"The Story Ends: The Story Continues"

Acts 28:1-31

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

Stories. We listen to and tell stories. We read stories to children. We tell stories to each other. We read stories in books and magazines. There are stories in songs and movies and theatre. We share about our day. We share about kids and grandkids and pets. We share about a vacation and a new sofa and a dinner out. We share stories.

In fact, I think to be a human being is to share stories. It's how our brains work. It's how we make sense of things. It's how we understand our experiences and our lives. It's how we share ourselves and how we get to know someone else. It's how we build community. It's how we form hopes and beliefs about God. Stories are essential for human beings. It's easy to imagine our earliest ancestors sharing stories around a fire at night.

Stories. Of course there are good and bad stories. Good stories tell of courage and hope and kindness and truth and humility and love. They build character and shape souls. They help us make good choices in life. They help build a good community. They share wisdom. They help us with the deepest questions: Why am I here? How should I live? Where am I going?

And if there are good stories, there are also bad stories. Bad stories seek to justify hate and anger. Bad stories tell lies as truth. Bad stories are selfish. Bad stories tear down community and self-esteem. Bad stories are part of the hopelessness, depression, and suicide we see all around us. The internet and social media platforms have made it too easy to share bad stories.

But Christian faith has good stories to share. There are stories about the beauty and wonder of creation. There are stories about Abraham's faithfulness, Moses' leadership, and David's charisma. There are stories of salvation, and stories of failure, and stories of God's grace. Jesus' parables are stories. And the stories about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are stories about the love and power of God. They are good stories. They shape a soul and give hope.

This summer Bill and I have been preaching through the book of Acts. It's a type of story about the beginnings of the church. It's a story that tells how the handful of Jesus' followers became the Christian faith that spread across the Roman Empire. It begins in Acts 1 with the risen Christ telling his followers, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon

you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And so that story is told. Today we come to Acts 28, the end of story. Or maybe it's just the last chapter, and the story continues. I'll let you decide.

II. Brief Exegesis

Paul the prisoner is on his way to Rome. Like Jesus before him, Paul's mission activity has stirred up some violent opposition. So Paul was arrested. He has defended himself well before different Roman judges and government leaders, and in his defense, he has spoken about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as God's Savior. Paul is now headed to Rome to have his case heard by the Emperor Nero.

Traveling by ship in the fall of the year the ship is caught in a violent storm. The ship is blown out to sea. All seems lost. But Paul inspires everyone with his faith and confidence that God will deliver them so he can bear witness to Jesus Christ in Rome. And so it happens. The ship runs aground in Malta. The ship is lost, but everyone is saved.

As if surviving the storm is not enough to prove God's purpose and power in Paul, we have these stories about Paul on Malta. Gathering wood for a fire, Paul is bitten by a snake. The natives there know the snake is poisonous. So they at first think Paul must be a murderer. They believe fate has a way of catching up with you. So even though Paul survived the storm, the bite from the snake is justice. But Paul just shakes the snake off. Nothing happens. The natives now believe Paul must be some type of god. Of course neither is true. Paul is a servant of God empowered with God's Holy Spirit who is to tell of Jesus in the courts of Rome. Surviving the storm and snake show that the mysterious powers of nature bow before the power and purpose of God.

The powers that protected Paul are not merely for Paul. The power and purpose of God in Paul is also directed to healing people on Malta. As the story in Acts draws to a close, Paul's righteousness is confirmed by surviving the storm, surviving the snake bite and healing others. Paul doesn't stumble into Rome on accident. Rather, Paul goes to Rome with purpose, serving God.

When Paul arrives in Rome he is put under a type of house arrest. He meets with the Jewish leaders in Rome. He tells them that he comes to Rome as a prisoner not because he has dishonored Jewish religious customs and beliefs, but because he sought to live out the hope of Israel in God's Savior. The Jewish leaders tell Paul they have not received letters from Jewish leaders in Jerusalem about him. Nor has anyone arrived to speak against him. But they are aware of the spread of belief in Jesus that is disrupting some communities. So they would like to hear for themselves about Jesus as God's Savior.

And so a day is set to hear about Jesus. Many Jews in Rome come. Paul speaks all day. He tells about Jesus fulfilling the hopes of Jewish beliefs and scripture. He tells about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. He tells about his own experience with the risen Christ, and his own

conversion. He tells about his mission, and the great work of God to include everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike. And as has been the case throughout Acts, some believe and some do not.

And then this great story about the birth and spread of the Christian faith ends. It ends with Paul quietly living under house arrest at his own expense, welcoming all who come, and proclaiming the Christian faith in Jesus Christ. The story that began with the charge of the risen Jesus Christ ("You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" Acts 1:8) now ends with the final verse: "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hinderance" (Acts 28:31). That final verse is a good summary of the whole story. It is what has happened.

But the end of the story is also a bit strange. It is not what we might have expected. It might have made more sense to end with Paul's great witness before the Emperor. It might have ended with Paul on trial before great Roman Empire declaring the grace of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It might have ended with a courageous Paul unbowed before all the power and wealth or Rome. It might have. But it didn't. Rather it ends rather quietly with Paul in Rome sharing about Jesus with anyone who comes to visit. It's not exactly a dramatic ending.

And as I thought about that I think that's the point. Acts is written to Christians in the late 1st C who are a small and powerless community in the vastness and power of the Roman Empire. Perhaps they were in danger of losing hope. Perhaps they wondered about this "power" for witnessing that the risen Christ promised. Where is it? Perhaps they longed for significance in the culture around them.

So I think the story in Acts ends in a way that is not really the end. It is a story told to invite those small communities of Christians to continue the story. It's a story told to invite followers of Jesus to follow the example of Paul. It's a story told to encourage churches to "proclaim the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ with boldness." It's a story told for Christians to add to themselves. It's an end that continues.

III. Theological Reflections

A story with an end that continues. I read recently a small booklet called "Centenary of the First Presbyterian Church of Sharon 1844-1944." It was written in 1944 to celebrate our church's 100th anniversary. It's a history of 1st Church. It's a good story that tells about our history. But it's also fun because the author Sarah Graham Morrison is not afraid to share her opinions.

One of those opinions regards 1870 and the 1st Church pastor, Rev. Robert Graves. She writes, "Rev. Robert Graves began to hypnotize the congregation with 80-minute sermons. When

his conduct became subject of dissension, 75 of the like taste left the church with him and erected a building on Vine Ave. The old church sent a petition to Presbytery opposing it. The Presbytery found Rev. Graves wanting. So ended the Second Presbyterian Church of Sharon. Some members returned. Others found more congenial spirits in the Episcopal Church."

Sarah Graham Morrison also writes this about 25 years later: "During this period of growth and change, the Presbyterian pastor was handsome Rev. George Donehoo, with brilliant eyes, jet black hair and mustache, a great cyclist, and a reader. He became the State Librarian. Because of his popularity as well as the expansion of the town during his stay here, 1890-1903, our membership so greatly increased that we were forced to enlarge the church again." And if, by chance, you are curious about "handsome Rev. George Donehoo" his picture is on the picture board of pastors outside the sanctuary.

So I can tell you with great confidence that neither Bill nor I will be preaching 80-minute sermons, start a 2nd Presbyterian Church of Sharon, or have jet black hair. We're just happy with any hair of whatever color. But we are adding to the story of 1st Church. As are you.

Sarah Graham Morrison told a story about the first 100 years. Her story ended in 1944. But the story has continued. It continued with the post-war boom. It continued with mill closures. It continued with change and the important place of 1st Church in the community. It continued with staff changes and membership changes and mission changes and program changes. There's an end, and a "continuing," like the story told in Acts. I doubt 1st Church members in 1944 could imagine today's "Beach Sunday." But here we are.

We are a part of that continuing story. Our vision statement is: "Deep Well, No Fences." It's a courageous statement that we want to be a church defined by God's grace that welcomes all people, and not by fences that divide. Our mission statement is: "Meeting Jesus on the Corner of Faith and Life." It's a bold statement that we believe Jesus calls us to make a difference in our community in all types of ways. There will come a time when those important statements will come to an end. There will come a time when my part of the story will come to an end. It's the way of things. But the story of 1st Church will continue. It is the way of God.

The story ends; the story continues. Maybe a good word for the story of 1st Church is the final word in Acts: "proclaim the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness." (Acts 28:31). Amen to that.