Without Hindrance
Acts 28:16, 30-31
August 10, 2025
for Westminster Presbyterian Church

Our first text this morning comes from the Book of Acts, chapter 28, verse 16 and verses 30-31. Listen for the word of God:

… 16 When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.
… 30 He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, 31 proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

One of the best things about living in central New Jersey was NPR. Princeton is only 50 miles from New York City and 45 from Philadelphia, which means I had a crystal clear signal for both WNYC and its famed public radio programs *and* WHYY, home of none other than Terri Gross. My life in New Jersey was cluttered with driveway moments, those stories so engaging that you are forced to keep the car running long after you've arrived at your destination. Besides access to critical information, the actual best thing about having access to *two* stations was that when one was running a pledge campaign you could flip right to the other — check in on Philly for a few days while New York promoted its tote bags. (I was young and a fool — please don't try that here!)

On just such a day, on my way to the world's best Wegmans, I dropped in on WHYY and heard a quote whose near-familiarity caught my ear.

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe," the soothing radio voice intoned, "The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice."

The initiating event that NPR picked up was a dust up over an Oval Office rug onto which a series of iconic American quotes had been embroidered. As I would soon learn, the line that caught my attention was from Theodore Parker, a 19th century unitarian preacher and abolitionist from whom both Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King borrowed.

Indeed the quote *I knew*, which lived in my memory without context, was from Dr. King: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

At the end of Acts we find Paul on house-arrest, accompanied by a Roman guard and severely limited in his access to the world. Now those of you who've been exploring Acts alongside us this summer might expect at this point some sort of caper that ends in Paul's release. That's been the pattern in Acts: the Apostles find themselves in a quagmire — a battle with the sea, a subterranean earthquake — from which they are miraculously, outrageously — rescued.

The vignettes propel the plot forward. The Christians, it seems, always come out on top, momentum favoring the Gospel message:

2,000 new Christians at Pentecost,
10,000 by the time of Paul's arrest,
house churches in Europe, Asia Minor, and the Mediterranean,
believers in Africa…
the successful Apostle thwarting local officials and planting churches…

and then, right at the end…
Paul is still in chains.

The final scene in Acts is a quiet one, unlike anything else in Luke's Gospel or his history. We hear nothing of Paul's trial, we hold no hope for his release. History's best guess is that Paul will die a martyr while still under arrest — a victim of Nero's purge of Christians from the city and a symbol of his gruesome, self-centered hold on imperial power.

One might suspect that all that momentum is about to come to a crushing end. The great theologian and orator is a captive of the Empire. Rome wins.

What interests me about the King quote, and the Theodore Parker line before him, is the use of the passive tense. The image — the long arc of time — is visceral and descriptive, and its bend leaves hope for those who engage in the struggle for freedom.

Nonetheless it feels incomplete, and I can't quite shake a nagging question: *who is moving the arc toward promised justice*?

In many ways *that* is the question of Acts, and the question that binds today's text to our modern context, through decades and millennia of faithful Christian work. After all the hijinks and the wild capers, what is Acts trying to tell us?

The final words of Acts have lived rent-free in my brain since we first designed this sermon series. Paul is receiving whomever comes to his home, but he is bound. Still, he is "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." It's those last two words that have captured my imagination — the grammar is the same in the Greek and the English: *without hindrance*. The book that gave us the Ascension and Pentecost, the Jerusalem Council and the Shipwreck, ends with an paradoxical cliffhanger. The Apostle in chains, yet unhindered. Perhaps Rome will not have the final say after all.

In the most literal way, Paul *is* hindered. He cannot go where he pleases, he cannot do what he wants, he cannot visit the beloved churches that support him or go worship in a Synagogue or set his eyes on the disciples with whom he has labored. He is not free, at least not in the way we imagine freedom.

But, the author insists, he is *without hindrance*. How? Paul knew, I think, the kind of freedom that Dietrich Bonhoeffer would write about generations later, the freedom Bonhoeffer called "a relation and nothing else." Though uncertain of his own future, Paul trusts that the Gospel that caught up with him on the Damascus Road would continue *despite* his circumstances. Paul was bound, but he welcomed all who came. He told the story of Jesus Christ, even when he could not be with the congregations. And because of his paradoxical liberty, because he bound himself to any who would come, the Gospel went out unfettered, boldly, *without hindrance*. He preached, he wrote, he welcomed. Bound, he is nonetheless free.

It's hard to call it a happy ending. But it is, perhaps, the best ending we could hope for, a moment of honesty in Luke's otherwise wild book.

What should we take away from Acts? Well first we have to figure out what the book is about. It turns out that Luke's history — Acts — was never about Paul or Cornelius or Peter or Lydia. It was always about the Spirit, the living God who set Jerusalem ablaze at Pentecost, who healed in Samaria, who empowered the disciples to serve the community, and who gave them the forbearance to disagree well.

The memorable characters whose stories we've told remain alive in us by the power of the Spirit, they are real to us because they got caught up in what God was doing — building communities and tending to the poor and proclaiming a Gospel world utterly unlike the dehumanizing, fear-based economy of the Empire. They got caught in the Spirit's bend.

Before he was converted, Paul persecuted the church. Between Jerusalem and his imprisonment, his work built a church. Imprisoned at the end of Acts, Paul's witness to the Spirit's work allows the church to flourish. Paul wasn't the main character, but he joined the story.

All this to say: for Paul, the arc of the was long, from creation through the exodus, through the fall of kingdoms and the birth of the Messiah, and the coming of the Spirit. It was long, but the Spirit, through a crucified messiah, a persecuted church, a man in chains, was, all the while, *bending it* toward kingdom justice.

By the time he came to Rome, Paul knew that he was a part of a much larger story, and that his freedom was tied up to the ways he might choose to participate in *that* story.

Perhaps that is what Acts means for us. The arc of the universe is long. It is difficult sometimes to find any edifying momentum…but God is bending that universe towards justice…

and we have the opportunity, even in the darkness, despite whatever chains bind us, hinder us, prevent us, to freely join the work, to labor in God's vineyard, to follow after the Messiah, and in so doing, to help hasten the bend.

In our first text this morning, all the way from the beginning of Acts, the Apostles who remained after the crucifixion and resurrection were made to come to terms with a Messiah no longer physically with them. In a scene we rarely preach Jesus simply … floats away, ascends to the right hand of the Father, out of their sight. The disciples stood gazing in deflated bewilderment, standing frozen in place. While their necks were still trained toward the sky, they were joined by two men, ""Men of Galilee," they asked, "why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

If Acts exists to remind us that God is the main character bringing the world to its promised Kingdom, then its beginning prompts us to consider how we might make meaning in that new order.

Westminster: Why do we stand looking up toward heaven when the liberating God of the Exodus, the compassionate God of the Messiah,
the freeing God of Pentecost is bending the world toward Kingdom justice? Why do we crane our necks when the Spirit is up ahead?

We may no longer have our eyes trained on Jesus' hem but it's not so hard to see where his Spirit is at work.

Two millennia ago we saw it in the birth of Jesus Christ, when Mary sang of the turning tides of the social order. We saw it in the ministry of Jesus, who ate with sinners and welcomed the religious, who healed the leper and proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom, the arc of time. We saw it when Jesus was raised from the dead.

In Acts we saw it when leaders were appointed to care for the poor and when crowds came to hear the good news.Throughout Scripture, the Spirit was at *work. And the Spirit is at work now.*

The same Spirit who animated Paul's adventures, who consoled him in prison, who gave him language to preach the good news of freedom from an occupied seat, now works among us, freeing us so that we might get to freeing others. Giving us the gift of relationships, of the word. *That* is the promise of Pentecost. We are a part of the unfinished story, we are the characters through whom God is working.

The Spirit is up ahead of us, calling us on.

But we've got to stop staring toward heaven in frozen wonder. Like Paul, it is ours to get to work *in whatever circumstances life brings us.* There is simply no excuse — if Paul is unhindered, so are we: called to welcome the neighbor, to work for the release of the prisoner, to tend to orphans and widows, to *give all we have* for the kingdom boldly, *without delay.*

Delivered on the steps of the capital in Montgomery, Alabama, "Our God is Marching On," is one of Dr. King's best known and most defiant speeches. By the time he marched at Selma, King's home had been bombed by the Klan and he had watched as the Black community was beset by homegrown white terrorists. But he was hopeful. Demanding

the right to vote, he acknowledged that the battle had been long and the war not yet won:

> *"I know you are asking today," King rang out, "'How long will it take?'...I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because 'truth crushed to earth will rise again.' How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice...How long? Not long...because our God is marching on.*"

King's hope was rooted in the God of Acts, the God who would not be hindered, the God behind whom he marched, whose lead he followed, whose and truth would not be laid to rest.

With that God up ahead, King knew he could not stand gazing at heaven, not when he was on the steps of the capital or when he was behind bars in Birmingham. God was marching on, setting the pace, bending the world. Like Paul in prison, with *every* obstacle in front of him, King nonetheless worked *without hindrance*.

We may not be Paul. We may not be Dr. King, but we can still labor in *that* vineyard. The time is ripe, the need is urgent. God is on the move.

I've been thinking about the arc of the moral universe since that moment on the road to Wegman's fifteen years ago. The arc of the universe is long; that's true enough. We are somewhere in the middle. The bend, the movement towards justice, that's harder to see, it perhaps feels impossible — "divined by conscious." The bend is an article of faith, a faith that belongs to us as much as it did to Paul.

And *that* faith, our faith, Paul's faith, King's faith is not passive. It does not allow us to abdicate our duty, to assume that someone else will take up the mantle and carry the story forward. It does not allow us to lose hope because it hopes in the Spirit of the Resurrection alone. It does ask that we stop gazing toward heaven when there is Kingdom work here. That is what Acts shows us. God, who was always the main character, is marching on, without hindrance and without delay. God is bending the world toward justice, and God is calling us to join in the work in whatever way our circumstances allow.

God is here, among us, not in some inaccessible realm beyond our reckoning. Acts shows us that. God is up ahead, God is at your tables, in your work, in your witness. God

is present, and God is still asking us to follow, to co-labor in bending the world toward the everlasting Kingdom. Without piddling, without delay, without hindrance.