

“Faith Under Fire”

Acts 5:12-42

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During times of international conflict, hostage-taking or the detention of a person with the threat to kill, injure or continue to detain him or her for political purposes has become a useful weapon. In fact, illegally seizing law-abiding persons and treating them as pawns has become among the most valuable political tactics a nation can use. We currently see this in the Middle East where Hamas still has 120 prisoners seized when they invaded Israel back on October 7th, five of whom are American citizens. Because there is growing pressure on Israel to get them all back alive, it continues to be the main reason Israeli Defense Forces haven't yet gone into southern Gaza to finish the job.

Contributing to the escalating tensions between the US and Russia was the arrest on August 14, 2021 of 63-year-old Marc Fogel at an airport just outside Moscow. He was in possession of less than half an ounce of medical marijuana which had been legally prescribed for him to treat chronic pain from a debilitating spinal condition he had for more than three decades. In an obvious show of force, the Russian government charged him with drug smuggling and drug possession and sentenced him to fourteen years in prison.

Well Marc Fogel is also my neighbor- he and his family live just two blocks from my home in Oakmont. Where the higher-profiled prisoners become greater trade bait like *Wall St. Journal* correspondent Evan Gershkovich and the WNBA star Brittney Griner (who was exchanged in a prisoner swap for Viktor Bout, a notorious arms dealer known as the “Merchant of death”), Marc is just an unassuming middle-class history instructor who has been teaching at international schools such as the Anglo-American School of Moscow for the past few decades. But after four years inside a Russian penal colony, his case is now starting to receive some much-neglected attention. This week, in a measure sponsored by Sen. Bob Casey, the U.S. Senate passed a bipartisan resolution demanding his release. Fogel remains optimistic but what makes it enduring is that it is a hope born from out of his Christian faith. There is a church he visits daily at the prison. He says, “It’s very small but beautiful. On this wall, there’s a number of icons. ... I go through this daily routine of thanking for little things that I’m alive. I have a great family and I try to be thankful.”

Of course, such oppression and persecution is not new. Our text this morning details the phenomenal growth of the early church which have left the religious and political authorities greatly concerned- they see a fire starting and want to keep it under control. They thought that once Jesus had been crucified, that would put an end to it all but it had only EXACERBATED the situation. Followed by reports that Jesus had come back from the dead and then a sudden burst of enthusiasm among his followers that began on the Day of Pentecost, the Temple priests along with the Pharisees and Sadducees were finding it impossible to contain this altogether new and burgeoning movement. At the hands of the apostles, many signs and wonders were being performed and multitudes were being converted. When they were told to cease their preaching and teaching, they refused, and when they were arrested for being noncompliant, they discovered the prisons could not hold them. Standing before the Sanhedrin--the Jewish high council--Peter’s defense was “We must obey God rather than men.”

This was a very DIFFERENT Peter than the cowardly disciple who had abandoned his Lord and even denied knowing him- not once but THREE times. THIS Peter had had an encounter with his Risen Lord which convinced him that everything Jesus had said about himself was TRUE- that he was INDEED the Lamb of God who had taken away the sins of the world, that his kingdom was now breaking into THIS one and transforming it through the simple message of God's love, and that he—Peter—now had nothing to fear--NOT EVEN DEATH--for Jesus had conquered THAT realm as well. Furthermore, he had received Christ's own spirit on the day of Pentecost so that the pledge of Jesus' personal presence and power in his life was no longer merely a promise but a LIVING REALITY. Nothing would ever frighten or alarm him again—not all the religious or political tribunals he would be dragged before, not all the prison cells he would see the insides of, not all the beatings they could administer to him, and not any of the crosses they could nail him to. With Christ's spirit, he had received a new-found courage and confidence which would enable him and the REST of those disciples to follow Christ wherever he would lead and fulfill his will REGARDLESS the cost.

Some years ago, when I was ministering in Waterloo, Iowa, my wife and I were honored to host in our home the Rev. Mano Rumlshah--the Bishop of the United Church of Pakistan. I had invited him to address my church where he made it perfectly clear that to be a Christian in his country is to virtually have a bounty upon one's head. Christians in that country remain a persecuted minority in the middle of one of the largest Muslim nations on earth. Three weeks after 9/11 in 2001, terrorists attacked a group of Christians during a church service killing 17 congregants- 13 of whom belonged to the same family. Since then, armed guards are now required at every church in order to protect worshipers from terrorist attacks which continue to grow with greater frequency. And yet what's MOST amazing is how the Christians there possess a devotion and a love that I dare say few of US could ever HOPE to have.

The next day, as I was driving him to another church at the opposite end of the Presbytery for his next engagement, he was telling me how after years of ministry in London, he left the safety of England to return to Pakistan to assume a small church there in one of the most dangerous areas in the world. By doing so, he forfeited a significant chunk of his pension because he felt his own country needed him more than his adopted homeland did. Even today, he receives but a small stipend because the Church of Pakistan is so poor and much of his ministry is not even subsidized. Still, he said that he has no regrets because he has never done ANYTHING for money but to serve God in whatever capacity God has wanted him.

Over forty years ago, I was privileged to spend a week serving as the personal chaperon to Rev. Richard Wurmbrand, a Rumanian pastor and seminary professor who languished 14 years in Communist prisons until his release in 1964. Taken away from his wife and family (who had also been arrested), he had no knowledge in all those years of what had happened to them. Months of solitary confinement, years of periodic physical torture, constant suffering from hunger and cold, the anguish of brainwashing and mental cruelty had left him in constant pain and made it difficult for him to walk. Each afternoon, I would take him for a long slow walk around the neighborhood and he would tell me stories about his imprisonment and the lessons he learned from them. It was one of the greatest experiences of my LIFE!

He shared with me how he and other Christians were beaten badly with red-hot iron pokers and stabbed with knives, how starving rats were driven into their cells through a large pipe, and handcuffs with sharp nails on the insides were put on their wrists. Christians were

hung upside down on ropes and beaten so severely that their bodies swung back and forth under the blows. They were put in ice-box "refrigerator cells" which were so cold, frost and ice covered the inside. Freezing to within a few minutes of death, guards would then drag them out and warm them only to repeat the process again and again. They were put in wooden boxes only slightly larger than they were leaving them unable to move. Dozens of sharp nails were then driven into every side of the box, with their razor-sharp points sticking into the box. While they stood perfectly still, it was all right but they were forced to stand in these boxes for endless hours. When they became fatigued and swayed with tiredness, the nails would go into their bodies. What the Communists did to Christians surpasses any possibility of human understanding.

Pastor Wurmbrand said he has often been asked how after seventeen hours a day, year after year, being forced to hear:

"Communism is good!  
Communism is good!  
Communism is good!  
Communism is good!  
Christianity is stupid!  
Christianity is stupid!  
Christianity is stupid!  
Give up!  
Give up!  
Give up!  
Give up!"

it was at all possible to resist the brainwashing. His response was that there was only one method of resistance and that was "heartwashing":

*If the heart is cleansed by the love of Jesus Christ, and if the heart loves Him, you can resist all tortures. What would a loving bride not do for a loving bridegroom? What would a loving mother not do for her child? If you love Christ as Mary did, who had Christ as a baby in her arms, if you love Jesus as a bride loves her bridegroom, then you CAN resist such tortures. God will judge us not according to how much we endured, but how much we could love. I am a witness for the Christians in communist prisons that they could love. They could love God and men.*

In his autobiography, *This Grace Given*, the late David H. C. Read, who for many years served as the Sr. Pastor of the Madison Ave. Presbyterian Church in N.Y.C., described his five-year captivity in a German prisoner of war camp during the Second World War. He said of that experience:

*Being taken prisoner means being stripped down. Suddenly everything you have come to rely on is gone. Your possessions, your job, your plans, those dearest to you, your country- all these are, in a peculiar way, no longer there. There's just you- and God.*

David Read went on to say how it was his prison experience that taught him some of his greatest spiritual lessons:

*Still, the experience of being stripped of all the other things on which one normally relies does throw one back on God in a very challenging way. Is he really there? Does he care about what's happening? All the texts on which one has preached- "God is our refuge and our strength," "Fear thou not, for I am with thee," "Your heavenly father knoweth what you need," "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God"- these suddenly seem either mere pulpit rhetoric or the most important words in the world. I knew then and ever after that they were real- even when the darkness falls and the foundations quiver.*

Ben Weir is the Presbyterian minister and former Moderator of our denomination who was abducted and held captive in the Middle East forty years ago. His wife, Carol, grew up in my own home church of Felton, California, and her father—Al Swain--was a friend of mine. While home on furlough in 1984, Ben told a group of us that he and Carol were returning to Lebanon, although political tensions had become SO intense he wasn't sure they'd ever get out of there alive. He was PARTLY right for three months later, he was abducted off a Lebanese street to be held captive by Shiite Moslems for almost a year and a half.

In his biography, *Hostage Bound, Hostage Freed*, Rev. Weir talked about how his captivity provided him with the opportunity to see God's grace at work in a very powerful way, how his prison cell was transformed daily into a sanctuary where God would be present to him and the rest of the hostages. Together, including Father Jenco, they prayed, read scripture, worshiped and celebrated Holy Communion. Regardless of their religious affiliation, that cell had become a church and they had become the Body of Christ. Rev. Weir wrote:

*As the light dimmed I would sing to myself, "Now the day is over. Night is drawing nigh. Shadows of the evening steal across the sky." And I would in my heart thank God for providing me with resources and stamina beyond my expectation.*

*In the morning, I would thank God for another day of living, refreshing sleep, sound body, and expectation of his sustaining presence. After my first exercise period, I would do my Bible "reading," recalling passages that came to memory. I reviewed various psalms and fragments of them. I would choose each day a figure from the Old Testament- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Gideon, Samuel, Saul- and tell myself his story of faith.*

*I tried to reconstruct the account of Jesus from his birth to his resurrection from the dead. I detailed the travels of the apostle Paul, adding with mental pictures those places in the story that I had visited. I was astounded at Paul's persistence in the face of obstacles and dangers; I returned again and again to the verse in Romans 8:28, "In everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." This assurance was the foundation for my grip on sanity and hope."*

Let me conclude with a story that Don Buteyn, the former Dean and Professor of Missions at my seminary once shared with us. During the Second World War, Don was an infantryman in America's Fifth Army. As the war in Europe drew to a close, he helped liberate a number of concentration camps including Dachau where hundreds of thousands of Jews had been gassed. Entering the camp, he went from barrack to barrack, gathering up the survivors, helping them to the trucks for transport out of there. He had never seen such human degradation in all his life. There was one particular fellow he could never forget who was terribly gaunt and looked much older than his years. He had been personally arrested by Hitler and placed in the camps for more than eight years- it was truly a miracle that he had survived that long.

As Don helped him on the truck, the man reached into his shirt, pulled out a silver cross and held it up to him to indicate to Don what it was that had helped him survive, to show him what had been the source of his hope throughout those years. It was his faith in Jesus Christ. It was his belief in God's great love for him. It was the sense of his abiding presence. It was the knowledge that Jesus' mission was to the sick and the hurting and the oppressed for Christ HIMSELF had been a prisoner before Pilate, and knew injury and oppression and abandonment personally. Don said that as that truck drove out of the camp, he could still see that man clinging to his cross as a drowning sailor would cling to a life preserver.

Many years later as a professor at our seminary, Don had the honor of meeting that same man once again and introducing him to the whole student body- the very individual he had helped into that truck, the one who had clung so tenaciously to his cross. It was none other than Rev. Martin Niemoeller, the great leader of the Confessing Church, the fearless pastor who had defied Hitler and Nazi tyranny, who had spent more than eight years in concentration camps ministering to the other prisoners. As Don recounted his experience of the liberation of Dachau, of helping this man into the truck and watching him display his cross, Rev. Niemoeller once again reached into his shirt and pulled out the very same cross he had produced that day thirty-five years before. It had never left his neck.

Richard Wurmbrand, David Read, Ben Weir, Martin Niemoeller - all hostages, each knowing all too well the experience of exile, of humiliation, of sensory deprivation, of brainwashing, of loneliness, of the fear of being forgotten, of losing contact with each of their families. Yet, like Peter and the rest of the apostles, God gave them the strength to endure. They stayed patient; they remained faithful; they did not despair.

As was promised to these men, so is that promise OURS this morning for to US Christ says: "Be patient! Remain faithful! Do NOT lose hope! I understand your plight. I am with you in your situation. You are never forsaken or alone REGARDLESS the type of prison you may find yourselves in. Whatever the bars that imprison YOU this morning- whether they are bars of guilt, bars of loneliness, bars of fear, bars of self-pity, bars of poor health, bars of a bad marriage, bars of a wayward child, bars of financial hardship- I UNDERSTAND. I know firsthand the arrows of persecution and the loneliness of imprisonment; I have borne the sufferings of many beatings and stared death in the face. Yet, in spite of it all, I have overcome the world. And because I have, you can TOO!" Let us pray...

*O Lord God, your Son Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. Through his resurrection, he restored life and peace to your creation. Comfort, we pray, all victims of intolerance and oppression by their fellow humans. Remember in your kingdom those who have died. Lead the oppressors towards compassion and give hope to the suffering. Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*