

June 14, 2020

Acts 28: 23-31

Prayer: Dear Lord, We thank you for the Scripture we know as Acts, so unlike other books of the Bible. Please go with us as we apply its message to our lives today. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Unhindered

All you comic page readers out there know that Snoopy is a writer. He writes on a typewriter atop his doghouse. All his stories begin, "It was a dark and stormy night."

Last week there was a *Peanuts* strip that I cut out and put on my bulletin board. Snoopy is standing at his mailbox, reading a rejection letter.

"Dear Contributor," it reads. "We are returning your stupid story. You are a terrible writer. Why do you bother us? We wouldn't buy one of your stories if you paid us. Leave us alone. Drop dead. Get lost."

The final frame shows him lying on his doghouse and thinking, “Probably a form rejection.”

I assure you, that’s what a rejection letter might as well say. “You are a terrible writer. ... Drop dead.”

Oddly, it was writing that drew me into ministry. I started seminary in the year 2000 because I’d taken on the religion beat for *The Greenville News*. I wanted to learn more so I could write intelligently for the paper. That was all I planned to do.

But then in all my Bible courses, we looked at the way in which books of the Bible were written. We looked at the writers as real human beings who structured their stories in certain ways for certain readers, for certain reasons.

Especially in the four gospels, we looked at how Matthew, Mark, Luke and John fashioned their individual portraits of Jesus. How who *they* were influenced what they thought was important about who Jesus was.

Well, I was so fascinated that I left journalism for ministry. Eventually I begin writing books, first a memoir and then fiction. And I became more convinced than ever of how writers intentionally structure their stories to get their message across.

One of the most important tools we have is the crafting of a beginning and an end. Those bookends often carry an inordinate amount of weight in a story.

For instance, there's a book I've talked about in here before – Jeannette Walls' memoir, *The Glass Castle*. Jeannette's book opens with a scene in which she is all dressed up for a night out in New York City. She's in a taxi on a New York street, headed to a party.

Her taxi stops at a traffic light, and she idly looks out the window. And she sees her mother, rifling through a trash can.

Jeannette is horrified. Her mother is dressed in layers of dirty rags, wild-haired, grabbing items from someone else's garbage.

But it turns out she's only partly horrified that her mother is homeless. She's long gotten used to that. She is more horrified that someone might see her, might find out that her mother is homeless.

So without approaching her mother, Jeannette tells the cab driver to turn around. She runs into her apartment, the party forgotten.

That is how her book begins. And then Jeannette tells the almost unbelievable story of her life. She tells about catching herself on fire at age 3, trying to cook hot dogs on the stove because her mother didn't cook for the family.

She tells about the family constantly packing up and leaving home in the middle of the night because they could not pay the rent.

She tells about being hungry.

She tells about falling out of a moving car one day and waiting by the roadside for hours until her parents realized she was gone.

She tells about her brother sleeping for years with a rubber raft over his bed to keep the rain off as it poured through the ceiling.

And she tells about her father's plans to build a glass castle where they all would live.

Of course, it was a fairy tale because her father was an alcoholic and her mother was mentally ill, and they were incapable of raising their four children in any kind of stable environment. They managed to hang onto shacks while the children grew up, although the roofs leaked, the doors were blocked, and they had to crawl in and out of windows.

But after the children were grown, the parents became homeless in New York, living in abandoned warehouses and on the streets.

After a harrowing ride through 22 years of her life, that's what Jeannette's book circled back to – her mother's life on the streets, going through trash cans as her daughter's taxi idled 10 feet away. It is an extremely effective writing technique.

Jeannette's beginning and ending are exquisite bookends for the life that lay between.

What lured me from a career in journalism to a career in ministry was the realization that many biblical stories used the same writing techniques. I came to appreciate the Bible's writers, what they were trying to do, and how their stories have endured.

I wanted to live in that world, and I could do it in a church in a way I couldn't at the newspaper.

Take the two-volume set that we know as Luke-Acts. In the first few chapters of Luke's gospel, he carefully places Jesus in the heart of Judaism.

He tells the story of Zachariah, the temple priest, and Elizabeth, who become parents to John the Baptist.

He tells the story of Jesus's parents, Mary and Joseph, devout Jews.

He tells how Jesus was received in the temple as an infant, first by Simeon, then Anna, both devout Jews worshipping in the temple.

But then, BAM! In chapter four, he tells the story of Jesus preaching in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth. And Jesus inflamed his people, the Jews, because he mentioned that God once worked through the widow of Zarephath and the Syrian army commander Naaman. Both of them were Gentiles.

Well, the crowd was so furious that Jesus even suggested that God would accept a Gentile widow and a Gentile army commander that they tried to hurl him off a cliff.

At this point, the issue of inclusion and exclusion, of who's in and who's out, becomes the theme of Luke-Acts.

That's why I call Luke the gospel for Triune. Luke is the writer who tells us Jesus was first recognized by lowly shepherds.

He's the writer who talks about the women who followed Jesus – unimportant women who were barely citizens in ancient Israel.

He talks about lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes who were welcomed into Jesus's company.

And he's the only gospel writer who relates the parable of the Good Samaritan – about a scorned half-breed who tended a fellow traveler when the good religious folks would not.

So it is hardly surprising that we see the same theme develop in the book of Acts, which is Luke's Part 2. All through this book, we see the tensions between those who wanted to keep their cultic and ethnic and religious circle tight, and those who wanted to cut the circle and swing its welcoming embrace wide open.

I think that the message of Acts is so important that I have preached all the way through it twice during my time at Triune. It took months and months and months each time.

A good bit of the last part of Acts is taken up with Paul's adventurous and perilous journey to Rome. He had endured heckling and imprisonment, storms at sea and a shipwreck, even a snake bite.

But he finally arrives in Rome, where he is placed under house arrest, but invited to preach. So here he goes: I'm reading from **Acts 28: 23-31**. This the ending to Acts.

23 After they had fixed a day to meet him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

²⁴Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. ²⁵So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: 'The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

²⁶ "Go to this people and say,

You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

²⁷ For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”

²⁸ Let it be known to you then that this salvation of
God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.’

³⁰ He lived there for two whole years at his own
expense and welcomed all who came to
him, ³¹proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching
about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness,
unhindered.

He proclaimed and taught ... *unhindered*.

The last word of the book of Acts is a deliberate and unusual adverb in Greek. It means *unhindered*.

Some scholars think that one word is the exclamation mark for the whole book. Now the gospel would go forth *unhindered* by cultic and ethnic and religious squabbles, *unhindered* by requirements of circumcision and dietary laws, *unhindered* by musts and have-tos and shoulds.

Three times previously Luke dropped a form of this same word into his story, but he used its opposite, *hindered*. Like Hansel and Gretel dropping crumbs to lead them out of the woods, the writer Luke dropped this word like clues.

But this is where we can get into trouble with translations.

Hindered is not a word we ordinarily use. And so, while Luke used the same word in Greek four times, our translations don't always use the

same word in English. So we can lose track of what he is doing as a writer.

But in the original Greek, Luke used the same word all four times, and I think very deliberately so.

Back in chapter 8 of Acts, the evangelist Philip met a eunuch from Ethiopia and explained the gospel to him. And Luke writes, **“As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to *hinder* me from being baptized?’ ”** (Acts 8: 36)

In chapter 10, Peter met with the Gentile Cornelius after being sent a vision of a sheet full of unclean animals. Peter was persuaded that God was reaching out to Cornelius and his family and friends, and so he asked, **“Can anyone *hinder* baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”** (Acts 10: 47)

And finally, when Peter had to explain his actions back in Jerusalem, he argued, **“If then God gave them the same gift that he**

gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could *hinder* God?” (Acts 11: 17)

In all three cases, the *hindering* was related to Gentiles. The Ethiopian eunuch. Cornelius. And Cornelius’s household.

In all three cases, Luke used the word to indicate there was no reason to *hinder* these Gentile believers from believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, to *hinder* them from baptism, to *hinder* their entrance into the kingdom of God.

And that, in a nutshell, is the theme of Luke-Acts.

Yes, this Messiah was born a Jew and came first to the Jews as a baby way back at the beginning of the story. But his message will now spread to all people, *unhindered*.

Look at the first of the story and the last of the story, and you’ll find your bookends. Jesus came *to one people*. He ended up *for all people*.

This is the message of Luke-Acts. It's the same message we read last week in the gospel of Matthew when Jesus commissioned his disciples to go to "all nations." And it's the same message for our church today.

Jesus came for all people, and we are not to hinder their entrance into the kingdom of God.

We don't check for the same beliefs they checked for in the first century – who's been circumcised, who's eating clean and unclean, who's following marriage laws.

But we check for reasons to exclude people all the same.

Some of us think you cannot be a Christian and be an immigrant to this country. We saw that in comments from church members near the border in the past few years.

I imagine if you probe very deeply into white supremacy groups, you'd find a belief that you can't be Christian and black or brown.

How else would they justify their insane rhetoric?

Or maybe, you cannot be a Christian and drink.

You cannot be a Christian and protest police actions.

You cannot be a Christian and dance. Play cards. Gamble. Do drugs. Lie. Steal. Have an abortion. Have an affair.

Some of those things are silly. Some are morally repugnant. Some go against our Christian teachings.

But Paul, that unhindered one, wrote in his letter to these same people in Rome, “... **I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**” (Romans 8: 35, 37-39)

There is nothing that cannot be forgiven in the unhindered gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is no one who cannot rest in his grace, unhindered.

Amen.