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Standing before the King.

First of all, I was inspired to write this sermon after our Bible study last week. I thought I would share parts of our discussion with everyone. Please come after church today to go even deeper into Acts.

I'm not going to begin today by reading our Bible passage. Instead, let me first set the stage for today's reading. Paul has completed his three great missionary trips and has survived multiple attempts to kill him, and he has been beaten and imprisoned multiple times. At this point, Paul has been imprisoned for two years by the previous governor, Felix. Festus, a newly appointed governor, is in Jerusalem presumably to introduce himself to the Jewish authorities there. He rules over them, but he wants them to like him so that they don't give him any trouble. The "chief priests and the leaders of the Jews", which is most likely a reference to the Sanhedrin, a high council made up of senior rabbis, ask Governor Festus to charge Paul with a serious crime for teaching beliefs that are against Jewish law and that, in a sense, defile the Temple. This can be punishable by death. So, Festus holds a formal hearing. During this

hearing, he refuses to transfer Paul's case to the jurisdiction of the Sandedrin in Jerusalem. If he had done this, Paul might well have been executed. Instead, Festus takes Paul back to Caesarea to have him tried in a Roman court. During that trial, Paul, as a Roman citizen, declares that he should be tried in Rome. Then, King Agrippa arrives in Caesarea to pay his respects to the new Governor, Festus. Festus tells him about the situation with Paul, and Agrippa says he wants to hear from Paul for himself.

The King, by the way, is higher in authority than Festus the governor, but lower than Caesar, the Emperor, in Rome. The Emperor appointed Kings to rule over areas controlled by Rome. Still, Agrippa is a very high authority. So, as King, Agrippa makes a grand entrance into the hall where the hearing will occur. Leading military officers and prominent people of the city are present. So, when Paul delivers his speech, it will be before a large, influential audience. Whatever gets decided here will have impact far and wide. The Jewish leaders want Paul to be executed. The Roman governor and the King don't want trouble with the local people in Jerusalem, and so they aren't necessarily going to decide in Paul's favor because he is a Roman citizen. Agrippa then gives Paul permission to speak. Now, we come to today's passage. For brevity, I am leaving parts of it out:

Acts 26:1-32. NLT

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You may speak in your defense."

So Paul, gesturing with his hand, started his defense: ² "I am fortunate, King Agrippa, that you are the one hearing my defense today against all these accusations made by the Jewish leaders, ³ for I know you are an expert on all Jewish customs and controversies...

⁴ "As the Jewish leaders are well aware, I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem. ⁵ If they would admit it, they know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion. ⁶ Now I am on trial because of my hope in the fulfillment of God's promise made to our ancestors. ⁷ ...

⁹ "I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus... ¹⁰ Indeed, I did just that in Jerusalem. Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many believers there to be sent to prison. I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. ¹¹ ... I even chased them down in foreign cities.

¹² "One day I was on such a mission to Damascus, armed with the authority and commission of the leading priests. ¹³ About noon, Your Majesty, as I was on the road, a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is useless for you to fight against my will.'

¹⁵ " 'Who are you, lord?' I asked.

"And the Lord replied, 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. ¹⁶ Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. ... Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.'

¹⁹ "And so, King Agrippa, I obeyed that vision from heaven. ²⁰ I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that all must repent of their sins and turn to God—and prove they have changed by the good things they do. ²¹ Some Jews arrested me in the Temple for preaching this, and they tried to kill me. ²² ... I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen—²³ that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way announce God's light to Jews and Gentiles alike."

²⁴ Suddenly, Festus shouted, "Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!"

²⁵ But Paul replied, “I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth. ²⁶ And King Agrippa knows about these things...²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do—”

²⁸ Agrippa interrupted him. “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?”

²⁹ Paul replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains.”

³⁰ Then the king, the governor, Bernice, and all the others stood and left. ³¹ As they went out, they talked it over and agreed, “This man hasn’t done anything to deserve death or imprisonment.”

³² And Agrippa said to Festus, “He could have been set free if he hadn’t appealed to Caesar.”

Paul says at the beginning of his speech that Agrippa is an expert on Jewish matters, and this implies that he, Agrippa, is a Jew. The Roman government used local officials to rule in the name of Rome in order to get the people whom they had subjugated to accept Roman rule. The Jews would have seen Agrippa as a traitor, but they would have preferred him over a pagan Roman. Historians believe, in fact, that Agrippa was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, the man who was a Jew himself and who built the Herodium, as we saw a couple of weeks ago. Agrippa is believed to have been an authority on Jewish scripture and law.

Paul goes on to argue that he himself is a loyal Jew, as well as a faithful follower of Jesus. And in fact, near the end of his speech, Paul says: “I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen—²³ that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way

announce God's light to Jews and Gentiles alike." It is then that the Festus interrupts Paul. This is a very telling moment from literary perspective. Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, by having Festus suddenly stop Paul from saying anything for a moment, is underscoring the importance of what Paul just said. Paul is making the most powerful statement of the New Testament. When Paul says that he is on trial simply because he was trying to help fulfill the promise made by God to the ancestors of the Jews, he's saying that a Messiah will come, and that the oppressors of the Jews will be overthrown. Paul is making it clear that Jesus is the true savior of his people, and that Jesus will triumph over all evil – including the Romans. Agrippa is a Jew and he might think this is fine.

By the way, as a former academic, I have to say that I find it funny that Festus figures Paul is wacked out because he's over educated. Remember that Paul has the highest level of education that the Jews could have – and they prided themselves on the high standard of education of their intellectuals. But indeed, like Paul, I must be crazy to have gone to 11 years of college.

Paul then repeats that Agrippa is a Jew, by saying that Agrippa believes in the prophets. So Paul is saying that Agrippa knows the following to be true: Paul is innocent if and only if Jesus is the savior predicted by Jewish scripture and

tradition. That means that if Agrippa finds Paul innocent, Agrippa is saying that Jesus *is* the Messiah. What happens next is stunning. Agrippa says that he's tempted to become a Christian. The King concludes that Paul has done no wrong. Paul is declared innocent in every way imaginable: Agrippa is representative of all levels of society: he is a Jew, a Roman citizen, and a powerful representative of the government. Christianity is vindicated.

The final little bit in our passage is also very important. The King appears to be saying that he would have simply released Paul if the guy hadn't appealed to the Emperor in Rome. The problem is that jurisdiction has been irrevocably handed over to the Emperor. Perhaps Paul is telling us that his career as an evangelist is over, that he will sacrifice his life for Jesus Christ. But we are to know that our Lord has been declared the legitimate messiah. Or maybe Paul wants to go to Rome so that he could evangelize there. Paul spread the faith everywhere he went and used every opportunity to do so.

Let's step back. Notice how Paul leveraged an unexpected situation. At the beginning of this hearing, he sees that he has the King, the Governor, military officers, and a number of very important civilians present, and what does Paul do? He decides to evangelize, rather than try to squirm out of his problems via

some technical legal argument that might assuage his Jewish accusers. Now, remember that when Acts was written, they didn't write literal, complete histories. Written speeches presented in histories like the Book of Acts were summaries of the real thing. The speech that actually happened was certainly a very complete, rich presentation of Christian theology. So, in truth, Paul is presenting the full Gospel of Jesus to an amazing collection of people. The King has just heard a very long evangelistic presentation by Paul – and it's working on him, a Roman citizen who is only one level below the Emperor. That's how powerfully Christianity has been vindicated – and how far the story of Jesus has been spread. It's a stunning culmination to the Book of Acts. And Paul did it by doing just what Christians would proceed to do over and over and over in the next two thousand years – he appealed to Agrippa's heart.

There's a big lesson related to this that I have discovered while working as a hospital chaplain. I discovered that faith is deeply embedded in the hearts of far more people than I would have guessed. I live in a town that is certainly not known for its Christian presence. When I first started at the hospital, I was warned by a person who was training me that I would probably never pray with a patient, that they would not want this. That's how non-Christian Boulder is perceived to be. Knowing that I was training to be a Christian pastor – and I am

very excited to say that I am a pastor here, now - the person in charge of me was concerned that I might get religious with non-religious patients and family members. I was told that I would find “spiritual” people there, but not people who literally believed in anything like the Christian God. In fact, the unit I work in is changing its name from Spiritual Services to Support Services, in part to acknowledge the lack of formal believers among the population of the community, as well as to recognize a change in charter of the unit, away from carrying out spiritual work. The new focus is on using people who previously worked as chaplains to identify patients who are suffering from the impacts of being treated for complex medical conditions like cancer and chronic heart disease, and then to offer them palliative care. It’s a critically important job.

But, as you might guess, I couldn’t stop being a Christian, even in a non-Christian hospital. So, unlike all the other team members, I have kept the word “Chaplain” on my badge, and I am the only member of the unit who still only does the old school work of visiting people who need spiritual support. I walk into someone’s room, or sit down with a distressed family member, and my badge says “Chaplain”. I’m also an old guy who happens to wear a cross around his neck. Guess what? They frequently ask me what denomination I represent. I tell them that at the hospital, I am strictly nondenominational, and that I am there to

serve people of all faiths and people don't believe in organized religion. I tell them that I enjoy having people teach me about their beliefs. I do tell them, though, that when I am not at the hospital, I am a pastor of a United Methodist Church. But I repeat that at the hospital, I am there only to help them at a time of fear and uncertainty, not to pursue some personal religious goal of mine.

And I do end up talking to people about a variety of faiths. I have a fun time doing this. Still, it's extremely common for someone to then ask me to pray with them. It turns out that many people are indeed active Christians, and many more are what we might call "soft" believers; they know there is a God, and although they do not attend a church regularly, they turn to God when bad things happen in their lives. This is the legacy of two thousand years of evangelism. The Word has spread, and it has worked itself deeply into the fabric of our society. Paul, I am sure, worked hard to get King Agrippa to accept the teachings of Jesus and to validate Christianity. Many more evangelists followed after Paul. I have the luxury of benefiting from the work done by countless people before me.

This is glorious news for our faith. It has given me great joy to learn how many people have a deeply rooted belief in God. I don't worry about Christian

doctrine at a public hospital. But getting people back into churches should be our goal, and from-scratch evangelism often isn't necessary.

By the way, I have a textbook on 3D Animation that is being released as a second edition in the next handful of days. To augment the book, I have an account online where I have posted 45 training videos. The ordination folks at the church required that I post a video of a sermon so they could view it. So, I posted it on the same account as my animation training videos. Guess what? In just a few days, and before the ordination committee had a chance to view it, 28 people who were probably looking for animation videos, watched my sermon. Our church is alive and vibrant!