

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SOVEREIGN SILENCE”

Scripture Lesson: Acts 4:32-37; (9:19b-27; 11:19-26; 13:1-3); 15:36-41
*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling on Sunday, February 2, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Acts 12:1-11

James Killed and Peter Imprisoned

1 *“About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. 2 He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. 3 After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) 4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. 5 While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.”*

Peter Delivered from Prison

6 *“The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his wrists. 8 The angel said to him, “Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.” He did so. Then he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” 9 Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel’s help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. 11 Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”*

Sovereign Silence

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in the fiery furnace were tossed,” and as the classic children’s hymn continues, “Everyone thought the end was near!”

Ah, but as we also affirmed in this morning’s children’s hymn, “My God is so great, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do!” And so it happened, God did deliver Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego from that furnace of blazing fire.

But our reading this morning precedes that mighty act of God! These servants of the King of all Creation are in their predicament because they had refused to bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar’s golden statue...and they are now faced the consequences of their decision!

Listen again to what they say in Daniel chapter 3, “If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”

Now, sometimes people may get hung up on the word “if”. “If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us...” but before we cast doubt God’s ability to intervene, let us consider another occasion when the word “if” is used during a time of prayer. I’m thinking about the time when Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest!

“And going a little farther,” the Bible tell us, “[Jesus] threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want’” (Matthew 26:39).

The use of that word “if” it does not speak to God’s ability to answer prayer as if God might not have the ability. No! It is saying that for a prayer to be answered, it must first be in accordance with God’s will.

I love how it was that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had such faith that no matter how God decided to deal with their crisis or whether God preserved their life or not for their part, they were going to be faithful even if that meant that they would die talk about faith under fire!

Our Tuesday evening Women’s Bible study just like our Tuesday morning’s men’s group and our Thursday co-ed Table Talk those Bible studies are shifting gears and beginning to look closely at the Book of Revelation.

And perhaps quite providentially we are planning a church trip to follow in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul in the spring of 2026 and one of the places we are going to visit is Patmos, the site where John wrote the Book of Revelation.

Prior to our shift to Revelation, our Tuesday morning and Thursday lunchtime groups have been studying several other writings of John namely, his 3 Letters and in 1 John 5:14 we read, “And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”

Now, here again and as was the case with God’s ability let’s not presume that God cannot hear the prayers of his people which are not in accordance with his perfect will that is not what John was trying to say.

To put it plainly, God does have the ability to grant us what we ask, and sometimes, by God’s grace, we are the very vessels that God uses in the working out of God’s response to prayer.

But lest we miss the point, prayer still has much more to do with God than it has to do with us! Prayer is not a bell we ring, and God comes running! We just can’t expect that everything for which we pray will be answered in our way and in our time.

I suppose that, at some level, we understand that, but what about those occasions in life when we find ourselves grappling with the weightiness of “Sovereign Silence” those occasions when we have prayed earnestly, and no answer seems to come!

I mean, how could a prayer that a person’s home be spared from the California’s wildfires not be somehow accommodated within the scope of God’s will? Or how could a prayer for God to intervene and pull us out of the depths of depression not result in the healing that we so desperately need? Does God not want us to experience healing and wholeness? Has God in Jesus Christ our Lord not come to seek and save the lost?

Consider our New Testament Lesson this morning. Peter, we were told, was in prison, and there didn’t seem to be any way out. There were two guards, one on either side of him and two chains holding him fast. Not only that, but there were two gates through which he would have to pass if he were to be free, and two additional guards posted at those gates Peter wasn’t getting out!

Still, we are also told “while Peter was kept in prison, the church fervently prayed to God for him.”

And praise be to God, an angel of the Lord appeared to Peter and told him, “Get up, put on your cloak.” The angel then led him past the guards, through the gates and Peter is delivered. He is free. And to that miraculous act of God we say, “Amen!”

But I wonder if we ever pay careful enough attention to the very beginning of this miraculous story of Peter’s deliverance, because in verses one and two and almost as if in passing we read that Herod had “James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.”

Well, surely the church prayed for James too! And it is certainly not the case that Jesus loved Peter and did not love James. James was Jesus’ brother! Peter and James were both disciples! They both knew how to pray!

Ah, but their stories are very different! In fact, in our New Testament Lesson this morning we have two stories: the story of Peter who was delivered and the story of James who was not!

I have shared this story with some of you before it comes to us from the St. Cuthbert’s Church in Edinburgh, which is where our Associate Pastor, Dr. Peter Sutton, is currently serving until he comes to be with us on the first Sunday in March.

There was a young American pastor who was serving St. Cuthbert’s as a student attachment. The young man was preaching at an evening service, and, right in the middle of the sermon, and right down the beautiful mosaic isle, there strolled a man in a dirty old coat.

The man made his way straight to the front and took a seat. Being a young pastor, he got flustered as any preached probably would, having been caught off guard and not knowing what to expect.

Following the service, there was a woman who worshipped there regularly standing near the exit. This woman was in her 80's, and she had worked as a missionary doctor in Malawi, serving there as a representative of the Church of Scotland.

She was described as a lovely woman, but who was so physically affected by arthritis that she could hardly look up to see in front of herself; she was painfully bent over, and she used not one but two canes.

And as she neared the place where the young pastor stood in line, the fellow who had walked in during the middle of the service was making a bit of noise, and he said to her, "You know, if you really pray, and really have faith, God could heal you and you could walk."

Without missing a beat she said, "I have heard of prayers like that, and I've prayed some of them myself and sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't."

I don't know about you, but it makes me feel a little bit better to know that just because I may or may not get the kind of response I want from my prayers, that doesn't mean that I am an unfaithful person.

We would do well to remember that even the Apostle Paul he asked God three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed, and yet his thorn remained!

History is full of faithful people who have gone through terrible trials. Christian martyrs who have been killed for holding fast to their faith.

Oh, how many people do we know who to this very day grieve the loss of a loved one for whom they prayed recovery? Have we never wondered to ourselves if God really hears us, if God is listening at all?

This morning's Call to Worship is rooted in Psalm 13. David says, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" David's is a sincere lament, and yet by the end of the prayer there is a completely different tone, "But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation."

Here's the thing: nothing in David's external circumstances changed from the beginning of that Psalm to the end! His situation is still dire, but his trust in God remained firm.

Psalm 13 and others like it reminds us that prayer is not about getting what we want, it is about trusting in the One who holds all things together and the one whose ways we may not understand, but who always keeps his promises!

We can and must believe that prayers can be answered! Miracles can and do happen! God can still do the impossible! And not just for David or for the Israelites, but for us as well!

Oh, there are countless people out there in the world today, perhaps even in this sanctuary, who have been caught in despair's firm grip, and yet, even in their lives, even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances; be it fire, or deep waters, or fear, or pain, God's covenantal promises providential care is always with us!

Perhaps that's the lesson we most need to learn that sometimes God's greatest answer to our prayers is not changing our circumstances, but changing us and helping us to love him and to trust him!

At the end of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, he turns to his sleeping disciples, and he says to them: "Get up, let us be going."

Emerging from prayer, and facing whatever the day may hold, may that be our response as well, that we would get up and that we would be on our way with God!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.