May 17, 2026
Acts 28:17-31

Personal testimonies from Christians fascinate me. Often, they say something like, “My life was a mess, and then I became a Christian, and now things are great.” I wonder what Paul’s testimony would have been like. “Hello, my name is Paul, and since I’ve become a Christian, I’ve lost all my respect and prestige that I had in the Jewish religious community, there have been countless assasination attempts, countless people have tried to undermine me and the work I’ve done in the churches I’ve planted, and I’ve been accused of crimes I did not commit, and I’ve been rejected, laughed at, called insane, and much more.” At this point, Paul has spent the last few years, being imprisoned, almost shipwrecked, bitten by a viper (but survived), chained to a Roman guard, and something would have been very clear to him: He is not in control. God has spared his life and has been guiding all things to this point in Rome- he is there because, and only because, Jesus wants him to be there. That foundational truth- I am not in control, Jesus is, is what we celebrate when we celebrate Jesus’ ascension into Heaven- all authority has been given to him, he is ruling all things, nothing happens in this world that he does not allow to happen. And Paul preaches that in Rome: Jesus in in control, but doesn’t rule like earthly rulers. Jesus is a suffering King, who defeated not the Romans, but death itself by his own death and will rescue from death all who believe in him. Jesus is ruling Heaven and Earth for the good of his precious, chosen people. **Jesus is King.** And what we see in Paul’s final sermon and time in Rome, that means two things: **1. Jesus Will Not Be Mocked. 2. Jesus Will Not Be Hindered.**

1. Jesus Will Not Be Mocked. Obviously, the preaching that Paul gave the Jewish synagogue leaders of Rome was much longer than what’s recorded. He spends the entire day teaching, answering what were penetrating, difficult questions, explaining, and proclaiming the forgiveness of sins in Christ, how every sacrifice of the Old Testament, all the blood shed in the temple for the forgiveness of sins ultimately points to the true sacrifice, Jesus himself. Paul very likely pointed them to Abraham, how he was declared righteous before God not because of his adherence to the Law, like many Jews thought, but through faith- by believing in God- he was considered righteous! He likely pointed out how the Law of God demands perfection, and if you don’t have a perfect record, you must be punished, but also that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 would be pierced for our transgressions, and the punishment that brings us peace is on him! He likely pointed out many things, and it partially worked. Some, maybe over half, believed and were filled with joy to know that their religious performance is not what made them righteous before God, but the true sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and that this could be given to Gentiles as well! And some did not. Why not? It doesn’t say, but it likely had to do with this: pride. If the Gospel is true, that means that nothing you do or can do will ever earn you anything with God, and if you are going to be saved, it is only through what Jesus has done for you. There’s something about that message that offends highly accomplished, righteous, or proud people. And as they are beginning to leave, Paul leaves them with a terrifying warning: “If Jesus is truly God and King, he will not be mocked. Don’t think that if you reject him today, you can accept him tomorrow. That’s not how this works.” And he quotes this passage from Isaiah about God’s people Israel

hundreds of years earlier- God tells Isaiah that his listeners will hear, but not understand, see, but not perceive. Why? Because they have hardened their heart, not only will they not believe God's promises, but they won't even care, they won't even understand what they mean. They won't want God's healing or forgiveness, so God won't give it to them, and he will take away their ability to receive, or even desire it.

This is one of, if not the most terrifying teachings of God's Word, but it needs to be taught. If any of us rejects God's forgiveness, love, and grace, he might just say, "Okay. Have it your way," and not only not give it to us, but actually take away any chance to repent- to harden our hearts from ever repenting and believing. We see this with Pharaoh in Exodus- he hardened his heart against God's warnings, and eventually God hardened Pharoah's heart. And in Israel, some people were so adamant about not believing God's promises, not giving up their sins, hardening their hearts, that God said, "have it your way," and God actually hardened them in their rebellion and sin and didn't allow them to ever believe. Jesus is King, and he will not be mocked. If you reject him today, there is no guarantee that you will have an opportunity to repent or be saved tomorrow. God never hardens people out of nowhere, it's always a response to the person hardening their heart, but there are times when God spiritually destroys them, before they actually die. Paul's point? Don't be like your ancestors. Don't treat this with indifference. Repent. Leave your sin and false belief behind and enjoy Jesus' free salvation that he earned for you because he loves you!

Satan is always tempting us, always trying to get us to reject God's mercy, and we need to recognize the patterns and beginnings of hardening in our hearts so we can repent. If you are relishing feelings of hatred, holding grudges against people who have hurt you, refusing to make amends when they attempt to reach out, that is a sign of hardening. When there is a sinful habit or lifestyle choice that you've made, and you know the Bible says it's wrong, but you either justify it, weasel out of it, or just say, "I don't care," that's a sign of hardening. When a church member who's been trained in catechism and knows what the Bible teaches, even after months, years of a pastor's invitation and encouragement does not come to worship regularly, or make the necessary changes in life or work in order to come to worship more than once every few months, that is a sign of hardening. And if a Christian is harboring secret sin, secret animosity or resentment or selfishness, if a Christian groans at church, groans every time a sermon or service is a little long as if they had anything more important than being in God's Word, if someone hears a word from Pastor and immediately says, "How dare he call me out", they are actively rejecting God's mercy and there may come a day when God gives them what they want. Now, we can't know whether someone is truly "hardened" or not, so we never give up praying, encouraging, calling, pleading, but this is a reality.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to make you question your salvation- I'm urging you not to take it for granted. As a Lutheran theologian once said, "The despising of grace is the death of the church." Your status in aHeaven in and God's heart is a free gift given to you through faith, sealed in your baptism, and renewed when you take the Lord's Supper, and yours

every time you repent and hear the Gospel of God's promises to you. But Satan wants to see you fall, and if he can't get you to cling to a sin like greed, lust, gossip, envy, or laziness, he will try to trick you into pride, which is deadlier than all of them. Paul's point and my point: "God has called you into his family by his grace and redeemed you as his children. Surrender your pride and enjoy his forgiveness. Don't harden yourself."

2. Jesus Will Not Be Hindered. Some of you may know this, but this is actually how the book of Acts ends. It's a bit of an abrupt ending- it doesn't tell us how Paul's trial went, what happened after, how he died, if he died, Luke just says that Paul preached for two years without hindrance. Done. *To be continued.* That's the point. We are still in the New Testament Church. The work of preaching the Gospel has been handed down to us from Paul and Jesus' disciples, all the way to today. We'll sing it in a bit:

Christ in his splendor, all dominion gaining,
Christ with his people evermore remaining,
Christ to all ages, gloriously reigning,
we are his witnesses.

Because Jesus is in charge, there is nothing Satan, his demons, the unbelieving world can do to stop his will from being done, and yet he decides to do his will, to save people, *through us*, and most surprisingly, *through us in ways we would never expect.* When Paul was actively persecuting Christians, many Christians likely thought, "This is going to destroy God's people!" Well, Jesus turned Saul into Paul- the greatest pastor and missionary ever. And when Paul, the greatest missionary ever, wasn't able to do mission work and plant churches, many Christians likely thought, "Well, now what?" And as it turns out, Paul was able to preach in Rome, and many people came to faith through his ministry even while he was under house arrest- in fact, some of the books of the New Testament- Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon- were written during this time and he realizes- nothing can hinder Jesus- he is in complete control, and everything that happens to us, every place we end up, Jesus has allowed for a reason.

Final point. Why are you here? If Jesus is truly the king over all creation, there is a reason that he has brought you here, today, this church, this town, in this state on this Sunday listening to this pastor preach this sermon. There's a reason why Paul ended up in Rome, and it's the same reason all of us have ended up here in Whitewater. St. John's Lutheran Church in Whitewater, Wisconsin is not here simply to exist, and neither are any of her members. We are not here just to "be here." The reason Maddie, Dot, and I were guided here by the Holy Spirit through the call committee, all under Jesus' direction, and here to serve each of you is not random, nothing is. We are all here because God in his mercy decided that there are people in this town that need to be saved. There are people who don't know Jesus, and Jesus wants them to know him. There are people who think they know Jesus, but in reality the Jesus they know is a false Jesus given by a false pastor, and they are either discouraged, in despair, or under the delusion of their own goodness, and we are here to help. Some of them are freshmen in college, some have lived in

Whitewater all their lives. Please don't think that we are here just to exist. Some of you, your church recently closed, and that's sad, but is it possible that God allowed that to happen because he knew that there's someone in Whitewater that he wants you to reach? And why am I here? Certainly not to take up your budget with my salary, just because "Churches are supposed to have pastors!" I'm here because God in his wisdom said, "That church in Whitewater needs a servant to equip them to share me with their friends and families and neighbors." And notice- Paul had years and years of training before he could do it, this is why Bible Study is important- that's where we learn and practice- because that is why we are here. To share the Gospel- if that's not something we want to do, we might as well close up shop! That's why we are here. That's why I'm here. We have a Gospel unique in this town and it is worthy sharing.

I'll share a strategy I got from another pastor: Don't ask people if they have a church. Of course they do- they may not have gone in five years, but they'll say yes. Ask them, "Do you have a pastor? Do you have a close relationship with a trained servant of God's Word that loves you enough to challenge you? If they say yes, which they may not, ask this: "Does he visit you? Ours will." I'm busy, but not that busy- you can use me for that. That's why I'm here. That's why Christ in his infinite power placed us here- that all may know his saving name and join the chorus as they shout: "Christ is King." Amen.