**Sermon for September 22nd 2024 Acts 4, selected verses “The Usual Suspects”**

**THE FIRST READING** The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand. The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest’s family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: “By what power or what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is “‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

**THE SECOND READING** When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Welcome! Welcome back to our little sermon series from the Book of Acts, ***All You Need to Know about Christianity, a Drama in Eight Acts.*** Today is the third act, as it were, and normal expectation would be that we would move on to the *third* chapterof the magnificent book of Acts. But you have met me; normal does not really apply, so this *third* act comes from the *fourth* chapter of our new favorite scriptural book. And today I promote a theory: that this odd, uncomfortable mixture of religion and politics that is currently vexing our country is nothing new at all, and that the same human types, the usual suspects, were troubling before Jesus walked the earth, and are still a pain in the tookus to this very day. Let’s meet the lineup from today’s reading, and then see how those roles are still in play two thousand years later.

*The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.* We meet three of the usual suspects right away – the priests, the temple guards, and the Sadducees. Actually, there were three principle priestly groups within Judaism at this time, but only two are represented here in Jerusalem, because the third group, the Essenes, were ascetic desert dwellers who would not pollute themselves with the way-too-worldly others, the Pharisees and, even worse, the Sadducees. In this reading, when it just says ‘priests’, we can safely read Pharisees, because when St. Luke wants to include the Sadducees, he calls them out by name. I will describe them in the order presented…so first, the Pharisees.

If you have ever heard or read *any* part of the Gospels, and I know you have, c’mon, you know that Jesus and the sect known as the Pharisees were none too fond of one another. The Pharisees were the keepers of the Law, the enforcers of the purity requirements, and the largest of the three priestly groupings. Generally, they were in charge, in Jerusalem and throughout Judea, yet always continually grappling for power with the soon-to-be-described Sadducees. For a bit of historical perspective, St. Paul was a Pharisee by training, and a violent persecutor of the early Church before his conversion. The historian Josephus, to whom we owe the lion’s share of what we know about things during Jesus’ lifetime, was also a Pharisee. They were not ordinarily bad men – and they were, after all, all men – but power messes with peoples heads and priorities. So when this unaffiliated rabbi from Nazareth, of all places, has the audacity to fulfill, amend, even improve the Law, they bristle big time. When their precious purity rules are dismissed by Jesus and his followers as largely irrelevant, their blood pressure escalates. So, they are the seething core of this group, the Sanhedrin, who march right out into the street to shut down the rabble-rousing preaching of Peter and John.

A few words about the Sanhedrin…this is a term we throw around as if everybody knows what it means, and that just isn’t the case. In the Gospels and the Book of Acts, when the Sanhedrin is mentioned, it means the official one in Jerusalem, two high priests and sixty-nine other really religious fellows for a total of seventy-one. They were much more than a priestly gathering; their political clout in the Roman-occupied lands was enormous, because they were, in essence, the Supreme Court for all of Judaism, all over the globe. And just like our court system, there were smaller Sanhedrin-type ‘courts’ in the major cities of the diaspora, but their authority was limited. The Jerusalem Sanhedrin was the top of the food chain, and if you were called before *them*, things were gonna get serious.

So we’ve learned a bit about the Pharisees…the next fellows mentioned are the Temple guards. They came along for the usual reason, to be the muscle if Peter and John would not come along quietly. Temple guards were exposed to religious Judaism every day, but were likewise awash in Roman political maneuvering every day too, so they were a conflicted lot. I suspect, like most guards throughout history, they were there more for the paycheck than for the polity. They kept some measure of order in the Temple precincts, shutting down the Zealots before the Romans could swoop down and crucify them, and pacifying the hedonistic Romans when they inserted themselves into the religious life of the Jews. Not an easy job, but a useful and necessary one, back then, at least.

Finally, we come to the Sadducees, a priestly brotherhood who no longer exist. Whereas the Pharisees evolved into the foundation of rabbinic practice and Jewishness as we now experience it, the Sadducees faded into history, sort of. These men were the wealthy, aristocratic, more worldly Jewish guys, and the main plank in their platform was that this life is all you’re gonna get. No afterlife, no reward in the great beyond, so live every day as fully as you can! Kind of the polar opposite of the Essenes, the Sadducees filled their homes with luxury items, ate rich foods despite what the Torah said, and were not shy about dressing well. They embraced the Hellenistic social agenda and even warmed a bit to the Romans; they played the game to get along, right? *Their* beef with Peter and John and their claims about Jesus is pretty overt: the apostles were preaching the resurrection of the dead, eternal life to come, better things down the road. Blasphemy! And thus the Sadducees joined the arresting party who made big strides into the courtyard where Peter and John were changing lives and hearts.

The apostles spent the night in jail, and then: *The next day the rulers, the elders, and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem.*These are more generic terms, less religious and more political, but be sure there were a large contingent of Pharisees in the mix. Specifically, *Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest’s family.* This historic inclusion is helpful if we know the players. Annas was actually kind of a High Priest Emeritus at this time, having been succeeded by Caiaphas, Rome’s appointee following the Jesus disaster under Annas’ leadership. They were Pharisees, but Alexander is mentioned, and he was the big cheese among the Sadducees. Bottom line, the Sanhedrin was not messing around; they wanted this Jesus nonsense to stop, because it conflicted with both their religious understandings and their political leanings.

We need to fast-forward into our own times now, and learn to recognize these ‘types’, for they are still the main pot-stirrers in the complex relations between religion and politics. Let’s talk about them in reverse order, just for fun: we will start with modern Sadducees. Worldly, wealthy, privileged; in our society these would be Episcopalians, old money Roman Catholics, old American aristocracy that survived the Civil War with their riches and lands intact. Modern Sadducees, ironically, would likely include atheists, more than comfortable with the idea that there is nothing behind the curtain after we die. And just like the original Sadducees were detrimental to Jesus’ ministry, so are their ideological descendants. These are the loudest voices about separation of church and state from the state side of the aisle. These are the folks always bringing up tax law and critiquing the privileged status of the tax-exempt church. But most of all, these are the self-absorbed, hedonistic, pleasure- seeking citizens who feel that Jesus’ teachings just cramp their style. And guardedly, it is fair and needful to mention that capitalism and Sadducees go hand in hand. Realizing the egalitarian goals and teaching of our Lord is absolutely more complicated by our modern-day Sadducees.

And what about the Temple guards? These are the loudest, the more violent, the quickest to shut down dissent and promote uniformity. Our modern guards are mostly self-hired and feel the need to defend either the Church or the State from their perceived and chosen enemies. And like the originals, these men and women are often religious, but not so much that the actual teachings of Jesus would be evident in their lives! Militia members? Temple guards. Ku Klux Klansmen? Temple guards. Extremists in the Woke movement, the Me Too movement, the MAGA movement, all of them, temple guards. Self-appointed muscle defending causes beyond their understanding, and worst of all, making like miserable for the very people that Jesus died to redeem.

Finally, the Pharisees. These modern mayhem-makers are the easiest to spot; defenders of purity and law and order, but not usually rigorously applying those to their own lives. They enforce social and religious boundaries that no one asked them to enforce, and draw the boundaries pretty much where they want, or where the Sadducees tell them to draw them. You probably remember Anita Bryant, one of the early self-appointed anti-gay organizers. She was active in the late 70’s and early 80’s, and caused a lot of pain. You may remember the Rev. Fred Phelps, infamous pastor of the Westboro Primitive Baptist Church. He left this earth in 2014, and not a moment too soon. A divisive and controversial figure, he gained national attention for his [homophobic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homophobia) views and protests near the [funerals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funeral) of gay people, [AIDS](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AIDS) victims, military veterans, and disaster victims who he believed were killed as a result of God punishing the U.S. for having "bankrupt values" and tolerating homosexuality. His church has been described by the [Southern Poverty Law Center](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Poverty_Law_Center) as "arguably the most obnoxious and rabid [hate group](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hate_group) in America". Our modern-day Pharisees are just like Jesus insultingly described *his own Pharisees* in the Gospel of Matthew: *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.* I said earlier that most of the bible-era Pharisees were good men, well-meaning men, but deluded and corrupted men. Our modern rule-minders and purity enforcers are just the same, and continue to erect needless roadblocks between the Holy Spirit and God’s beloved creation.

I must close, but please indulge this final word: you *absolutely* know some Sadducees, some Temple guards, and some Pharisees. It is even possible that you have some of these corrupted tendencies yourself; I know I sometimes do. The love of power may yet be the undoing of Western society, and all that the Church has haltingly labored to build over the centuries. Our recourse is to always, always, always remember that Jesus didn’t preach the love of power; he preached exactly the opposite, the power of Love. And we do believe that Love will ultimately triumph; hopefully, we can participate in that triumph through our choices and our faithfulness. We *know* the usual suspects, friends: let’s not get caught in *that* line-up, shall we? Amen.