

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale  
Sunday, February 22, 2026

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Well, Friends, as we center ourself once again in worship, I invite you to take a deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. As Pastor Joshua always reminded me, relax your shoulders, unclench your hands, and breathe deeply as we prepare to hear God's word.

Let us pray.

Gracious and merciful God, blow your spirit amongst us that we may feel your presence. That our eyes might be opened and our ears unstopped. That our hearts may be strangely warmed. and that we may once again hear your words of promise and challenge across the centuries. Let the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Friends, this morning on the first Sunday of Lent, we are preparing ourselves for a new season, a season of reflection, repentance, and renewed commitment. We are also embarking upon a sermon series that over the next six weeks will be asking us a simple but searching question. What does a faithful disciple of Jesus look like in the world? Now, this sermon series, Marks of a Disciple, is mainly rooted in Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, which is the Epistle reading for this Lent. But today, we will start out with a reading from Acts of the Apostles. But as we go through these six weeks, we will explore the qualities of a discipleship-filled life, including boldness, gratitude, humility, perseverance, peace, and compassion. And each week as we take steps closer to the cross, we're going to consider how these marks are cultivated not just by what we do, but through a life centered on Jesus, who calls us to share in his love and his way of life. So I invite us all this morning to hear these words from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 28, starting with verse 16.

*Paul was allowed to live by himself with the soldier who was guarding him. Now three days later, Paul called together the local leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them, "Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans." When they had examined me, the Romans wanted to release me because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But when the Jewish authorities objected, I was compelled to appeal qto the emperor even though I had no charge to bring against my people. For this reason, therefore, I ask to see you and to speak with you, since it is for the sake of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain." The local leaders replied, "We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken anything evil about you. But we would like to hear from you what you think. For with regard to this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against. Now, after they had set a day to meet with him, the Jewish authorities came to Paul at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening, he explained the matter to them,*

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*testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced by what he had said while others refused to believe. So 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, "Go to this people and say, you will indeed listen, but never understand. You will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes. Otherwise, they might look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them. Let it be known to you then, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen." Paul lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. .*

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

As we begin this sermon series and as we begin with the closing lines of the book of Acts, we want to keep in mind that Acts is a companion piece to the Gospel of Luke. It is the continued telling of the story about how the disciples and the early church did exactly what Christ called them to do, to share the good news to the ends of the earth. It's the story about how the faith came to be here in Memphis as well as so many other places around the world. It is also important at the outset to name that this text and many others in the books of Acts have been used to justify some incredibly hateful discrimination against our Jewish brothers and sisters for centuries now. But for me and for us today, that is not what Paul is speaking of. Paul is talking about broadening —broadening the message of the gospel, not excluding people from it. So, that very important caveat before we continue on.

Now, I have admitted to you all before, Acts of the Apostles, is not my favorite book in the New Testament, which is truthfully a detriment to me because it is filled with so many rich stories about how the church that we know came to be. It tells...it's about half of the Apostle Peter and half Apostle Paul telling the story of how Jesus's Messiahship went from a small group of 12 to across the ends of the earth. And here at the end of the Acts of the Apostles, we have the Apostle Paul, who at this point has survived shipwrecks and earthquakes and being arrested and being attacked. He has traveled the known world. He has supported communities, spending 18 months here and three months there, building faith communities in places like Corinth and Ephesus and Philippi. He has supported and nurtured women and men to spread the gospel and work toward the kingdom. And here he is a long way from home. He is under house arrest in Rome, accused of blasphemy. Now Paul is lucky enough that he had a privilege that not many early believers and not many Jews at the time had. Paul was a citizen of Rome, which meant that when he was

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arrested in Jerusalem, he could appeal up to higher authorities, which is what he did. He appealed to the governor and then eventually ended up appealing to Rome itself and spent at least three years, maybe more, under house arrest before being able to make his case to Nero. He invites the Jewish authorities in Rome into his home to hear his own testimony, to make his case, to explain what he had been doing as he traveled and why it was so important to him. Because the text tells us clearly Paul is here to preach the gospel despite everything else. Like there is no wavering in every single situation. When he was arrested, when he was shipwrecked, even here under house arrest, he preaches the gospel. And it comes, the text tells us, in a two-pronged approach. First, he talks about Jesus as Messiah, pointing to Christ as the fulfillment of the scriptures, the one who would come to save, the one who would usher in the kingdom of God. And then he also speaks about what that kingdom of God is. How the followers of Jesus Christ are meant to live in the world and to understand the world. And everywhere he went, just like the text tells us, here in Rome, some were convinced and others refused to believe.

What I do find curious is that the book of Acts does not tell us how Paul's life ends. The very last words of the book of Acts are here in our text today. "He welcomed all who came to him proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." But we know that the emperor Nero had him executed. Accounts differ on what it exactly looked like, how it was done, but within a few years of his arrival in Rome, he was killed in a rash of anti-Christian sentiment. Now, for the writer of the book of Acts, he talks about the death and martyrdom of other apostles frequently, but leaves Paul here to his life and his ministry. I believe that's because for the writer of Acts, it is important how Paul lived his life, not so much the particulars of how he died. What he was doing in the face of empire mattered. He welcomed all. He proclaimed the kingdom, and he taught about Jesus Christ with all boldness.

Now, holy boldness is spirit cultivated. Just a couple of chapters before this in the Acts of the Apostles, the gathered 12 prayed for the spirit to continue to move in and amongst them that they could share the story with boldness. And we see boldness in the Apostle Paul, this mighty pillar of Christian faith. We would not be gathered here today without the work of Paul, without the spreading of the gospel and the opening of the idea of God's kingdom to the ends of the earth. So I spent a bit of this week thinking about the kind of boldness we as faithful disciples are called to. It might be. God may well be calling us to the kind of boldness that survives earthquakes and shipwrecks and continues to preach. We may be called to the kind of boldness that proclaims release to the captives in jail. We might be called to the kind of boldness that speaks before thinking, that finds itself in dangerous situations, that follows God's spirit wherever God is leading.

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But I also recognize that boldness is not always something flashy. As Whitney shared with our children, it's not always loud and calling attention to itself. There are plenty of quiet, powerful moments. And I think sometimes we get lost in the big things. So we don't spend enough time thinking about those little ones, the tiny quiet moments that for Paul shaped his legacy and thus the legacy of the early church. Because for every big sermon that Paul stood and preached at Antioch or in Rome or in Corinth or in Philippi, there were hundreds of thousands of moments across a table where he sat and spoke with people who had questions, who were hurting. There are hundreds of thousands of moments that are never recounted in our scripture where Paul spoke to the people, where he offered what food he had, where he welcomed people into his spaces, offering a port in the storm, where he lived his faith and lived it in a way that showed others Christ shining through. And I know that because the big bold declarations our scriptures recount for us of the Apostle Paul would not have been possible without all of these small powerful moments.

As I began thinking this week, I'm going to pause for a second. (Siren sounds outside)

Okay, as I began thinking this week about spirit-filled boldness, my uncle John came to mind. My mother is the oldest child of an oldest child. And so my uncle John, who is actually her uncle John, was only about nine years older than she was. He was nine or 10 years old when she was born. And so they grew up very close. And Uncle John, as I said, became an uncle to me when we saw him and spent time with him. He was an American Baptist preacher and theologian, professor at Colgate University in comparative religions. He graduated from Baylor where he met my aunt Sandra. And then they went on to King's College and Harvard before he graduated with his PhD and began traveling the world, spending time in Sri Lanka and in Japan. But while they were at Harvard, the Vietnam War broke into open hostilities. My uncle John was a devout pacifist. It was a central, central piece of who he understood himself to be. So, the story I was told is that my Aunt Sandra and Uncle John sat down at the little card table they had in the tiny apartment they were living in while he was at Harvard and she was teaching school to try and make ends meet. And they worked out on some napkin math the percentage of their taxes that went to the Department of Defense. And then they began donating that exact same amount every year for the remainder of the Vietnam War to pacifist organizations.

They took their meager salaries and felt strongly enough to try and support the groups that were working toward the vision of God's kingdom that was so central to them. This was not a flashy act. It was not one that made the newspapers. It was not one that they often talked about actually, but it was a very bold act. It was them following their faith.

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So friends, sometimes the spirit-filled boldness that we are called to, that boldness that is the mark of a disciple, is indeed not something that makes front page news. It may not be something that leaves an indelible mark on a history book for generations to come. It may not be something that makes a big splash. But each of those bold moments of our faith add up to the reflection of God's kingdom amongst us. Every one of those moments, big and small, where we step out in faith are witness to the beauty and justice of the kingdom of God and the witness to our understanding of Jesus Christ as the son of the living God. Holy boldness is spirit cultivated, and it is rooted in who we know God to be and who we know ourselves to be. in the face of a broken world that is going to look different for each one of us. But it is at its core centered in the self-revelation of Jesus the Christ, the one who befriended the outcast, fed the hungry, healed the sick, and welcomed all.

As we walk this journey of Lent, we, and friends, are cognizant of the pain of the world, of how far we are from the vision of God's peaceful and justice-filled kingdom. We know that at times it feels overwhelming,

and I have had so many conversations about how it feels like we just don't know what to do.

But the witness of our scriptures says that the greatest insult to the God of empire, the God that says might makes right, the God that says my way at all costs, is to love our neighbor boldly, proudly, and vocally. To choose love rather than division. As we, friends, have been welcomed, forgiven, and freed, we are boldly called to do the same. In the face of cruelty, apathy, and oppression, in the face of the empire, the church must simply be the church. We must simply be disciples. And that simply is carrying a lot of weight because following God is neither easy nor rewarding all the time. And yet, like the Apostle Paul, we are called to proclaim the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness in word and in deed this day and every day. Amen.