

Portrait of a Demagogue

sermon digest

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Acts 12:1-23

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From Greek origin, the word *demagogue* simply means a leader of the people; but even in ancient Greece it was a pejorative term applied to leaders who play on popular ignorance and prejudice to enhance their power. A demagogue then as now was primarily a politician. The only difference between a politician and a demagogue was how far one would go to gain power and sustain control.

I recall a conversation the week after President Kennedy's assassination. I was a seminary student in Fort Worth working for the TCU Library. A university history professor was involved in a casual conversation about the future of our nation. I expressed my reservation about the leadership of Lyndon Johnson. When pressed to state my misgivings, I said, "he is such a, a . . . politician!" The history professor spoke up in defense of the new president, "Who else would you want to be a political leader but a politician?"

I knew and I think that the professor knew where I was coming from. Johnson had a reputation in Texas for walking on the political shady side. Had I been a bit more sophisticated, I might have accused Johnson of being a demagogue; but I really was expressing the common wisdom that all politicians are shady and will do or say anything to enhance their power. I think that my scholarly mentor was expressing a genuine concern that we not paint all politicians with the same broad brush.

Consider the distinctive character of a demagogue. Adolf Hitler is the prime historical example. He rose to power out of the ashes of World War I, blaming Jews and the non-Aryan world for the economic plight of Germany. He provided the rationale and rhetoric for a doctrine of German Aryan superiority. He convinced Germans that they were destined for world domination. He played to ethnic prejudice and a sense of national persecution that marched the German nation into the most geographically extensive war in history. He even drew the established Church into his political structure, and some German theologians stooped to provide religious justification for Nazi policies against the Jews. The Jews became scapegoats for all German problems. Germans were poor because Jews were rich. Although the Jewish Holocaust was mostly concealed from the public eye, the ground was prepared by feeding the hatred and bigotry that seems always to be present among a people. Guards and soldiers in the Jewish concentration camps were justified in dehumanizing, torturing, and killing Jews by the well honed political doctrines of the Nazi government; and Hitler became for all time the personification of a *demagogue*.

Enter Herod, also known as Agrippa. Luke digresses to view the larger world into which the church was moving with the Christian gospel. Throughout Acts, Christians seem to spend a lot of time incarcerated, first in Jewish jails and later in Roman prisons. In his story of the birth and expansion of the early church in Acts, Luke identifies three major obstacles to the progressive movement of the gospel into the world—Jewish leaders, defective Christians, and Roman authorities.

From the beginning, religious opposition came from the Jewish establishment. Although Luke repeatedly accuses "the Jews" of persecuting the church, his focus is not on the Jewish religion or the Jewish people, which includes the followers of Jesus. Hostility toward the church came from the Jewish leadership attempting to protect their turf from a new Jewish sect. The story of Paul begins with his vigilance in persecution of Christians. He did not abandon his Jewish roots to become a Christian. Like Luke, Paul became convinced that Christ was the fulfillment of Jewish prophesy, that Christians were the true people of God.

A confessional note emerges in the exposure of defective Christians. The prime example is in Acts 5, the story of Ananias and Sapphira who cheated in their sharing of wealth with the church and then covered their dishonesty with lies. Luke offers no brief for Christian insiders. In fact, corruption from within the church seems to hold more of a threat to the progressive movement of the gospel into the world than the opposition of sworn enemies.

The final and perhaps the greatest obstacle to the church came from Roman rule. To some extent, this was secular opposition with a political concern on the part of Rome to maintain popular control; but Rome did not distinguish religious from political concerns and did not allow totally independent status for any religion. All religion had to serve the purposes and needs of the Empire and the Emperor. Any religion that attempted to stand alone or apart from Roman authority was a threat to

political control and had to be put down.

Divine justice determines the fate of a demagogue. Herod thus appears as a shrewd politician playing Jews against Christians in order to enhance his own authority. He comes from a long line of Roman puppet rulers of the Jews. Herod the Great, responsible for the new temple in Jerusalem and identified by Matthew with the slaughter of the innocents at the birth of Jesus, was the father of Herod Antipas, who ordered the execution of John the Baptist, and the grandfather of Herod Agrippa, who killed the Apostle James and ordered the imprisonment and execution of the Apostle Peter. A friend of the Emperor Caligula, Herod Agrippa maneuvered through the family pecking order and the Roman political system to become King of the Jews in control of the largest Jewish territory since the time of his grandfather.

Luke cites a political motive for the arrest of Peter. The demagogue had gained political points by the execution of James, so he decided to play the hate-Christians game a little further by making a public example of Peter during Passover. But Peter is walked out of prison by an angel of God leaving the Roman guards to pay the penalty of death that had been given to Peter. After Peter's rescue and safe passage, Luke returns to tell the rest of Herod's story. This is one of the few places in the New Testament where corroborating documentation exists from another source.

Josephus left a detailed account of Herod's climb to the top which concluded with deposing his uncle Antipas and being granted his grandfather's title and territory by his friend Caligula. According to Josephus, Herod received a warning of his death by an owl and died five days later of pains in his abdomen and chest. Some speculate that he may have died of the same ailment of his grandfather, an intestinal gangrenous infection. So Luke's account of Herod's being eaten by worms seems to be an elaboration of public information; however, Luke tells the death of Herod as the judgment of God on one who would usurp the authority of God in the political arena. According to Luke, Herod the demagogue died because he allowed himself to be praised as a god by the people of Tyre and Sidon.

William Willimon offers a tongue in cheek interpretation: "God is not nice to those who try to be God. Hitler perishes huddled in a bunker in Berlin. Mussolini is [hanged] upside down. Thus ever to tyrants. Next to this ugly scene of Herod being devoured by worms, Luke laconically remarks, 'But the word of God grew and multiplied.'" (*Interpretation, Acts*, p. 114)

The Christian gospel exists in political climates. Like it or not, Christians have always lived in a political world and must always press the demands of the gospel within a political context. Because Christianity always transcends national loyalties and institutions, Christians have historically had to work with every political system in the human experience. To use Niebuhr's categories, sometimes Christ is against the culture or above the culture, but always working to transform the culture.

Grace Covenant support of religious liberty through the separation of church and state is no secret in this congregation, but our view of separation does not justify silence before political powers. Just last week the former Director of our International Council of Community Churches was arrested in the U.S. Capitol along with several other religious leaders for protesting the dimensions of the debate over the national debt that ignores the plight of the poor. The protest was not aimed at one party, at one president, or one house of congress. The protest was for consideration of the people who live in poverty in this country. Sometimes that kind of stand puts Christians over and against a politician or a party stance, but the one thing we cannot abide as Christians is silence and passivity before injustice.

As I read Luke's account of the church moving out into the Roman Empire in Acts, I have a sense of "I wish it were so" when I read of the overpowering movement of the Holy Spirit and the miraculous rescues from prison. Historically Christians have more often experienced the suffering of James rather than the miraculous rescue of Peter, but even Luke does not assume that God is going to take care of the evil of this world without any involvement from Christians.

To no one's surprise, I like the dimensions of political involvement we describe in our covenant: Having received the costly grace of God in Christ, we commit ourselves to the costly life of Christian discipleship, taking our cross, denying self, and following Christ. We will be servants of God to all who have given up hope, working for peace and justice among all people, seeking to become a voice for those who have no voice. We support a free church in a free state, advocating religious liberty through the separation of church and state and meticulously seeking

to avoid using or being used by government authorities.