

January 22, 2023 Sermon
“Ordinary Men”
Acts 4: 1-22

Introduction and Prayer

Let me begin by introducing myself, I am Rob Scanland and I am an Elder in this Church, although not currently serving on Session. I would like to begin this morning with prayer: Dear God thank you for gathering us this morning to worship you. Thank you for this new year and with it the hope and promise of new beginnings. Be with me and with us this morning. Be with each of those gathered here, some physically, some virtually, all joined by your Holy Spirit. Be our strength to do those things which you are calling us to do in 2023. Thank you for Pastor Bob and his family and for safe travels, a time of rest and opportunity to be with family. I will close with the prayer offered in Psalms 19 verse 14 “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, for you are our rock and you are our redeemer.” Amen.

Background

So for those of you keeping track this will be my third time in the pulpit here at First Presbyterian Church in Carson City, NV. You will in the near future be able to decide which of the following two phases is true: “The third time is the charm” or “Three strikes and you are out.” A brief recap on my prior two appearances. In January of 2021 I preached on Matthew 25: 31-46, that is near the end of Jesus teaching about the parable of the talents. He concludes with “Truly I tell you, just as you did it (had compassion) to one of the least of these who are MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY, you did it unto me.” In January of 2022 and then again in March of 2022 in Belize, I preached on John 2: 1-11, the wedding at Cana and Jesus’s first miracle of turning water into wine. Jesus’s Mother said to the servants “Do whatever he (Jesus) tells you to do.” Those two scriptures are powerful, but now both hold special significance to me after having purposefully read them, prayed about them and then with the Holy Spirit, humbly worked to bring them to life to us here at First Pres. and again to the Calvary Chapel congregation in Belize. In preparation for today’s message I would like cite my references and give credit where credit is due. This included: The New Revised Standard Version of the Holy

Scriptures; the “Believer’s Bible Commentary by William MacDonald”; John MacArthur’s “Acts – The Spread of the Gospel,” Dallas Willard’s “The Great Omission – Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship,” and finally Pastor Bob’s last two sermons on January 8th and 15th on Acts Chapter 3.

An introduction to the Book of ACTS

In John MacArthur’s book “Acts” he begins by suggesting that the Book of Acts might be better titled, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.” The mention of the Holy Spirit in Acts happens more than 50 times. After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit directed, controlled, and empowered the church and caused it to grow in numbers, spiritual power, and influence. The Holy Spirit did that by empowering average, ordinary and generally un-educated men. Acts is thought to have been written by Luke, the gospel writer, around 60 AD. It describes the first 30 years of the early Church. Acts takes up where the Gospel of Luke leaves off and throughout goes back and forth between what had been, what was happening then and what the future would hold. Luke and Acts form a comprehensive and seamless account of how the followers of Jesus “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) by taking the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to “the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).”

Where we have been so far in 2023

So let’s begin with a brief review of what Pastor Bob brought to us in his last two sermons and contained within Acts Chapter 3. Peter and John have gone to the Temple to pray. They encountered the man who was lame and with the power of the Holy Spirit they healed him. This simple miracle has significant ramifications for the early church in Jerusalem . We talked about the miracle on January 8th, again on January 15th, and will continue talking about it today because the reaction to it defined the relationship of the early church to the Jerusalem community. I know that lame man, I saw him laying on a blanket on the street in Katmandu, Nepal in 2007. His family brought him down every day to the business district and passersby were leaving small donations on his blanket to help with his care. He had leprosy. It is an image I will never forget for the rest of my life. To bring the image of the lame man even closer to home I want to ask for a show of hands for those who know or know of Glen Lucky. Within a few months of Glen’s birth here in 1952 he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. The doctors told

his parents that Glen would most likely not live beyond his teens as the illness progressed. Many of us for decades saw Glen riding around town on his three wheeled bike towing a trailer with advertising or eating lunch at the Cracker Box or at Mom & Pop's. He is the guy we know, who we saw nearly every day. Glen is a miracle in so many ways, and this year he will be 71 years old.

Imagine Peter and John calling on the name of Jesus and saying to the leper from Nepal or to Glen from Carson City, NV, stand up and walk. To completely heal them, that is what happened. And then imagine seeing the healed man, who you had seen with their own eyes disabled every day of his life for decades. In Acts 4: 22 the scripture says he was "more than 40 years old." Now he is standing, jumping, walking, and praising God! Peter was quick to point out this was not he and John's doing; this was from the grace and power of Jesus Christ. God prepared the events of Chapter 3 to allow the disciples to bear witness. We too have stories to tell and witness to share. In lives of worship, God continues to provide opportunities to witness and proclaim God's grace in the name of Jesus Christ.

In last Sunday's sermon "Why do you wonder," Pastor Bob went on in Chapter 3 to what followed after the lame man was healed. The three of them all went into the Temple, praising God and Peter reminding the astonished that this was the work of God, their God whom they claimed to be there to worship! Peter then went on to remind and correct them for their actions of the last several months. Peter was saying "do you believe God is here in the Temple today?" Is God just a tradition, a way of life that makes you feel good or special; or, is God true, real, and actually powerful? A question that is just as relevant to us today. If you look at what Peter said, it is clear that he was putting the miracle in context like Jesus had of his miracles; it was a manifestation of the presence and power of the Kingdom of God. As the healing showed, the kingdom of heaven was already present. The power of Jesus's name was the power of the kingdom present in their midst. There were others not healed that day, so brokenness was not ended that day. Instead, the healing was a demonstration of what the full kingdom will be. The full realization of the kingdom was yet to be fulfilled - is yet to be fulfilled - but it will be. Though we live in the midst of brokenness and a world that has rejected God, we live in the hope and expectation that the kingdom of God is here and will be fully here in the future. Scripture

has foretold it. Jesus proclaimed it. The early church lived it - as made manifest in this miracle. The promise remains true today.

Peter responded to the crowd within the Temple: “Repent.” Repent of their rejection of Jesus. Repent of their choosing death over life. Repent of their efforts to kill the author of life. Then turn to God. The miracle was just a small sample of the power of God. It was the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. It is the power of God who has given all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus and called us to be his witnesses.

The WORD of God

Let’s read God’s word from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible:

Acts Chapter 4 Verses 1-22:

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

Response: THANKS BE TO GOD

Persecution of the early Church

So after reading our scripture this morning, another phase springs to mind: “No good deed goes unpunished!” The first persecution of the infant church was about to break out and true to pattern, it arose from the religious leaders of the day. Peter and John were surrounded by the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees and put under arrest. One commentator suggested that the priests represented religious intolerance of the early church, the captain of the temple, essentially the temple chief of police and second in command behind the High Priest, represented political hostility and the Sadducees, represented rationalistic unbelief. The Sadducees denied the doctrine of resurrection. These religious leaders were angry and jealous of the apostles for a number of reasons: 1) the infant Church was growing and people were leaving their Jewish, temple based heritage; 2) the apostles were teaching the people and the religious leaders felt this was exclusively their role; and 3) the apostles were also sharing their witness about the resurrection of Jesus. In particular the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection and certainly must have been fearful of being rejected by the people when resurrection was being described by these eye witnesses.

The following day Peter and John were brought before the religious council, the Sanhedrin. This included Annas, the high priest, Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, John and Alexander and all of the high-priestly family. This was the same council and individuals that Jesus had been brought before several months earlier. They had been successful in getting rid of that last troublemaker, Jesus, and I'm sure anticipated that dealing with Peter and John would be a simple matter. But things had changed since their last encounter with Jesus and his followers. Jesus's "trial," crucifixion and resurrection had been God's plan and although the High Priest and his priestly family thought they were in charge, they were merely minor players. The infant Church was growing and public sentiment was changing as well. The Holy Spirit had descended upon and was filling the followers of Jesus. And finally, there was the 40 + year old formerly lame guy, who EVERYBODY knew, standing with Peter and John, fully healed.

Boldly proclaiming the Good News

The trial opened with yet another opportunity for the apostles orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. The tribunal asked the apostles, "By what power and by what name did you do this (perform the miracle of healing)." Peter, given yet another priceless opportunity to share the good news with the religious establishment, boldly and eagerly began his testimony. Just a reminder, this was the same Peter who a few short months earlier, had denied three times he even knew this Jesus fellow! This is an excellent example of the power of the Holy Spirit, which remains with us to this day. It had transformed Peter from timid and fearful to bold and fearless. Also remember that the last time Jesus had "testified" before this group it had ended badly. We as Christians know that it really ended quite wonderfully!

Peter begins "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone." There is salvation in no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Listen did you hear that pin drop! This is a remarkable, dare I say super-natural, delivery by Peter of the good news of the Gospel. Think of the context, think of the audience, think of the prior consequences of testifying to the truth. It is mind blowing.

The Rulers and Elders were equally surprised. In verse 13 it says “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.” Another text says “they could say nothing against it (the healing).”

William Barclay says “Dry, formal religion is ever intolerant of enthusiastic, vital evangelism that produces results in hearts and lives. Its leaders are non-plussed to see uneducated and untrained men making an impact on the community while they with all their wisdom “fail to rise above flesh and blood.” Peter was, in their view, an ignorant fisherman from Galilee.

The Sanhedrin was struck by the boldness of Peter and John. They would have liked to have brushed them aside, but there was something about their self-control, their empowered lives, their fearlessness that made them think of Jesus when he was on trial. They attributed the boldness of the apostles to the fact that they had been with Jesus in the past, which was true, but in addition the real explanation was they were now filled with the Holy Spirit. The rulers and religious leaders of the day must also have been a bit embarrassed to have the healed cripple there in the courtroom. There was no denying that a miracle had taken place. J.H. Howett writes: “Men may more than match you in subtlety of argument. In intellectual argument you may suffer an easy defeat. But the argument of a redeemed life is unassailable. “Seeing the man that was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.”

Ordinary men filled with the Holy Spirit

So with this incredible scene in our mind, let’s talk about what it means to have a life filled with the Holy Spirit. In Dallas Willard’s book “The Great Omission” he talks about two ways that the Holy Spirit can manifest in our lives. The first is through Gifts which enable us to perform some specific function - such as service, or healing or leading worship-with effects clearly beyond those of our own making. I would humbly suggest I may be an example of that this morning. I

think Laurie Lee and Randall [who spoke during the Mission Message] are also wonderful examples of that. These gifts serve God's purposes among His people, but they do not necessarily signify the state of our heart.

The second way the Holy Spirit can manifest in our lives is Fruit. The Fruit of the Spirit, in contrast, gives a sure sign of transformed character. When our deepest attitudes and dispositions are those of Jesus, it is because we have learned to let the Spirit foster his life in us. Paul confessed, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:19-20). The outcome of Christ living within us through the Spirit is Fruit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23; see also John 15:8). Both gifts and fruit are the result, not the reality, of the Spirit's presence in our lives. What brings about our transformation (the result) into Christ-likeness is our direct, personal interaction with Christ through the Spirit. The Spirit makes Christ present to us and draws us toward his likeness. It is as we behold the "glory of the Lord" that we are constantly "transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). I don't know about you, but I have a long way to go on that journey

The Sanhedrin's ruling and admonishment

In verse 15 the Sanhedrin told Peter and John to step outside while they discussed the matter and decided their fate. Their dilemma was this: they could not punish the apostles for performing an act of kindness; yet if they did not stop these fanatics, their own religious business would be seriously threatened by loss of members. So their ruling was to forbid Peter and John to talk to the people about Jesus in private conversation, or to preach Him, Jesus, publicly.

In verse 19 Peter and John answered them "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

The weakness of the ruler's position is seen in the fact that they could not punish the apostles; all the people knew that a gracious miracle had taken place. The healed man, over forty years old, a guy like our own Glen Lucky, was well known, because his plight had been displayed publicly

for a long time. So all the Sanhedrin could do was dismiss the accused apostles with further threats. I think they also plan to watch and wait for yet another opportunity to “deal” with them down the road.

What about the here and now?

John MacArthur in his Book “ACTS” concludes his Chapter 2, which talks about Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in the Book of Acts with this summary.

“Widespread confusion exists over what the primary mission of the church of Jesus Christ should be. Some argue that the church should lead the crusade for social justice for the poor and downtrodden. Others see it as a political force to help change the culture. Still others view their church as a private club, where they can socialize with their friends. On a more biblical note, the church’s goal is to mature the saints through the preaching of the Word, fellowship, and discipleship. It also meets to praise and worship God. These are important goals that should mark every church. Yet none of them is the church’s primary goal here on earth. Indeed, every one of them could be better accomplished in heaven.

What is the primary goal of the church? Our Lord answered that question by charging us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). The church’s primary goal is evangelism. It is to carry on the work begun by the Lord Jesus Christ, whose mission was “to seek and save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). That is the only duty of the church that can’t be better done in heaven.”

Just so you don’t forget Matthew 28: 19-20 we printed it on the front of your bulletin and we will do that again next week and the week after that and we put up a BIG sign in the Family Life Center, above the fireplace, to be a constant and ever present reminder to us all.

Are you, like me, dissuaded by the world from proclaiming the Gospel? Just like the Sanhedrim, the world wants to threaten, restrict, and restrain how we Christians are called to live and what we are called to share. Don’t be afraid. Be like Peter and John - bold and fearless. Begin or continue on the path to strengthen your gifts and fruits from the Holy Spirit. We may

be seen by the World as ordinary men and woman, but with the God's Holy Spirit within us,
there is nothing that we cannot do.

Amen