

THE MESSAGE**April 18, 2010****Acts 5:12, 17-32****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller*****A Passion***

Several years ago, a single lightning bolt sparked a wildfire in the Catalina Mountains north of Tucson, Arizona. The firefighters could not control the blaze. It was constantly fanned by desert winds at 40 miles per hour. By the time the fire burned itself out, more than 70,000 acres were scorched with dozens of homes and businesses lost.

2000 years ago, God sent a lightning bolt to earth in the person of Jesus, and the wind of the Holy Spirit fanned the flames of a God movement to redeem the world. That movement continues to spread as more and more people live the faith by following Jesus.

The religious leaders thought they had put the fire out when they crucified Jesus and sealed him in a tomb, but they were profoundly mistaken. After three days Jesus rose from the dead, and by Pentecost the fire of God's redemptive movement had become a wild fire that spread out from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Peter and the other apostles were swept up in that movement. They were consumed with a passion to tell others the good news that had changed their lives. They wanted others to know - not just about God - but to experience God's love in their lives through Jesus. Today we continue our study of the book of Acts chapter 5 (*Read Acts 5:12, 17-32*).

Let me set the stage. In chapter 3, Peter preached a powerful sermon – but the religious leaders were not too happy about what he was saying about Jesus and how they were responsible for his death. (*Which by the way they knew they were responsible for Jesus' death but didn't like being accused of it.*) So they tried to silence Peter as they had tried to silence Jesus. The religious leaders (Let's call them the traditionalists.) had Peter and the other disciples arrested and told them to stop telling people about Jesus. They were released and told to keep quiet about Jesus. Yeah right!

Keeping quiet was not an option for Peter and the other disciples. They continued to proclaim the good news of Jesus as the Leader and Savior of the world, and more and more people caught the fire, more and more people were caught-up in the grace of God and this movement continued to spread.

In our reading today we find those same religious leaders trying to put out the fire a second time. They arrested Peter and the apostles and threw them into prison. You'd think that by now the religious elite -- the ones who wanted to preserve their religious way of life -- would have figured out that if the tomb couldn't hold Jesus, a jail cell wouldn't be able to hold his followers. Apparently they still didn't understand just how much fire they were playing with.

Peter and the apostles were miraculously released from prison, and look what they did. They went right back to the scene of the crime, back to the temple and began to preach about Jesus – sharing the good news about Jesus and the new life he offers through repentance and forgiveness of sins.

Think about that. What if you were arrested for your faith and thrown into prison. Then suddenly found yourself set free by an angel of the Lord, what would you do? Go back to doing what put you in prison in the first place. I'd probably head right out of town as fast as I could complaining to every one how I was mistreated by the religious elite.

But not Peter and the apostles, they were so passionate, so driven by their mission, so on fire for this redemptive movement of God, they couldn't remain silent, even when faced by the those who had the power and authority to have Peter and the apostles stoned to death.

Did you catch what Peter and the apostles said? "We must obey God rather than any human authority." WOW!!!!!! Now that's living the faith. They wanted more and more people to experience the faith.

Passion. That's what drove Peter and the apostles.

Passion. Fanned by the wind of Holy Spirit.

Passion. If you look up the word *passion* in the dictionary, you'll find definitions like - *strong emotion, fire, fervor, enthusiasm, zeal*. Oddly enough: the word *passion* is derived from a Latin word that means *suffering*. How appropriate for those of us who are passionate disciples of Jesus. Our passion is fueled by Jesus' suffering on the cross and fanned by the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Now... We live in gratitude (I hope...) for all of God's blessings in our lives. (We do, don't we?) We are truly blessed just look around. Indeed... we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others. Our passion then, our faith is fueled by what God has done for us in Christ Jesus – his passion, his suffering, his death, his resurrection on our behalf.

Think about this for just a moment. Jesus died the death that we as sinners deserve. And yet by faith – Jesus' faith – we have been set free from the prison of sin and death and the devil. We are forgiven to live by faith and not by fear.

Our love for God, our passion to live for Jesus grows like a wild fire as we become more and more open to the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and in our churches. Jesus is our model for living and for giving, for loving one another and for loving our neighbors.

I love the equation I saw on a bumper sticker, 4givenss = 3nails + 1cross. The cross drives our passion to live the faith and to help others live the faith too.

Peter and those early disciples had a passion to tell more and more people about Jesus and the life he offers and it got them arrested and put in jail. That probably wouldn't happen to us here in Myerstown, PA. But let me ask you this: If being a Christian today were a crime would there be enough evidence to convict you?

It begins with our passion. What are you passionate about – preserving the past or preparing for the future? Are you passionate about what God is doing in your life and in the life of this church?

News flash -- it is so easy for us to become like the high priest and the Sadducees and the council in our reading -- wanting to keep a lid on every one and every thing that happens in this place.

It is so easy to become jealous and resentful of the good things we see God doing through a different worship style, or a different way of growing through small groups instead of Sunday school, or the wonderful fellowship we now offer with a cup of coffee and a cookie, or through ministry teams instead of committees.

Folks there is no need for competition here at Friedens. God is doing a new thing in this place. Sometimes we are tempted to stop the God's movement that is happening in this place and when we do we need to repent and seek God's forgiveness...

- Who here doesn't need to repent because of something you did or didn't do?
- How many of you here today don't need God's forgiveness?

We all do! Don't we? Present company included.

One of the joys for me in worship is serving you Holy Communion. There is something powerful about giving you a piece of bread and say, "This is the body of Christ given for you." It's implied that you receive this spiritual food of bread and wine the body and blood of Christ Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.

Each one of us walked in here this morning a sinner of our own making and we will walk out of here as forgiven sinners of God's making to go and share the good news by forgiving others. Disciples of Jesus forgive... or they aren't disciples of Jesus.

So who do you need to forgive? Maybe it's a family member, a friend, a church member, a neighbor, or maybe it's your pastor, or maybe it's God. Who do you need to forgive?

The devil would love it if you didn't forgive. But Jesus gives us the power through the Holy Spirit to be passionate about our relationships and to give to one another what he makes possible forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is the ultimate sign of love. Forgiveness is the ultimate sign of a healthy relationship. Forgiveness is the ultimate gift of life we can give to someone.

When it comes to faith what are you passionate about? About being right or about being in a right relationship with God and the people around you?

2000 years ago God sent a lightning bolt to earth in the person of Jesus, and the wind of the Holy Spirit fanned the flames of a God movement to redeem the world. That movement continues to spread as more and more people live the faith by following Jesus.

Is your passion to try and stop that God movement or to help spread it? The choice is yours – choose wisely. Amen.