God's In Control

Have you ever felt totally out of control? You know there's nothing like being in a river for being out of control! (*Kayak story with Adrian).* I know that's a very literal example of being out of control but the truth is, none of us are totally in control of anything in this life! We're not in control of our jobs, we're not in control of everything that happens to us, we're not even in control of our health, and we're certainly not sure of the future! I know we like to think we are, but we're really not! Every time I go through Geneva airport on those moving escalators, I'm always shocked at what you read on the adverts on the billboards as you go to the gate. Investors claiming about they can 'guiding you to your future,' 'your futures safe with us' 'spanning your life.' Really? How can they be so sure? Do they have control over the future? No bank, no investor, no company, nobody has that kind of control!

But even though circumstances are often way beyond our control. We can take comfort in the fact that they are not way beyond God's. Even though it might seem like things in this life are spiralling out of control, we can be sure that God is absolutely in charge. And that's the case in the story we're about to read this morning. One guy gets his head chopped off, another guy gets a miraculous jailbreak, and worms eat the king! But God's in charge of all of it! It's a great story. Turn to Acts 12 and let's read together…

Acts 12:1-24

1 About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. **2** He killed James the brother of John with the sword, **3** and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread *(that's Passover festival)*. **4** And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. **5** So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

Peter Is Rescued

6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. **7** And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. **8** And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." **9** And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. **10** When they had passed the first and the

second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. **11** When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." **12** When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. **13** And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. **14** Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. **15** They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was Peter, and they kept saying, "It's his angel!" **16** But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. **17** But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place. **18** Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. **19** And after Herod searched for him and didn't find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

The Death of Herod

20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. **21** On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. **22** And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" **23** Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. **24** But the word of God increased and multiplied.

What a story! Sounds like a fictitious novel! But it's not! Its here, recorded for us by Luke? Why did Luke, or more importantly why did the Holy Spirit inspire Luke to dedicate a full chapter to this story? Possibly for many reasons: to see the power of prayer, to see how persecution purifies the church, to see the gospel advancing. But I really have a sense that the greatest lesson of this chapter, at least the thing that kept jumping out at me as I read and re-read this passage, is the sovereignty of God: how God is totally in control and his purposes are unstoppable! How nobody and nothing can stand in his way!

One guy tries though! His name is Herod. We're introduced to him in verse 1. This is the grandson of Herod the Great: that's the Herod who we see at time of Jesus birth! And he's crazy. He's power-mad! Remember he orders that all

firstborn sons be put to death in an attempt to kill Jesus, for no other reason than his own fear of being superseded. In fact he even killed some of his own sons, because he was scared that they would conspire against him and try taking his throne. Apparently the saying at the time was that it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons! What a guy! And his grandson, Herod Agrippa, takes right after him. He's also desperate for attention, eager to be worshipped by the people, and desires political power. Now his mum happens to be Jewish, which makes him half Jewish and he keeps the Jewish customs, partly because of his Jewishness, and partly to keep the favour of the Jews in Jerusalem. Remember, he's desperate for them to like him. So desperate in fact that he begins to use his authority to persecute the Christians in Jerusalem. He just wants to do whatever he can to stay popular and so he has James beheaded! James is the first of Jesus' 12 disciples to be martyred. And when he sees the positive reaction he gets from the Jews after killing James, he thinks 'man, these guys love it when I attack Christians, I know, I'll take out Peter, the "big Christian leader," in front of all of them right here in the middle of the Passover celebration. Then they'll think I'm the man!' So he has Peter put in prison to await execution.

But Herod's master plan gets overturned, because although he thinks he's in charge, actually God is! The very night, verse 6 tells us, that Peter is due to be executed God shows up – it's prison break time! Just picture the scene: Peter is handcuffed to two guards one on each side of him! And somehow he's fast asleep –I don't know about you, but I think if I knew I was going to be executed the following day, I wouldn't be sleeping like baby, especially tied to two big guards, but Peter is. In fact he's so deep in sleep that when the bright white light of an angel bursts into his dark cell, Peter doesn't even flinch! So the angel has to give him a kick! "Get up Peter!" (Peter all groggy!) "Get dressed. Put your shoes on." "Grab your coat, we're gonna break out of here! And off he goes, past the first guard, past the second, and then the prison gate starts opening and they walk off into the night…and then Peter wakes up and realizes it's all a dream…Nope! It's real! He's been sleep walking! I had to laugh as I read this passage because I am a crazy sleeper! Some of you know some of my stories because Nix loves to tell them. Some of them I wont let her share with anyone, coz they're too embarrassing! But I am such a heavy sleeper, that I really sympathize with Peter! He's been woken up in the middle of the night and he's delirious! I know this feeling! It happens often! *(Most recent France episode).*

So back to Peter in a minute, but what about Herod and his vicious little production? Sorry Herod, not gonna happen! You've gotta see the funny side: he knows Peter has escaped Prison before, so he's taken no chances, he's covered all bases: got Peter in a high security facility, strapped to two burley men, with more men watching the cell and guards everywhere, not to mention a big iron gate and

cctv in every corner! Peter's not going anywhere! Or so Herod thinks! But God just sends an angel and takes care of it. It's good to know God's on your side right? Verse 18 tells us Herod's reaction: the biggest understatement in the bible!! The jails in an uproar! "Where's Peter? What's happened to Peter?" Herod's fuming! I can just imagine him foaming at the mouth! Nobody can answer him. They're as shocked as he is! What an embarrassment! So what's he do? He tries to take control again and regain some dignity by ordering the prison guards to be killed and then off he goes on holiday, down to the beach at Caesarea! What a guy.

Reminds me of Job 5:12: God frustrates the plans of schemers so the work of their hands will not succeed. That's exactly what he's just done! But before we get too carried away, and return to Peter who has just been rescued, some of you might be thinking 'what about James?' These guys have both faithfully followed Jesus for years, yet one gets a miracle and the other one becomes a martyr. If God can send an angel to rescue Peter in prison, surely he could have stopped that sword from removing James head? This presents us with a difficult question, but one which we can't avoid. The question is about how God works in our lives! Ever found yourself asking similar questions? 'Why are they healthy, and I'm not? Why did God give them that gift and not me? Why do they suffer so much and I don't? How do we answer these questions?

3 things to remember…

1) **God is in control.** Isaiah tells us that God holds the universe in the palm of his hand. When God is silent and when God is performing a miracle, in both cases, He is still completely in control. He is working. We are told that he is working everything together for our good and for his glory. That doesn't mean everything is good. James being beheaded is not good. But God specializes in bringing good out of bad! He takes every piece of your life and redeems it. He has a master plan, whether it seems that way or not right now, we have to stand on the truth that God is in control and he has our best interests at heart.

2) **We won't get all our questions answered.** For some reason, I always feel that if God is in control, he should let me in on his plan – at least let me know what he's doing so I can understand his big purpose! But he's not answerable to me or any other human! He just wants me to let him be God and to trust him! But you know, having answers doesn't necessarily make what we go through any easier anyway. If Nix were to die tonight in her sleep, finding out why it happened wouldn't make it any easier for me to deal with. We have to learn to be content despite not knowing everything. Job found this lesson out. He wanted God to give him answers.

He wanted to know why God had taken his children, his home, his health, but God didn't answer him. Even if he had, it wouldn't have made it any easier for Job. Rather, God shows Job how great he is, his wisdom, his power, and his purpose in creation. And Job responds in worship. That should be our response. Why didn't God rescue James? I don't know. Why wasn't Peter beheaded instead? I don't know. Why didn't God slay Herod sooner? I don't know. Some people would try to explain God's actions… 'well God allowed James to be killed because of the witness it would be…faith is built on martyrdom' etc., but while that may be partly true, it's not the complete picture! And so, I would say we should be careful when we try to explain God. I've heard some terrible explanations for God's actions. We don't need to defend him. Let's admit, we won't always understand.

3) **God really wants us to trust him.** Last week, I was sat by the Lake and my daily reading was Psalm 139. It's a well-known Psalm where David prays 'Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' And so as I sat there and stared at the mountains I asked God, I said 'Lord point out in me right now what it is that offends you.' And I'm thinking he's gonna say, well it's your bad attitude towards that person, or I'm offended at how you lost your temper last week or what you watched on TV the other day…but you know what he said? He said "Mark, it offends me that you don't fully trust me. You pray and ask me for things but then you carry on worrying about whether I'll do it. It's like when you ask someone to do something for you but then you go ahead and do it anyway coz you're worried they wont do it as well as you or simply might not do it at all! And God said I'm upset that you don't feel I'm trustworthy enough for you to leave things with me. And as God was speaking to me I began to realize that because I don't fully understand exactly what God's doing in my life, I have begun in some ways to fear what he might allow. As if he might hurt me or forget me or do it wrong! But trusting God means trusting in his character. And God said 'Mark it really upsets me that you don't trust me. I love you and I have perfect plans for you and you need to trust me. I began to think through the various events in my life and realize that God has never let me down. He's been faithful in all of it. Sure people have let me down. I've let other people down, there's been some confusing stuff too, and I've been disoriented at times, but God has been faithful through it all. And he absolutely deserves every bit of my trust and every ounce of yours. Listen guys, he really wants us to trust him.

And so, to get back to the story, Herod's gone to the beach *(pic at cesearea).* In the meantime, Peter has arrived at the house where all the believers are praying for him. Verse 5 says that they'd gathered to pray earnestly for him – James has been beheaded, Peter's due to be killed, it's a crisis that's affecting the whole church and so they're pleading with God to do something. And lo and behold, he does, but guess what? They don't believe it, they're praying for a miracle, and when they get one, they refuse to believe it! Poor Rhoda, no one believes her! Poor Peter, stood out at the gate – the irony – the prison gate opens for him, but the garden gate doesn't! "Guys, Peter's at the door…seriously it's him!" "Yeah sure Rhoda, you're crazy, there's no way!" I find myself quite comforted (and amused) by the little faith of these Christians. Even while they prayed for Peter, they found it hard to believe God actually answered their prayer. It reminds me of what Jesus said: that 'if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. Little faith can accomplish great things if it is placed in the great God. As one person said 'kneeling before the God of the Universe is the most powerful position you will ever find yourself in.'

And so the story concludes with Herod's death. Luke explains that he's walked out into the amphitheatre there in Caesarea, all dressed up in silver and delivered a powerful speech to the people of Tyre and Sidon and they start to worship him in response, which is just what he wants. "The voice of God! The voice of God!" they shout. But God's had enough of Herod's arrogance and sends an angel to strike him down. Herod had given God no credit for anything. As one preacher said 'Herod… glorious on the outside, rotting on the inside!' He's struck down for putting himself in God's place. Just like God says in Isaiah 42:8: I will not give my glory to anyone else, nor share my praise,' Herod has gone too far and God takes him out.

And so we see that God remains in control. Herod thought he was in control, he wanted to be in control, but God frustrated Herod's plans in every way. First, he took his prize prisoner right from underneath his nose, then he struck him with worms and killed him and finally, God turned the tables entirely on all that Herod was trying to do — he made the Word of God grow and multiply. Verse 24: "But the word of God increased and multiplied." He made Jesus' reputation spread, not Herod's. He glorified his son. And that's the lesson for us this morning. That God is absolutely in control. No one can stop him. No one can thwart his purposes. He is God and he can do what he wants but he loves and protects his people. We might not always understand why he does what he does but he asks to trust him. He's worthy of our trust Amen?