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“Preacher Paul”

Acts 20:7-12

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After graduating from Presbyterian College, my oldest daughter, Paige, served in the Peace Corp. Her assignment was in a town on the coast of the Crimea Peninsula, then a part of Ukraine. She was warned it was a hard adjustment at first, and it was. She was isolated and lonely. She wasn't yet fluent speaking Russian (the language spoken on the peninsula) and only a few teachers spoke English. Also, her poorly heated apartment was bitterly cold in the winter... *so* cold, she never took off her winter coat even when sleeping.

Millie and I would check in on her using FaceTime. She would see us comfortably sitting in our familiar home on Stanley Ave and we would see her in her apartment wearing her huge coat, hat and gloves. We tried to keep her spirits up. But during one of our visits, she said something that lifted *my* spirits sky high. She said, “Dad, the last thing I do many nights is to listen to one of your sermons online.”

Now, come on, what better thing could she say to her Preacher dad? “Wow, Paige, thank you for telling me that. Do you really do that?” “Yes,” she said, “it helps me go to sleep.” So much for my soaring spirit.

Paige quickly realized that did not sound right. Millie erupting in howls of laughter might have clued her in. She quickly added, “No, dad, I'm not saying your sermons are boring. But I want your voice to be the last voice I hear before going to sleep.”

Nice save, I must say.

I have joked with many of you that no one has ever gone to sleep while I'm preaching. In fact, I often see them nod their heads in agreement or close their eyes in prayer, but no one ever sleeps. Of course, I know that's not true. Anyone who was in church that Christmas Eve noon



service around 20 years ago and heard a man snoring so loud that I thought that ice was sliding off our slate roof knows it isn't true. But sometimes it isn't the preacher's fault. Warm sanctuary, full belly, late night out: there can be other factors.

I bet that's what Paul would say about what happens in the passage I am about to read. The story takes place in Melitus which is close to Ephesus. Try to stay awake and listen for God's Word in the reading of Acts 20:7-12:

⁷ On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. ⁹ A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and bending over him took him in his arms and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." ¹¹ Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. ¹² Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.

Partly because of this passage, many think that Paul must have been a boring preacher. They give him credit for being a good leader and even a brilliant theologian. That's obvious when you study Romans, Galatians and his other epistles. But you know how it is with some theologians. They can talk over your head. Goodness, even theologians can talk over theologians' heads. When I was in seminary, my buddies and I attended a lecture in Watts Chapel. Dr. John Leith introduced the visiting theologian and then sat down in a chancel chair behind the pulpit. The speaker went to the pulpit and... well, I think "droned" might be the best word here. Yes, he droned on. But, we students didn't fall asleep. No, we were wide awake. We had no problem at all staying awake because we were keenly interested in watching Dr. Leith struggle to stay awake. His eyes could close, then open again. His head began to nod. And then we saw it. It was mesmerizing. The hymnbook he was holding started slowly sliding out of his fingers, then down his lap, until it crashed to the floor with Dr. Leith's head jerking up.

Is that what is happening in our passage? It's midnight and Paul is droning on? Eutychus, a teenager, is listening in. Perhaps the room has gotten overly warm from all the lamps that have been lit to provide light. Eutychus found a place in an open window where he can catch some evening breeze. Paul talking, talking, talking... and down Eutychus goes. Is this story proof that Paul is a boring preacher?

No. The simple answer is, "No." I've always thought that Paul is a good preacher, mostly by reading the epistles, but a recent lecture by the theologian John Zahl reminded me why using the book of Acts. First of all, this isn't a worship service and Paul isn't preaching. He is having a long, serious, conversation with leaders in the church. They are talking about what lies ahead for Paul, and what lies ahead for the church.

Second, what they are talking about is *not* boring. On the contrary, it is upsetting, even frightening. Paul is explaining why he needs to go to Jerusalem and his friends are trying to talk him out of it. This is a Déjà vu scenario. As with Jesus before him, there has grown an enormous



amount of opposition against Paul among many Jewish Jerusalem leaders. It is quite plausible that Paul, in returning to Jerusalem, will face the same fate as Jesus when he returned to Jerusalem. But Paul feels that he needs to go.

What they are also talking about are the dangers facing the Ephesian church. With Paul gone, others will try to take his place and lead this church. Paul knows, because it has happened in other churches Paul established and had to leave, that some of them who will try to take over are going to preach a corrupted Gospel in the name of Jesus. They are going to try to use the name of Jesus to move the congregation in a more Jewish direction or a more Gentile one. Or possibly push the church to benefit some class of people over another class of people. In other words, they'll try to push the church to become what Paul was getting people away from. How are they going to protect the church?

So, no, this is not a boring conversation. Not for adults who know the dangers and what is at stake. But for Eutychus? I mean, what is such a young person doing there at this time of night anyway?

On the face of it, that seems like a frivolous question, but Willie James Jennings asks that question in his commentary. And, honestly, I had not really thought about it before. I mean, the memory of this passage is about a young man falling asleep in church, I just assumed that everyone is welcome in worship. But this is not worship. This is a strategy meeting going late into the night. They are talking about matters which that young man may now be prepared to handle.

Jennings points out that too often we put young people in difficult situations where they do not have the maturity, experience, or depth to handle. I understand that. Children's ministry and youth ministry are top priorities for me, and *for that reason*, don't count myself as one who thinks that a young person needs to be on every committee or serve on the session so we can have their perspective.

- Institutional issues can be boring.
- Personnel issues can be shocking.
- Debating issues can be upsetting.

Jennings admits that Luke may not have had this point in mind but suggests he might have. Regardless, I think everyone who sees Eutychus after he falls might agree that maybe this young man should not have even been part of the conversation.

But he was there in the window. What Paul and the others were talking about may not have been boring for those who knew the stakes, but Eutychus,

- tunes out...
- nods off...
- and falls down.

Some think he falls to his death. Paul says otherwise. If there is any sermon in this passage, it might be his declaration that this young man, who they think is dead, is alive.



Then again, that would be Luke's sermon, not Paul's. Luke telling this story to make yet another connection to what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem when he was given up for dead, but after three days is raised again.

So, this passage has nothing whatever to do with whether or not Paul is a good preacher. Zahn says that there is plenty of evidence in Acts though as to what kind of preacher Paul is. Plenty of it. Read the last half of the book of Acts that has to do with Paul's missionary travels and you'll see that everywhere he goes, crowds flock to hear Paul speak.

- Paul is Roman and Romans flock to hear him,
 - which upsets some Roman leaders.
- Paul is Jewish, and Jews flock to hear him,
 - which upsets some Jewish leaders.
- Rich and poor,
- male and female,
- slave and free,
 - they all flock to hear Paul preach when they hear he is in their region.

He speaks to minds,
he speaks to hearts,
he speaks to life's circumstances,
and minds, hearts and lives are changed.

Many change their religion because of him. And many change their lives.

And that's the major problem in Acts. Opposition to Paul will be framed as theological issues. That's what often happens in a power struggle in the church, but if you read carefully the stories in the last half of Acts, what crops up repeatedly is that Paul's preaching changes spending habits. Then as now, there is a huge Idol Industry built on anxiety that makes a lot of money.

Today, some will go into deep debt just to look right in the eyes of neighbors. There is some idolatry there.

- Some will build wealth beyond common sense because they think only money will protect them from what they fear most; disease, death and worse, not getting what they want.
 - Some idolatry there too.
- Some will sacrifice family and friends at the political altar believing that a partisan divide is a divide between good and evil.
 - Definitely some idolatry there.
- Some will give way too much of themselves to an athletic program because they have some deep, personal, need for their team to win to feel good about themselves. Do you know how much it costs to fund the football program at Texas A&M this year? I read it costs \$88.26 million. The program brings in a profit but that is because 41% of their revenue comes from donations. I am sure that many who give think that this is the very best way to help the world.
- Some idolatry there as well.



Honestly, I don't think that those who oppose Paul in the book of Acts would care that Romans and Jews, rich and poor, male and female, slave and free, become followers of Jesus ("People of the Way" they were called) if only they would do it without changing their spending habits. But it does, and Paul's preaching hurts the bottom line of those who make their living serving up idols.

I could point to a number of examples, but I think the best one is the kerfluffle—It's about time I used that word in a sermon—the best one is the kerfluffle that Paul caused in Ephesus just before this meeting takes place. You can read about it in the previous chapter; chapter 19.

Actually, Paul didn't cause the kerfluffle. Demetrius caused it. Demetrius is a silversmith who fashions silver idols and sells them to craftsmen who sells them to tourists who come to Ephesus to see one of the seven wonders of the world, the Temple of Artemis (I have been to Ephesus and, even though in ruins, the temple is still quite impressive). The enormous statue of Artemis in the Temple is of a woman with many breasts because she is the Greek Goddess of Fertility. People travel from all over Asia Minor to see her and when they go home, many want to take her with them. The bestselling items at the temple are expensive, silver reproductions.

Demetrius knows what happened in other places Paul has preached. It's not that Paul is going to come and stand on the steps of the Temple and rage against idols. No, it's worse than that. It is almost as if he laughs at them.

- He has a way of making Caesar Augustus seem like a human being just like everyone else.
- He has a way of making slaves seem more like people than property.
- And he has this way of guiding people to quit caring about what the Anxiety Industry wants them to care about.

In Corinth, food offered to idols is sold at a higher price. Paul says it doesn't matter to him whether you eat the food or not. In fact, because it might scandalize new Christians for you to do so, why not save the money and eat food that priests haven't touched. He doesn't care, so his listeners don't care, and Corinthian priests' income took a major hit.

Demetrius knows that when Paul comes to the Temple to preach that he is going to make shiny, expensive *idols* seem like they are only shiny, expensive *things*. And so, Demetrius sounds the alarm among the craftsmen, and then they hit the streets, drum up a crowd and incite a riot and Paul doesn't get to preach.

Did you hear that? A riot is incited just to keep Paul from preaching. No one has ever incited a riot to keep me from preaching. Now tell me, is he an effective preacher or not?

I continue to work on the preaching craft, so I have to wonder what his technique is?

- Does he have an impressive voice?
- Is he good with a turn of the phrase?
- Does he start with humor, like telling the story of a young woman saying that she came to hear him preach to help her sleep?
- Does he have this knack of finding the right illustrations and stories to tell?



- Does he build this narrative arc to take folks on a journey where they learn something in the middle and cry at the end?

What does he do to inspire people to follow him from town to town just so they can hear him preach again and again?

I am asking the wrong questions here. Paul might well have been good at his craft, but his technique is not what makes his sermons so effective. It is his message. Paul's day is different from ours, but some things are the same, and this is one of them. His world is full of competing messages that feed on people's anxieties about their fate. Feeds on their fear of death. And they are being manipulated to believe that something less than God can bring them salvation and ultimate happiness.

And what is Paul's message? All those idols are promising something they cannot deliver. Because here's the deal: *There is no deal!*. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We are saved by the unmerited grace of God. There are no political leaders, not even Caesar himself, who should be given the status of gods. There is no Law of rules that can be followed that will secure your place in God's good graces. There is nothing you can purchase that will buy out your guilt or buy you a better seat in heaven. Be Roman or not be Roman, be Jewish or not be Jewish. Whatever you are, be loving, be kind, be compassionate because while we were yet sinners and deserving no place in God's good company, God showed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that there is room for us.

Others might want us to hate their enemies, be afraid of another race, or judge the worth of others by how much they make or how much they own. They might even say these things *in the name of Jesus*. When they do, they are precisely the kind of false teachers and preachers that Paul is afraid could mess up the church in Ephesus after he is gone. But any preacher who is preaching nationalism, or materialism, or hatred of others under the name of any god is serving false idols.

This is a radically liberating message. And boy does it preach. Those false teachers later do trick him and try to change the message of God's grace back into something you can earn, buy or lose. Over the years, some become ministers. Some become popes. I hope you know the story of Martin Luther preaching God's grace and condemning the sale of indulgences to buy souls out of purgatory. I hope you remember that the pope excommunicated Luther only after revenue was badly hurt. I also hope you see those people today who try to join religion to some person, some nation's fate, or some partisan agenda. Some are liberal, some are conservative, and some are simply egotistical, but those pesky false teachers just won't quit.

What I want us to remember today is the basic message of all of Paul's preaching. It goes back to Jesus saying, "Be not anxious." Don't buy into what our anxious age tries to sell you to make you feel saved. You are a beloved child of God. You don't have to please idols. You have only to know that you are loved by God and you are to love others as God has loved you.

Let's protect the church by protecting that message.

