

April 25, 2021 – Acts 4:1-12 & John 10:11-18

The year was 1870 and the world was kind of a mess. In Europe, France had endured centuries of warfare. First against the British, then against themselves, then against Napoleon. And now they were engaged in a war against their powerful neighbor of Prussia. In the United States, things weren't much better. The Civil War had killed over 3 million people, in addition to destroying our economy and infrastructure.

And yet, a Frenchman by the name of Frédéric Bartholdi was hopeful. He was hopeful because the United States had just done something really remarkable. In less than a hundred years we had thrown off the British monarchy, ratified a democratic constitution, established a peaceful succession of leadership, and survived both a civil war and the assassination of our president. And come out of it all with freedom and liberty for men of every race, income, and religion, while maintaining a peaceful succession of power.

We weren't perfect. Far from it. But we had done what almost no other country on the planet could claim. Certainly not France, with one king after another finding their way to the guillotine. So impressed was Bartholdi that he conceived of a statue commemorating the achievement. A statue of liberty.

And Bartholdi was right. Because the history of the world is full of people killing each other over power. Whether it's those who want power killing those who have it. Or those who have power killing those who want it.

Even the Bible has examples of it. Look at the first three kings of Israel. Saul who tried to murder David because he feared his popularity. David who killed Uriah because he feared the scandal of adultery and only barely survived an attempted coup by his son. Solomon who killed his brother Adonijah because he feared his elder brother's claim to the throne.

And that's just the first three. The throne of ancient Israel had as much blood on it as the throne of France during the French Revolution. One king after another killing to keep power or being killed to take power.

It's no wonder that the Pharisees and chief priests crucified Jesus. The example is set for them right there in their scriptures. And if that wasn't enough, they've got the example of ancient Greece assassinating Alexander the Great or ancient Rome assassinating Julius Caesar.

In their minds, it's just how the world works. Even Pontius Pilate recognizes that. He sees what they're trying to do. He knows Jesus is an innocent man. But when he tries to stop them, what do they say? "Don't push us Pilate or you'll be next." And Pilate responds, "Go ahead. Take him. I'm not risking my neck for this guy."

And so Jesus is crucified. Because that's how the world works. Death is the ultimate solution to every problem. Death is the easiest route to power. Every leader of every nation in the history of world knows that. And many of them have made use of it. Because it works.

Except that this time, it doesn't. The Pharisees and the chief priests don't realize it at first, of course. They hear rumors about Jesus' disciples claiming that he's appeared to them. It's the usual crazy talk of zealots and religious fanatics. No one pays much attention to them.

Until Pentecost. You see, for the disciples, Jesus' resurrection occurred on Easter Sunday. But for the Jewish authorities, it occurred on Pentecost. Because that was the day that this little religious movement that they thought they had killed with Jesus suddenly rose back to life. And thousands are suddenly calling themselves Christians.

Which is exactly what happens in our Epistle lesson today. Last week, I told you the account of how Peter and John heal a paralyzed man and then preach to the crowds about Jesus. About how he died, yet rose again. And that the forgiveness of sins is given to all who call on his name.

And the people are astounded. There's only one man they had ever heard who preached like the apostles preaching. There's only one man they had ever seen who did miracles like they just did. And they thought he was dead. The people watch. The people listen. And five thousand men believe.

That number shouldn't be lost on you. Five thousand men. Where have we heard that before? Oh yeah, it's the same number of people who came to hear Jesus preach by the Sea of Galilee before he miraculously fed them all.

What does this tell us? What does it tell the crowds? What does it tell the Pharisees and chief priests? That Jesus is alive and well.

Not just physically risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. Jesus is alive and well in each and every one of his disciples. And they are still doing his work. Before he died, Jesus said that it was to our advantage that he leave so that he could send the Holy Spirit to us and be with us always. And we see proof of that advantage right here in our lesson.

And so the Jewish authorities bring Peter and John in for questioning. At first, they think they can handle this just like they handled Jesus. Intimidate them. Threaten them. Maybe just go ahead and kill them. Because this is the way the world works.

But it's not going to work here. Because these men are not afraid of death. They saw their Lord dead on a cross. They saw him alive and well three days later. And they know they have nothing to be afraid of. As David once wrote in Psalm 118, "*The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?*"

It's that attitude that allowed them to stand up to the Pharisees and chief priests. It's that attitude that built the Christian church throughout the centuries. And it's that attitude that continues to sustain Christians around the globe today.

I had someone ask me not too long ago, "Why don't these Christians in persecuted countries defend themselves? Why don't they carry guns? Why don't they fight back against those who kill them?" But you know, the Bible describes two different types of defense. There's defending your neighbor and there's defending yourself.

Now, defending your neighbor is a great thing to do. Whether it's serving in the armed forces or becoming a police officer or just protecting your own family. As John tells us today, we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. It is the greatest act of love one person can show to another.

But defending yourself against those who would persecute you for your faith? That's a different story. Because that's an opportunity. It's an opportunity to show the world just how unafraid you are of what they can do to you. It's an opportunity to look sin, death, and the devil in the eye and say, "You can't scare me."

As Jesus said, "*Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*" Or as Martin Luther once even more bluntly declared, "Go ahead and chop off my head. You won't hurt me. For I have a God who will give me a new one."

But you know, it's easy for me to stand up here and say these things. There isn't a man holding a gun to my head right now. There isn't a crowd setting fire to our church. There isn't a warrant out for our arrest. For all that we often complain, we have a pretty easy life here. Surrounded by that same liberty that Bartholdi built a statute to commemorate.

And yet, the devil doesn't need terrorists to intimidate us. He doesn't need armed thugs or a hostile government to make us afraid of death. He does that every day. With pandemics and cancer and heart disease and car accidents and murders and suicides.

We wake up every day facing our own mortality. And, I'm ashamed to say, more often than not, we cower in the face of it. Every day, we have the opportunity to look the devil in the eye and say, "You can't scare me." But we usually don't take it.

That's what Jesus was talking about in our Gospel lesson. That's what makes him the Good Shepherd. Because a hired hand sees the wolf coming and says, "These sheep aren't worth dying for." These sheep are cowards. These sheep aren't any good. These sheep aren't worth facing death.

But the Good Shepherd says, "I don't care if they're worth it or not. I love them. They're my sheep. And I will give my life so that they don't need to be afraid. I will give my life that they may live. Even if they choose to spend that life running in fear from the very wolves that I have already defeated."

And so we live today in liberty. Not just in the liberty of a democratic country. But in the liberty of a God who has freed us from the power of sin, death, and the devil. That we may live. Free from fear. Free from sorrow. Free and in our savior's flock. Amen.