

Of Its Own Accord

^{NRS} Act 12:1 About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church.² He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.³ After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.)⁴ When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover.⁵ While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.⁶ The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison.⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists.⁸ The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."⁹ Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision.¹⁰ After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him.¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

“Never, never, never believe any (endeavor) will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on a strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman...must realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.”

Winston Churchill said this, and nobody knew better than he that no matter how great an individual, or how strongly they believe in themselves, or how hard they work, their success or failure largely hangs on doors they themselves don't have the power to open or shut. No matter how great we are, we are not God, and therefore we are always subject to events beyond our control.

Churchill ran smack into this into his life. He is one of those fascinating people who really did seem to know what he was called to do early in life and to follow this with

absolutely no doubt or hesitation. Born into an aristocratic family in 1874 Churchill enrolled in military school and spent his early years a war correspondent. He was actually taken prisoner in the Boer war in South Africa and managed to escape, walking hundreds of miles through enemy territory becoming a kind of minor celebrity in Britain for a time.

And when he went back home he capitalized on this fame and successfully ran for Parliament. Last week we talked about the virtues of contemplation- Churchill would have hated that sermon. He was forever the man of action, decisive action. He believed life was in essence simple and complication was the refuge either of the incompetent or the coward. And of course this kind of stiff upper lip, this kind of bold conviction- this was exactly what Britain, what the world, needed during the dark days of World War II. After Germany captured France and the low lands of Europe Churchill prepared the people of Britain for war in perhaps the most stirring words ever given by a statesmen. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself in England in 1940 with Hitler just a few miles off of your coast. Imagine what it would be like to hear these words: “What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more

sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'

It gives me chills when I hear these words today- can you imagine what it felt like to hear them in 1940?

Thing is- Churchill almost never uttered these words. For Churchill almost never became Prime Minister.

After he entered Parliament as a young man, he ascended quickly- and became the Lord of the Admiralty in charge of the Navy during WWI. But between mistakes on his part and terrible leadership on the part of others, England suffered a series of terrible defeats along the Turkish coast at the battle of Gallipoli. With all the blame falling on him, Churchill was drummed not only out of the government, but was branded a failure and a radical and drummed out of political life.

Of course half of that was true- he was a radical. Unlike Julia Child we talked about a few weeks ago, Churchill didn't find his call late in life- he always knew what it was, it was always his gift to lead, to look for trouble, and to spur others into taking action. It didn't matter whether he was persuading anyone or not, this is just who he was. And after WWI and then during what he called his "wilderness years" when no one was listening to him- he continued to warn about the threats of totalitarianism growing in Russia, Italy, and then finally again in Germany. Churchill was ignored, ridiculed, and laughed at, but he kept on warning us no matter how tightly the doors seemed to be locked. He saved much of his ammunition for Neville Chamberlin, the Prime Minister who negotiated the Treaty of Munich with Hitler telling Britain it would mean "peace in

their time”. Churchill famously eviscerated Chamberlain and this agreement saying: “You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour and you will have war.” Wouldn’t you hate to have a guy like this for an enemy? But no matter how pithy, no matter how right it turns out Churchill actually was- the doors of leadership simply weren’t opening for him. No matter how great he believed he was, there was nothing for him to do but to sit on the sidelines in relatively obscure government positions and wonder how things might be different were he in charge.



I imagine Peter was feeling like this, too, as he was sitting there, rotting there in Herod’s prison. I imagine him staring at the iron gates locking him inside as he sat there between those two enormous and no doubt putrid guards.

I imagine him just sitting there in absolute frustration. His imprisonment couldn’t have come at a worse time. You all know when the Christian movement started there was this huge argument going on between disciples who thought Christians should just stay within Israel and work with Jews- or whether it would be OK to begin trying to spread the Gospel amongst the gentiles, too. And then, when they finally decided maybe it would be OK to work with Gentiles, the fought over whether the Gentiles would have to become circumcised and follow all of the dietary laws and what not. I know it sounds strange today, but this was a major conflict. The movement had always been Jewish- Jesus just didn’t spend much time with Gentiles.

Well, Peter, Jesus’ first disciple, had always been a solid conservative- if Jews were good enough for Jesus, they were good enough for him. Paul talks about how stubborn Peter was about this in Galatians. But then, here in Acts, we find out Peter has a

change of heart- a change of vision, actually. There he is sleeping, and even in sleep he was safe, but God gives him this vision of a tent coming down from the sky. And all these animals are in it- birds and snakes, everything. And he hears a voice telling him to rise, kill, and eat. And he's disgusted! He's a good Jew. He wasn't going to break the law. But then he hears another voice, the voice of God, and this voice tells him that nothing God has made is unclean.

Now when Peter is trying to figure out what this vision means, right there in the middle of the night there's a pounding on the door. And there at his door are three soldiers- not the thing you want to see in the middle of the night, right? But they don't look angry- they actually look afraid. And they tell Peter that their centurion, Cornelius wants to see him." And Peter goes- and Cornelius tells Peter he's had a vision, too, and that he wants to follow Jesus.

And wham, Peter makes the connection- the dream wasn't about eating pork, it was about God loving all humankind- not just Jews. And Peter right there on the spot says, "Can anyone without baptism from these people who have received the spirit just as we have?" And without even asking the stated clerk of Presbytery he baptizes Cornelius and his followers right there on the spot.

Now, on fire with this revelation, and wanting to make up for lost time, Peter goes and tells the rest of the disciples to get over their prejudice, and get out there. And it's right at this moment- at this time of high energy that Herod clamps down on them. James is put to death. And Peter himself winds up in the hooscow.

Talk about frustrating. He's been giving this new sense of call. It's like moving from black and white into color. But there's this huge, iron door in his way. Not to

mention two stinking guards snoring on either side of him. A little fun ancient fact for you- for some reason men in the ancient world believe eating raw garlic would make you strong, so every guy from gladiators to guards were always nibbling on raw garlic throughout the day. I'm not sure it made their muscles strong, but I'm betting their breath would knock you over.



Well Peter's predicament gets right to the heart of the one of the most difficult truths of the Christian life: I hate to tell you this, but rightly discerning our call does not mean everything is going to work out for us. Following God's may actually mean life is a lot *more* difficult and painful than it would be otherwise. Remember, Jesus says take up your cross and follow me- he wasn't talking about jewelry. Paul tells us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Matthew tells us to enter through the narrow door, because the wide door, the easy way, the popular way- well this leads to nothing in the end. Peter's life probably would have been a lot easier if he would have stuck to his nets. And Churchill probably wouldn't have been hated so much for Gallipoli if he had just stayed a writer. Discerning God's call is critical to our sense of purpose-but this doesn't mean things will be any easier, or more comfortable. It does mean we will have the comfort of our convictions when the way before us is *not* easy, however- and this is no small thing.

But I know this is tough news. I'd probably stand a much better chance of getting that TV ministry I've always wanted if I told you that things will just turn around for you if give your life over to Jesus- that all of a sudden your finances will work out and your boss will promote you and all that. But this just isn't the truth- at least the truth of the

Bible. But there is good news. The good news is that even when we don't have the power to open the doors blocking our way, God does, and sometimes, sometimes doors open in the most peculiar ways.



Peter didn't even believe it when doors started opening for him. He thought it was a dream. I think that is so important for us to hear by the way. In spite of everything he experienced with Jesus, all those amazing things, he *still* thought it was a dream when that angel appeared, told him to hurry and put on his cloak, and loosed his chains. And he thought it was just a vision when that old, iron door opened "of its own accord" our translation says.

Peter didn't believe any of this, because despite all he had seen, he still thought he had a pretty good grip on what's possible and what's impossible. We do that, don't we? We get this idea somehow that we're good judges of what's possible in the world. I mean come on- we've been surprised by life a billion times, but still, you and I have this idea that we're good judges of what's really possible. And so when the doors are shut, when the chips are down- we get down. We think just because *we* can't open the doors why they must be locked forever.

We forget that while a door may be locked for now- it may not be so forever.



I think Churchill must have known this somehow. Really, he should have just given up. Everyone had long forgotten about his daring exploits in South Africa- all they thought of when they saw his doughy face was Gallipoli. It would have been easy just to

quit. But somehow, somehow he stuck with it, playing minor roles in the government, and speaking his mind, and then that strange day in May of 1940. Neville Chamberlain resigned as Prime Minister, and Chamberlin met with King George the VI and a handful of other leaders. It would be up to them to find a new prime minister. And Chamberlin, Chamberlain!, this man Churchill had so thoroughly trashed in public, surprised everyone in the room by arguing for Churchill like a bull dog. Neville Chamberlain will be forever known only as a failure, and I think this is an enormous mistake. Because at that moment, in that room behind closed doors- it would have been the easiest thing in the world for him to have pulled for any man BUT Churchill. But Chamberlain cared for Britain more than he cared for his pride. And while the council wanted to go with others, Chamberlain successfully fought for Chuchill- and of course you all know the result.

And do you know the very first thing Churchill did when he was notified? Not champagne. Not a party. He sat down, took pen in hand, and he wrote Chamberlain a personal note expressing his gratefulness and, I imagine, his surprise, for suddenly, a door that seemed locked up tighter than a Roman prison, was standing wide open.



Friends, of course our choices do matter- sometimes life is up to us to make decisions and take the bull by the horns. But you know, the wisest among us know what Churchill said is more true- no matter how great we are, or how hard we work- our success or failure depends on doors we just don't have the power to open or shut. Once we enter into life we become slaves of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.

In humble acknowledgment of this, let's take a page from him and from Peter and Churchill. Instead of spending all of our time frustrated and angry about the doors in front of us that aren't opening and we can't make open- what if we spent just a smidgen of our time reflecting on the doors that *have* been opened for us, the gifts we've *already been given* and not because we deserved them, but simply because others have been gracious to us. And when we find ourselves before doors that aren't budging, remember these other words from Churchill: "Success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts."

Beloved, may the doors that close before us be shut only briefly. May the guards who snore beside us forget their garlic. And whatever happens, whether the path before us be clear or not- may we continue knowing if not comfort, than knowing the comfort of our convictions that comes seeking to enter through the narrow door. **Amen.**