

“The Church – Practicing New Beginnings”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 21, 2024

4th Sunday of Easter

Psalm 23

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Acts 4:1-12

Introduction

During this Eastertide season, we are looking to the book of Acts and its formative stories of the early church. Two weeks ago, we heard – in chapter one – how the risen Jesus was lifted up into the clouds, ascending before the disciples’ eyes; but not before promising them that the Holy Spirit would descend upon them with power. Last week, we looked at the story – in the third chapter – of Peter and John’s encounter with a lame beggar outside the temple and how, by the power of the Spirit and in the name of Jesus, this man was healed in body and restored to the community; entering the temple leaping and praising God, causing the witnesses in the temple to be amazed and filled with wonder.

Thus, we were reminded that each of us, as followers of Jesus, are given opportunities to participate in healing: physical or spiritual, whether as those who are healed, those who offer acts of healing, or those who are amazed as witnesses to healing. In all these ways, our imaginations for the restoration of God’s creation and its inhabitants to health and wholeness can grow.

Chapter three concludes with Peter using this act of healing as a springboard to tell the people in Jerusalem of God’s saving activity through Jesus Christ, who was revealed as the fulfillment of their faith’s long-held hope and expectation for a Messiah: One who would bring salvation to the people. But, as it had for Jesus, this brings the disciples into confrontation with religious and political leaders unwilling to acknowledge the power of the Holy Spirit to heal in the name of Jesus.

This morning, in chapter four, we see this confrontation between the Jewish leaders and the followers of Jesus play out, as the early church learns how to participate faithfully and fully in the new beginnings that God, through the Holy Spirit, reveals.

Read Acts 4:1-12

Peter and John's act of healing in Jesus' name evokes diametrically opposite responses: wonder and excitement from the worshippers at the temple, but suspicion and fear from the religious authorities. Lauded by one group, Peter and John are locked up by the other.

The apostles' antagonists who, in this scene, detain and question Peter and John are not rank-and-file Jews; they are the leaders of the Temple whom Rome has entrusted with ruling and ensuring peace in and around Jerusalem. Annas was the former high priest, and his son-in-law Caiphas was the current high priest. John and Alexander were members of the same family.¹

Peter and John had the eyes of the powerful trained on them when the questioning begins. Jesus had stood in the same kind of place that now his disciples found themselves; as the judged. Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for this moment. These were the same leaders who, just weeks before, sat in judgment after Jesus had been arrested, choosing to condemn him to death.

Thus, we are seeing a confrontation between the powers that put Jesus to death and the power that raised him to new life. Resurrection is an annoyance to those who would use tools of death in their attempt to snuff out the living presence of the power of God.²

When asked "by what power" he had healed the man born lame, Peter responds that their hope of quelling the power of Jesus was undone by the hand of God. Instead, Jesus continues to heal; Jesus continues to save.

Where, in verse 9, Peter reflects back on the "good deed" that had been done, and how "this man has been healed," the Greek literally says, "this man has been saved." The name of Jesus is the power for the ongoing healing of every sort of human brokenness. God, through Peter and John, through the power of the name of Jesus, has saved the man: saved him from a lifetime of sitting and begging for his livelihood; saved him for a life of leaping about and praising God for life-altering deliverance.

Thus, Peter cites Psalm 118, saying, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." This stone, the structural key to the building project, had been turned away by the experts, the ones who were placed in charge. Peter points to the formerly crippled man standing beside him to show that this specific instance of healing is relevant to his claim of salvation; and that the

¹ Troy Troftgruben from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Willie James Jennings, *Acts from Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

wholeness of salvation is materialized in embodied actions. The gospel of Jesus affects the physical as well as the mental, emotional, and spiritual.

Therefore, when Peter – in light of this healing – says, in verse 12, that “there is salvation in no one else,” we need to remember the context: Peter is telling the religious leaders that there is no wholeness, no healing of body and soul in any other name than Jesus. Taken at face value, this word excludes. In its original context, though, the apostles did not aim to discount future religious movements, but rather to validate the message of Jesus before a hostile audience.

We, of course, live in a pluralistic society. As Christians and congregations, we need to discern when and whether such an exclusive message of salvation in the name of Jesus alone is a helpful or truthful way to proclaim our faith. Often, we are witnesses to acts of healing that can occur in places and ways that remain a mystery to us. So, while Peter’s words undoubtedly emphasize the distinctiveness of salvation associated with Jesus, how the same Holy Spirit empowers us to express the good news of Jesus today is a matter of ongoing discernment.

This morning, we will install congregation members to join our leadership teams of elders and deacons. After we, as a church, confess our faith together, we ask these individuals to reaffirm their commitment as followers of Jesus, and adherence to the scriptures and our particular form of governance. We also ask our leaders to pledge to lead with “energy, imagination, intelligence, and love.”

Every time that we discern how to give witness to the good news, we take the context into consideration. Why, we must seek to understand, are people that are looking to heal and be made whole hurting? Does their lack of food or housing or education create a barrier to finding healing? Have they been made to feel unwelcome because of the choices they have made? Are they suffering from wounds caused by exclusion or discrimination? Have they been told that if they just had more faith, their problems would disappear?

Author and Methodist minister Gil Rendle, in his book *Countercultural*, describes Christian churches as “Institutions of Morality” that – like other faith communities and non-profits – “require us to think long-term about purpose as opposed to short-term about personal gratification.” At its core, the purpose of these institutions of morality is to search for, and advocate for, a more expansive expression of the common good.

Rendle quotes another Christian writer, Tom Long, who describes congregations as “an ‘odd thing’ – a place where there will always be other people

that we would not choose to be with in any other setting.” Because churches give witness to a biblical faith that applies to and includes all people, not just tribal subsets of like people, there will always be room for people different from ourselves, but nevertheless belong because our shared stories bring us together.³

And so, we can claim, with Peter, that there is “salvation in no one else” but Jesus and that there is room in our communities for those who do not or have not yet proclaimed exclusive faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. We can proclaim that, for us, the mystery of God’s work of healing and salvation can be explained in no other way while acknowledging the plurality of faith traditions that promote wholeness and the common good. We believe there can be one God and multiple faith traditions. God is greater than our limited understandings and the full revelation of God that we see in Christ can be manifested in multiple ways based on context and experience; within and beyond the bounds of our faith tradition.

Does this make the understanding and practice of our Christian faith simple? In a way, yes. We are responsible only for our own witness to God’s activity in the world. Admittedly, though, this has historically and will inevitably continue to result in tensions and misunderstandings. While we profess, with Peter, that salvation, healing, and wholeness – these powerful new beginnings – rest in the name of Jesus alone, we must humbly accept that the work of God is sometimes broader, deeper, and greater than what we can imagine.

Thus, our faith – informed by our energy, imagination, intelligence, and love – rests in the power we have received through and in the name of Jesus; grounded in our shared stories that bring us together for the common good. In thanks, and with humility, we give praise to God. Amen.

³³ Gil Rendle, *Countercultural: Subversive Resistance and the Neighborhood Congregation*, p. 70-71