

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Signs and Wonders: Acts 3 and 4

Sunday, June 7, 2020 Sermon

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Will you all please pray with me.

Gracious God, in the words of Acts, chapter 4, enable your servants to speak with great boldness. Make us all bold witnesses of your grace today, as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Friends, today is the third sermon in our sermon series on the book of Acts, and when you are studying this particular New Testament book, it can help for you to think of the fact that there are three main characters throughout this book. The first eight chapters of the book focus specifically on the Apostle Peter and his ministry to the Israelites. The last twelve chapters of the book focus on the Apostle Paul and his ministry to the Gentile people. Now, the third main character within the book of Acts is the Holy Spirit and this particular character is present throughout every chapter of the book of Acts. It is God's Holy Spirit that inspires Peter in the first part of that book, and later it inspires Paul in the latter half of that book. And today we thank God for the gift of his Holy Spirit, for it ensures that we always have a clear connection with God and an ability to draw close to God in every situation.

Well, our focus within our church's sermon series is on those first eight chapters of the book of Acts which specifically focus on the Holy Spirit at work within Peter's life. I know many of you have heard me say before from this pulpit that I absolutely love the disciple Peter, because Peter is that one disciple that gets it wrong every single time and yet he never gives up on the idea of trying to live out his faith. More importantly, God never gives up on Peter. The Peter we find in Acts chapter 3 is very different than any account of Peter we hear from the gospels. The most familiar accounts of Peter, of course, are when he denied Christ during Christ's crucifixion, or when he tried to walk on water and failed spectacularly and Jesus had to rescue him. But that's all from the gospels.

When we arrive at Acts chapter 3, *this* Peter is very different. This is no longer a timid disciple failing at every turn. This Peter has the power and the ability to heal an individual simply by calling on the name of Jesus Christ, his savior. We heard that story read to us by Clare (Davidson) this morning from Acts chapter 3. Peter and John are going to the temple to pray and on their way as they pass through the Beautiful Gate, known because of its bronze and gold and silver, they meet a beggar who's paralyzed from birth who asks them for money. Peter looks at the man and his response is very clear. "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!" You may remember from hearing this story earlier that the man was completely cured. Not only did he accompany Peter and John into the temple for probably the first time in his life to pray, he went in leaping, we're told, essentially dancing in joy for his new, transformed existence.

From Peter's life and ministry at this stage we can see that clearly there is power found in the name of Jesus Christ. And we shouldn't be surprised by this truth, because if you read Acts, chapters three and four, carefully, you would notice the power of Jesus. His name is mentioned five separate times in chapter 3 and it's mentioned six separate times in chapter 4.

From these two chapters in scripture so many of our wonderful praise songs have been written, coming out of this idea that Jesus's name has power. If you have worshiped with us at all in the Upper Room, you may have sung some of these songs. Songs like Blessed is the Name of our Lord, songs like Jesus's Name Above All Names, or What a Beautiful Name It Is--Jesus Christ our King. So many wonderful praise songs focused on this idea of the power of Jesus's name and we know that power because whether we are aware of it or not, we pray so often to God. And we end our prayers by saying "in the name of Jesus Christ", maybe "in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord", or "in the name of Jesus Christ our savior. Amen."

We offer to God the power of Christ to fuel our prayer by the power of God's Holy Spirit at work within us. Well, you may be asking yourself how much power is there in Jesus's name today? We don't hear of many ministers performing fantastic miracles as we did for Peter and even in Paul's life. That was because those original disciples, those twelve, plus Paul, who had met the Lord on the road to Damascus, they had direct contact with Jesus, which is why they are referred to as apostles, not disciples. So, although we are not sharing these miraculous acts, we still share in the power of Jesus's name, because the Holy Spirit continues to transform our lives and transform our world.

We see today that there is power in a name. Even in the past two weeks as a nation we have learned this lesson, as we have continued to respond to the death of George Floyd. His name has been added to the names of so many others, and these names call us to change a broken system and a broken world, not by our power but by the power of God's Holy Spirit at work within us, the transformative power that's been at work from the very beginning. What we need to be clear about is the name of Jesus is different than any other name. The Bible is very clear about that. It talks about it in Acts chapter 3. At verse 12, it says that in the name of Jesus, salvation is found that's found in no one else.

At times, people have been offended by this verse, thinking it was very exclusive. But there is real truth in the fact that there is no other name in this world that brings new life to that which was dead. This is good news for us today, because if there was ever a time that we needed healing and new life coming out of an issue that seems to be dead, than it is *now*. We need the power of God's Holy Spirit at work to heal the pain and brokenness of our nation and the pain and brokenness of our lives today, but we should be prepared because the Holy Spirit's work is powerful, and it's surprising in nature. It calls us to a new way of living, a new way of life. It transforms us into bold witnesses of God's grace.

Now this is what happened to Peter and John. They found themselves suddenly, in Acts chapter 4, standing before Sadducees and temple officials and high priest. These were

unschooled, ordinary men with no rabbinic teaching. And yet because of God's Holy Spirit at work, they found themselves within an audience of extremely educated men, yet they testified to the work of God within them and within the world. They were bold witnesses of God's transformative power and they were bold because the man they had healed was standing right next to them. There was no way their argument could be refuted, there's no way the change in their own lives could be refuted, and those temple officials rumbled with this because they were desperate to keep life the way it was. They wanted to maintain the status quo, but yet with God's Holy Spirit change was on its way.

Friends, I have seen members of our own church who have become bold witnesses of God; people that did things that they never thought or expected they would do. I'm reminded of this truth most often when I think back to 2011 when eight members of our church traveled to Malawi for the very first time. There we learned that all eight of us, within a worship service, would be sharing the testimony of our own faith. All eight of us, including Jim and Kathy Bernard, myself, Sue Kage, Doug Kee, Kurt Rager, and Tom and Jane Weaver, all had to share our faith and share the transformative power of God at work in our lives. Two hundred people from our sister church in Malawi sat in a field for approximately five hours as they listened to us, and yet God was powerfully at work, not only through the sharing of our testimonies but even more so in the singing and in the praise and in the worship as we celebrated God's spirit at work within both our congregations together. God's Holy Spirit turns timid disciples into bold witnesses. It changes things that seem dead, yet brings new life and new praise.

The power of God's Holy Spirit was clearly on display in Acts chapter 4 and that man that was lame but was offered new life--he accompanied Peter and John into the temple, not just walking beside them to pray, but he was leaping! The Bible says he was leaping before the priests because he was so full of joy at how God had changed his life.

Friends, there is real power today as we share our stories of faith with one another and whenever I need to be reminded of God's transformative nature and power I think back to that trip in Malawi, or I think about many of our mission partners. If we were to stop and listen again to the story of Ruth Azar, the founder of the Second Mile Center in Detroit, if we were to stop and listen to the story of Jim Drake, founder of Colina de Luz in Mexico; if we were to stop and listen again to the stories of transformation in the lives of Davidson and Phoebe Chifungo, or Hussein Latif, in Malawi, we would be struck by the fact that God is powerfully at work in our world today. And is that not the news we need to hear--that God changes lives and God changes hearts and God helps us to share that faith, that joy, that grace with others?

It is by that spirit that we are healed, and we can offer that grace to others and to our broken world as we serve as witnesses of God's love and grace. Maybe, just maybe, even through this time of civil unrest, even in the midst of a global pandemic, maybe God's Holy Spirit is changing lives today so that we may reflect God's power at work in our world, transforming brokenness into occasions of grace.

Friends, God calls us as one family of faith today, even though we are apart, to his communion table. Here we are reminded of the grace poured out on us. Here we are invited, even in our homes, to turn our homes into sanctuaries as we invite God's spirit into our hearts and lives. Let us now share this meal together

[Sacrament of Communion]

And now let us go out into the world in peace, have courage, render to no one evil for evil, help the weak, support the faint-hearted, help the suffering, honor all people, love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of his Holy Spirit, and may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.