilizing and disorienting. The painful realities of living in a global pandemic; our dysfunctional politics; our racism; and our emotional and spiritual poverty are no longer issues that don’t really affect us, but have hit close to home in our relationships, our jobs, school, everything, really. And we still have lives to live—jobs to do, families to care for, illness to endure, responsibilities to fulfill. I wonder if we have ever been more collectively hindered than we feel in this moment?

“Oh Lord,” we pray, “how are we going to live, unhindered?”

I’m honestly more familiar with how Paul and Silas are freed from prison in Acts 16. Paul and Silas are singing through the night in prison when an earthquake literally brings the prison walls to the ground the guards to their knees.

But in today’s story, there is no singing, there is no earthquake, there is no one even awake to see what happens. Peter sits in a cell waiting to die. He is to be executed following the Passover festival. Herod suspects there will be some ploy to break Peter out of prison and so he quadruples the forces guarding Peter.

In the middle of the night an angel comes to Peter and taps him on the side. Peter’s shackles fall away and the angel tells him to get dressed. This seemingly special-operations angel leads

Peter through the pitch-dark corridors of the prison, so dark Peter surely could not see which way was up and which way was down and certainly not the way out.

I think this is probably what most of Peter's later years were like; walking in the dark. It was the same for the believers praying for him, late into the night. Did they pray for a miracle? Or did they pray for Peter to die quickly and without pain? For Peter and his Christian brothers and sisters, there was nothing else they could do but pray.

"Oh Lord, how are we going to live, unhindered?"

I've been thinking a lot about this prayer and Peter and the book of Acts. If we are to be true to the text, we have to ask ourselves not only what living "unhindered" is, but also what it is not. This is actually what the New Testament writers were mostly up to, asking themselves what relationship the Jesus movement had to the Judaism and to the empire.

The first generation of Christians, the real-life people of Acts and the epistles wrestled as much with what living unhindered did not mean as what it did mean:

They learned that following Jesus did not mean they got to be in charge of their lives. They learned they did not get to keep their old loyalties. They were called atheists and traitors because they broke the most important loyalties—loyalty to the state and empire, loyalty to the family and tribe, loyalty to the tradition.

They learned nothing would come easy and that they could not count on prosperity or stability; in fact, two of the primary markers of early Christianity were itineracy (moving from place to place for the sake of the gospel) and poverty.

They learned change was part of the deal as it became clear that Jesus' way would not become a part of mainstream Jewish life. They learned they could not go it alone and they also didn't get to judge who God welcomed into the gospel. Keeping up appearances and living within social boundaries of the time was no longer part of the deal. Because they followed Jesus' way, like Jesus they could not ignore the poor, the captive, the sick, or those with no vision or hope. Without these markers of identity and purpose that were so important 2,000 years ago, you can see that the first believers were walking in the dark, relying fully and completely on the Holy Spirit.

What concerns me is that these ways of being are some of the primary expressions of Christianity in the West, what we expect of our churches, of Christians, of Jesus. We are so deeply formed by these realities that we sometimes don't even realize that they are precisely what hinder the work of the Spirit in our lives. And so we pray,

"Oh Lord, how are we going to live, unhindered?"

In his brilliant book, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age*, C. Kevin Rowe, outlines three practices or life-patterns of Christians in Acts meant to help us understand more about following Jesus.¹

The first life pattern is that rather than conforming to the patterns of their day, the believers received an entirely new way of being that changed their religion, politics, economics, vocation, and their values. When the early Christians confessed Jesus was their Lord, their primary loyalty was no longer to family, money, or career but to Christ and Christ alone.

The second life-pattern is that they abandoned themselves to the work of God in Christ. God's mission to embody the gospel became their mission. The shape of Christ's life became the shape of their own lives.

The third life-pattern is community. In their practice of community, the early Christians lived in such a way as to embody good news, liberation, and healing.

We learn, in other words, that when Christ's presence shapes our identity, our work, and our community, then God will live in us, unhindered.

Peter is meant to be a model for us, a forgiven and freed man whose life took on the shape of Christ. Peter is the loud-mouth, obnoxious fisherman who walks on water before he's ready and always finds a way to say the wrong thing. Peter is clumsy and forward, he is a traitor and a coward. He is not successful or educated. He is not the person we would choose to be the rock on which Jesus built his church.

But to Jesus Peter is perfect.

The Peter of Acts is different than the Peter of the gospels. He is more about people and less about himself—he loves and nurtures the church with patience and tenderness. He becomes a bridge-builder, working for reconciliation in all things. The Peter of Acts is softer, listening more than talking. Jesus has become Lord of Peter's life. Peter has abandoned himself to God's mission of shaping gospel communities. Peter becomes a man of visions and dreams, a man vulnerable to the presence and power of God. A man willing to walk in the dark.

Friends, this dark space is de-stabilizing and but so is the presence of God. If we are to receive all that God has for us in these days, we must be willing to walk away in the dark.

The only way out of this time and these troubles is through it. There may not be an earthquake, the walls may not crumble around us. But Jesus comes to lead us in the dark, tenderly, quietly, powerfully, unhindering us from the idolatries, barriers, and loyalties keeping us from the life that really is life.

Do you remember, church, all the dreams we share for our city? For the world? What better place to dream dreams and have visions than in the dark. Can you imagine all Christ could do in us? All God wants to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed and healing for

¹ Holly Beers, "A Story that Teaches: Theology of Acts," *Christian Reflection: The Book of Acts* (Baylor University: Waco) 2015.

the hurting? O that we might look up in the weeks and months and years ahead to see that what we once thought only visions and dreams have become reality.

So brothers and sisters, let us vulnerable to the work of God's spirit, willing to risk and follow. Let us pray for God to unhinder us. Let us live like we need each other. As Jesus more and more becomes the Lord of our lives, let us boldly trust and believe that God's dreams are becoming reality through us.

Unhindered...see what love can do.