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Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke
Bible passage or verse: Acts 25:23-26:32
Title of sermon: **Here I Stand**
Series: Don't Settle for Normal - #11

Acts 25:23-26:32 - NIV:

25 23 The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. **24** Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. **25** I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. **26** But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. **27** For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him."

26 1 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: **2** "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, **3** and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. **4** "The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. **5** They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. **6** And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. **7** This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. **8** Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? **9** "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. **10** And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. **11** Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities. **12** "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. **13** About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. **14** We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, [a] 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' **15** "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," the Lord replied. **16** "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. **17** I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them **18** to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' **19** "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. **20** First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. **21** That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. **22** But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— **23** that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles." **24** At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." **25** "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and

reasonable. **26** The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. **27** King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." **28** Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" **29** Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." **30** The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. **31** After they left the room, they began saying to one another, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." **32** Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Today's our last day in this series, and -- it's been a fun time, but -- I'm gonna preach this message, and then I'm gonna take a couple of weeks, and Pastor Jeff's gonna come, and he's gonna bring the word of God. And if you miss it, frankly, the rest of your Christian life is going to be insufficient. So. You don't want to miss those. He's gonna bring such a good word, so I'm looking forward to it. So -- I'm just going to recalibrate a little bit, rest a little bit. I'll be around, and we're still working on some things, but -- I need to take a break.

So, for three weeks we looked at where we have emotions that we don't know what to do with, and we learned to complain rightly to God. And then we had convictions that God gave to us, and they're convictions that, if I believe them, they can enable me to get through this season. Because I believe, like Esther, I'm called for this day. I believe like Joseph that God can do anything. He can take the worst motives in the world and turn them around for His good. And I believe that. I believe that He can take a 23-year-old person who maybe is not mentally stable and does this damage,¹ and somehow, I have absolutely every conviction that God is going to turn this thing to His good. And then we looked at these weeks together for this assignment that God has given to us, and it's the assignment of forgiveness. And today, it's an assignment that God has given to us that I find easy to maybe walk away from -- not intentionally, but because of crisis. Crisis has a way of reorienting your life. It can grab your attention, and it just absolutely centers you on something. Years ago when the doctor told us that our daughter was going to be born, and she had a hole in her heart, and then my wife got preeclampsia and her blood pressure went to the point of stroke, and -- I remember calling the office, and saying to them, "Cancel every appointment I have for December. I'm not available." And as a pastor, it was the best December I've ever had in my life! Sorry -- but it does -- crisis does that. It grabs you and it reorients you. But one of the dangers that I have felt, and I think maybe you can identify with, is sometimes you get so obsessed, taken, maybe even overwhelmed by the pandemic or the crisis, that you find that it's reorienting your priorities -- and maybe even to a level, your values.

So, I turned to this passage, and there's a reason I come to this passage in Acts chapters 25 and 26. Because it is a point in the Apostle Paul's life where he is in crisis. He is speaking before Agrippa and he's pleading his case for his life. This is not a difficult season -- this is life and death. And yet his message convicts me, and it reminds me that it doesn't matter what the circumstance is, it's always an opportunity to be obedient to my calling. What is our calling? Paul reminds us in this text that God has commissioned us to share the good news. And it doesn't matter what the circumstance, it doesn't matter how difficult it is, it doesn't matter how much emotional weight it is, it doesn't matter what issue rises to the top -- be it some conspiracy that somebody's thinking of, or a racial tension that is real and needs to be addressed -- but even in that, as Paul is pleading for his life, he says to Agrippa, "I'm here for a purpose." When Paul starts talking to Agrippa, he's given -- it's a court

¹Referring to 8/11/20 vandalization of First Baptist Church by a 23-year-old man.

hearing -- Agrippa says to Paul, chapter 26, verse one: "You have permission to speak for yourself." Literally, *in your defense*. Paul waves with his hands, and determines, or declares to King Agrippa, "I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense." He's literally pleading for his life, and he says, "I just want to tell you -- I really appreciate the opportunity that I have to be here today, to defend myself." And then he begins to tell the story. What story? It's the story of his conversion.

People knew who Paul was. It would be like in the 1990s, somebody asking, "Do you know who Michael Jordan is?" Everyone, even a person who didn't give a rip about basketball, you knew who Michael Jordan was. They know who Paul is, and they know what he did. They know of his legend and his reputation. He persecuted Christians. He oversaw their death, and he oversaw their imprisonment. And he was telling Agrippa, "One day, as I was making my way to Damascus, I had an encounter. The light was brighter than anything I'd ever seen. It blinded me, and I had a voice." Who's he appealing to? He's appealing to Agrippa. Who is he? He comes in a long lineage of individuals who are as cruel as you could imagine. Herod the Great? Remember the story? He declared that all children two and under be killed, because he wanted to squelch the story that a messiah might be born. His son was the individual that, when he got offended by John the Baptist in his call to repentance, had John beheaded. It was his son -- so, the grandson of Herod the Great -- who heard of the work of James, son of Zebedee, and had him killed. And it's now his son, Herod Agrippa, who Paul is appealing to. It's not a good choice for a judge. And he tells him the story of the day that he met Jesus for the first time. And on that day, the voice of the Lord comes to Paul and says, "Paul -- why do you persecute me? Why are you kicking against the goads? Why --" A goad is a long stick that was about the size of a pool cue, and it was pointed on the end, and if you've a rancher you've probably used something like this. It's a prod that you move cattle along. You're not hurting them, you've just kind of making it uncomfortable for the cow to remain in the same position that it is. And so, you prod it along. And the Lord was saying to Paul, "Why are you kicking against these pointed sticks? Paul, there's no point in it!" It'd be like you, if you've ever driven into one of those car rental places where you drive over the spikes and they say, "DO NOT REVERSE," because it'll just shred your tires. It would be like God saying to you, "Why are you backing into the spikes? It doesn't benefit you."

Paul told about that, and he told about his encounter with Christ. But that's really not what takes up the vast majority of this speech. It's not his salvation. It's his commissioning. And in the midst of all of the difficulty, and his life is on the line, I marvel at the fact that Paul reminds us -- it doesn't matter the context, God has commissioned us to share the good news. It doesn't matter how difficult the season is that you live in your life, and how much difficulty it is for your family situation, for your vocation at work, how difficult school is -- it is going to be unbelievably challenging for our teachers. School is going to be hard for our families. Some businesses are struggling to hang on, and others are buried under their success. And there's issues galore, and there's little agreement, and the whole nation is polarized. And Paul would tell you, and Jesus would tell you -- "I've commissioned you -- for now." It's a good time to share the gospel. And, my friend, God expects you and I to be obedient. He does. Paul says in verse 19, "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. I honored it. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also" -- and this is what he preached -- "I preached that they should repent, I preached that they should turn to God, and I preached that they should prove through repentance and good deeds their salvation."

I have absolutely no disagreement with a person who says that we are saved by faith. I have absolutely no disagreement the person who says, "For it is by grace through faith that we are saved."

I also have no disagreement with the Apostle Paul, that when the Holy Spirit comes into your life and gives you a new heart, and transforms you, and breathes the life of the Spirit into you, that it is inconceivable to Heaven, to the Holy Spirit, to Jesus Christ who died on a cross for you, and to the Father who initiated the calling of your life to come to Him -- it's inconceivable that the Holy Spirit will take up residence in your life, transform you, give you a new heart, and leave you the same person for the rest of your life. My friends, that's inconceivable. And that's why Paul says, "I not only believe in obedience, I preach obedience." The Christian mission includes both the divine calling of God and human activity. It takes you. God has chosen not to save people apart from you proclaiming the gospel. I don't know why He did that! I wouldn't have trusted me! If I was God, I'd look at Mark and say, "Ha! He has some good days, he has some really bad days. Are you kidding me? I'm gonna take this salvation thing completely in my own hands." I wouldn't trust me! But He did! And He trusted you. He has put together the divine initiative of the Holy Spirit, John 16, that convicts people of their sin and draws them to himself. And He has said, "How can they ever believe apart from the messenger who preaches the gospel." We have a responsibility to obey. We do. We have an absolute responsibility in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of craziness, in the midst of political -- just chaos -- that's the time where God says to His church, "This is your moment." This is our moment. And a person's life is never going to be helped by a nice therapeutic anecdote. It's not. It's only going to be transformed when they hear the message of God who came to earth, who died on a cross, who is willing to forgive my sins, and willing to impart to me the power and the life and the renewal of the Holy Spirit -- that's the only way that they're going to change. And it takes us risking even their dislike of us so that they might be saved.

There was an article written in GQ. It's not my normal reading, but I read this one. It's an article written by Taffy Brodesser-Akner. And it's an article she's writing about a pastor in New York -- his name is Carl Lentz, he's one of the pastors for Hillsong. And I want to read her thoughts. I found them fascinating. "And here I have to say, out loud, how much I really like Carl. I like him even though he is ideologically opposed to everything that is important to me." Imagine that. Here's a woman, a non-practicing Jew. She's not a Christian, she's not even a practicing Jew. She happens to be Jew by birth. And she says of Carl, a pastor in New York: "Everything about his life ideologically is opposed to everything that I believe. And yet, he's so worried for my soul. And this should annoy me, but instead, it actually touches me. Because maybe I'm worried about my soul also, and Carl wants so badly for me to enjoy Heaven with him. How can I fault someone who is more sincere about this one thing than I have ever been about anything in all of my life?" What a message.

You see, Carl's obedient. He's obedient even though she dislikes him. Even though she's troubled by him. Even though "...ideologically," she says, "everything that Carl believes I'm opposed to." But Taffy was touched. Why? Because there was a man who believed he had an assignment by God. And it didn't matter that she was a powerful writer, it didn't matter that she was a person who hid behind her Jewishness -- it didn't matter. Her soul mattered to him. And God expects you and me to be that obedient. And if I'm going to be obedient, I have to understand that the good news must be shared. It has to be shared. Verse 24, Paul is speaking. Festus interrupts Paul. Paul's talking to Agrippa, and Festus is there. And he says, "Paul, you're out of your mind. Your great learning is driving you insane." "I'm not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I'm saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. In fact, I'm convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner, not done in secret." Paul turns to Agrippa. And he says, "King Agrippa, do you believe in the prophets? I know you do. I know you know their message. I know you've listened to them." And Agrippa speaks back to Paul, and he says to him, "Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul replies, "Short time or long -- I pray to God that not only you but everyone who

is listening today would be like I am except for these chains." His answer is, "Yes. I believe in even a short time you can trust God." Why? "Because I've shared the gospel." Paul's the one who wrote in Romans one, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God, the one who created the heavens and the earth with the spoken word, the one who parted the Red Sea, the one who called down fire for Elijah. The one who has raised the dead. That one! I believe, and I'm not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God unto salvation, first to the Jew and also to the Greek. Agrippa, I'm not at all afraid to admit to you -- yes, I'm here to persuade that you would follow Christ." But evangelism, though it may require good deeds to win a hearing, it requires a verbal witness.

I love the book, and I love the man -- Joe Aldrich. He was an incredible in the body of Christ. He used to be the president up at Multnomah. He's now in the presence of Christ. And he wrote a book years ago, called *Friendship Evangelism*. Marvelous book. It was marvelous because Joe began to introduce to the body of Christ the idea of Acts two, good deeds create good favor, which gives us the opportunity to share the good news. And he was a marvelous instructor, phenomenal theologian, a great evangelist. But he always coupled the good deeds with the good news. And Joe would talk about his barber that he led to Christ, he would talk about the guy who pumped his gas that he led to Christ, and he would often serve them and love them, but he understood -- you have to share the gospel. And what I'm fearful of is that at times we can be long on friendship and short on evangelism. And we can be friends over and over and over again, and we might even have fallen trap to the idea that I'm so desperate to have them like me and accept me that I don't want to share the gospel, because then our relationship might be awkward. But here's the danger. The danger is, if you never share the gospel, you actually might be communicating a message, and here's your message. "You can become like me, and you can become a Christian, if you simply do good things." Because if they've never heard the gospel from you, what are they going to conclude? They're going to conclude that the way to become like you is simply to do the things that you do. And they don't understand the repentance, they don't understand turning away from evil and turning to God. They don't understand the gospel. In every circumstance, there's an opportunity to share the transforming message of the gospel, but my friends, it must be shared. The good news, if it's not shared, will never transform a life.

Jermaine Wilson. His life changed. He was raised in Leavenworth, Kansas. At 15, he was a drug addict. At 21, he was incarcerated in prison. It was in prison that somebody shared the gospel with him and shared the message of Jesus Christ. It changed his life. He became a believer. And when he got out of prison, he went to the high school, the very high school he got kicked out of. And he told the principal, "When you have a kid at risk, I want you to call me, because I wanna work with that kid. I have a job for that kid." Because he began to work with local businesses, and he helped build the bridge for those coming out of incarceration, because they have a hard time getting jobs. And he built the bridge. And he began to create this kind of industry and this business where he would work with employers who would hire people out of prison, and then even began to work with the very high school that he got kicked out of. Finally, somebody came to him and said, "Mr. Wilson, you have a significant impact on our community. I think you ought to run for mayor." And he did. And he won. And at his acceptance speech, he said many things, but this is in part what he said. "I thank God for prison, because it was in prison that I met Jesus Christ. And if I wouldn't have gone to prison, I probably would've been dead. I surely wouldn't be here as your mayor. I will forever be thankful that it was in prison that somebody shared the message of Jesus Christ. And He's changed my life." 31-year-old Jermaine Wilson. He grew up in Leavenworth, he got kicked out of the high schools of Leavenworth, and now he's their mayor. Why? Because somebody in prison shared the gospel.

Nate Saint was murdered by the Waodani of South America. Mincaye was the individual who took his life. Though Nate was there to share the gospel with the Waodani, it would be the Waodani that would take his life. When asked why he didn't take a gun, he made the statement, "If I die, I'm in Heaven. If I shoot them and they die, they're in Hell. I will not shoot them." They took his life. And Rachel, related to Nate, when the dust had all settled, made her way into the Waodani, and she lived with them. Imagine the forgiveness and the love of a person to go and to have a conversation with the very person who took one of your relatives. One day Rachel was having a conversation with Mincaye and she was talking to them about the power of God, and the ability of God to forgive, and Mincaye asked her, he said, "You said that he could clean somebody's heart. My heart been very, very dark. Can He clean even my heart?" And Rachel said, being very strong, "Mincaye, God can even clean your heart." And he went home that night. The next day, he comes, and he knocks on her door. And he says, "Star, what you have said is true. Speaking to God last night, He's cleaned my heart. It's now wantamo (ph) -- It's clear." Mincaye has traveled with Nate's son, Steve Saint, all over the world. And he's told the story of the reconciliation of a man who took Steve's father's life. Why? Because there was a woman who sat in a little hut and shared the gospel.

My friends, if a prisoner can share the gospel to a delinquent who becomes a mayor, and if Rachel can share the gospel with the murderer of her brother, you and I should never be dissuaded by a governor who does not know Jesus. We should never be so distracted by the racial tension, or the riots, or individuals who are angry and wounded -- you and I have a job to do. And it's only by God's grace that we will do it. And maybe even we'll get the opportunity to share the gospel with a 23-year-old troubled man who caused probably \$100,000 worth of damage, and imagine with me the day that he would stand on this stage and tell you how thankful he was that he damaged a church that would forgive him. Let's dream of that. And until then, find somebody to share the gospel with. That's what God has given to us as an assignment.

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