

Acts 3:1-4:4: Witnesses In Jerusalem I:

Friends!

Last week we talked about the first check-in Luke gives us with the Church, at the end of Acts 2, and it's a doozy: If we believe it's a template for the Church in all places and in all times, then it's an incredibly challenging picture of the Church to read.

Remember with me: Jesus gives a prophetic mandate to his first followers at the start of Acts. He says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Luke structures Acts around this prophetic charge. We've seen the Holy Spirit come; we've checked in with the Church. Now Luke is going to present to us pictures of the way the Church bears witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and out to the ends of the earth, with a special focus on how Paul is used in reaching those "ends."

Today's passage is the first of these witnesses to Jerusalem that Luke includes for us.

(And, let me say, if you don't have an outline of Acts, or a Preaching Map of Acts, these are out in the lobby. Snag one before you take off.)

But today: Jesus' is borne witness to in Jerusalem. It's a big scene. And what I have to offer us this morning is a very, very practical take on today's passage. Today's message isn't a deeply theological one. I've highlighted some things we can do if we want to mimic the people in today's passage. That's it. A different message could be preached from today's scene, and honestly: If any of you feel called to preach that for us, let me know. But today: practical stuff. What we'll do is bounce from the scene, to an important point we can take away from it, then we'll bounce back to the scene. So conclusions, take-aways, these things are going to come in the middle of all this, not at the end.

Let's pray!

Prayer:

Bearing Witness:

Let's talk about bearing witness. Bearing witness. It's is no small thing. It's the basic thing happening in today's passage.

The Greek word for “witness” is “martyr,” a word we may have heard once or twice, or, if we’re my mother, modeled some version of it. I’m kidding, mom. (She’d make the same joke about her mother, so it’s cool.)

To be a martyr was to bear witness: To present, through word and deed, exactly who Jesus was and how he lived. Martyrs carry their testimony in their bodies: Just as Jesus unjustly suffered and was put to death, so have those martyrs who have followed him. But bearing witness clearly hasn’t always led to death; there wouldn’t be a Church today if everyone who tried to bear witness to Jesus’ words and way of life were killed.

What’s critical here is the idea that we can’t separate word and deed if we’re going to testify well. We do more than just speak testimony, we “bear” it, carry out the work of Jesus in our hands, and sometimes carry the suffering of others, just as Jesus carried our suffering. We could have a whole message on this; I’m skipping it right now.

But we are the ones who speak the truth of God to the world, and reveal the truth of God through our actions,

our commitments, and the solidarities we make. We build God's Kingdom through word and deed, and must always be connecting these two things together.

Bearing witness stands behind everything we see in today's passage.

An Event:

And what we see in today's passage is this:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. 2 Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. 4 Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” 5 So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

6 Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” 7 Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly

the man's feet and ankles became strong. 8 He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. 9 When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

There is so much here that we could discuss. The man was lame from birth; typically taken to mean that whatever was going on in him, it was deserved, some judgment of God for some sin--either his own, assumedly for being born, or his parents'. Beyond this, to heal someone who was never whole, as far as the society around this man reckoned it, was a much bigger miracle, if you can rate these things, than it was to heal someone who had been once healthy and now was not. The man has a community of compassion around him, those who carry him to the temple gate to beg, and carry him back to wherever he stays after. And that, too, just doubles-down for us on how low this man's quality of life is. Luke gives us all these markers for us to see it.

A point? Perceiving the Truth Of Others' Situations

So. Let me make a point, here:

Details matter. Recognizing the situation at hand matters. This man is desolate. Judged by all those who go past, who need to be as ritually clean as they can be, walking past this man who had no way to ritually clean himself. He may have a small group of people helping him, but even they have to wash their hands afterward if they want to interact with others at the Temple. He's dirty, broken, and has turned into a fixture, not a person. He is scenery: Someone you always pass if you enter through the Beautiful Gate. Luke wants us to see him for what he is to others.

Do you see the people around you? Who has become scenery? Whose pain do we no longer recognize as pain? Who is an outsider, and we no longer realize that they're outsiders?

We must pay attention to the situation of those around us, because it's in those details that we find compassion, and recognize that they are people.

A Point: Positioning Others For Miracles

Here's another point to make:

That small group of people who carry him to the gate every day? They set him up for this healing. Do we see that? They don't heal the man, but they position the man for healing. What if today that couple of people hadn't carried him over to Beautiful Gate? Someone else may have been healed, sure...but not this guy. I hope to God that whoever dropped him off there that morning saw him later, and when they went to bed, said to themselves, with grateful pride, "I'm the one who got him to the gate." They were a part of that miracle, just a quiet part that gets no play.

Do we value our quiet work? Do we see that every act of compassion may be the precondition for someone else's healing? Someone else's reintroduction to community? Someone else's amazing testimony of who Jesus is and what Jesus can do?

We must not give up doing good, because to do good may be to position a person for a miracle.

A Point: Receiving What We're Not Looking For:

And this guy, he's not looking for a miracle. Luke tells us, explicitly, he's looking for cash, you know? Alms.

The guy isn't looking for a miracle. He's not looking to become famous. He's out today to just do what he always does, which is ask for help until he is dead. That's his present and his future. He's going to ask for help, continually, until he's dead. And he'll probably receive it, in some measure, you know? For as long as he lives, he'll live this way: Asking for help. People may keep bringing him to the gate, he may keep getting just enough alms to pay for a bed someplace, and bread.

But today...today he gets what he doesn't ask for, and it's better than what he was asking for. This guy wasn't healed into full employment and a Roth IRA. He's maybe still going to be begging, just now walking himself. What will he say, in a week, if that's the case, about what has happened to him? About what he received? I hope, of course, he follows Peter and John back to the Church, and all his needs are met there, but we don't know.

What are you asking for for yourself? Regularly, daily? And not necessarily because you need it to survive, but for any reason. What are you regularly asking for for yourself. Have you gotten something else instead?

What have you already received that you weren't expecting, that wasn't as flashy or showy as this, and you've already forgotten to praise God for the providence of it?

We must not forget the good things we've received from God that we weren't looking for, because our present situation may not change all that much when we get whatever it is we've been wanting.

A Point: Giving What We have To Offer

Peter and John demand that this guy looks at them. "Hey! Over here!" "Look up here!" We read, anticipating it: "So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them."

"Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." 7 Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.

Look. This is a miracle. It's a miracle. I don't know if any of us have ever healed someone, said to them, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth---whatever." And it's happened. Maybe we have.

But one very basic point is simply this: Peter and John do what they can here. They notice this man, who they've been passing every day at 3 on their way to Temple prayers. They notice the man, they know what they have to offer, and they give it.

Any of us would say healing was better than cash, but they don't have cash and they do have this, a healing from God. We're meant to see that the Spirit is moving in Peter and John, that this moment and situation matters, that they've been moved by God to act, now. But their act, at its most basic, is to give what they have: They give a word of healing, and they lift the man to his feet.

I hear so, so often, in very well-meaning circles, "People don't want a handout, they want a hand up," meaning, more or less, that people want the means to have personal agency, they want to be able to act, and have power, and do for themselves. In the case where I hear this, and I always hear it, the contrast is between just giving someone money, or you know, giving them a job or job training, or something. But, honestly, I think this phrase is bogus, and generally used by people to justify not giving what they have to

give.

Yes, people want agency and capacity and power to take care of themselves and those around them. OF COURSE they do. But never, ever have we gotten a benevolence call where someone says, “I don’t really want any money, even if you want to give me some, I just want job training.” People want both money, which you cannot survive without in our society, and they want the means to provide for themselves. I could nuance this, and might someday, but if we have cash, and someone asks for it, and we just say no, we’re actually disobeying what Jesus has told us to say yes to. A handout is a great gift; a hand-up is wonderful, too. But to play these things off one another is to excuse ourselves from one or the other.

Notice: Peter doesn’t have a handout to give. He only has a hand-up to offer. He has no money, but what he has, he gives. And everyone I know has something to give.

What do you have to give to others? What is your skill? What network and connections do you have? What power? Because what Peter and John have here, is power. They are conduits of God’s healing in this

moment, and offer it freely to this one who needs it.

We have to offer what we have to give to those who need it.

A Point: Treating People as People

And building of this moment, just notice that they touch this man. They touch him.

He is a dirty invalid, cursed by God as far as those around him would reckon it. They don't seem to have to lift him to his feet in order for him to be healed, but they do. Perhaps he needed the lift in order to believe them. Maybe they needed to touch him in order to realize the miracle they'd done. Regardless: In touching the man, and then embracing the man, they humanize this person. It's a symbolic re-entry into the community. Honestly, this touch and embrace, it's so, so important, and we miss it. But for those of us who have not had a hug in awhile, have not had a comforting hand on our shoulder, have not been held, we know how important this is. And we might want to ask someone for a hug, you know?

When we offer what we have to others, do we treat them as people worthy of our touch, or do we avoid

them, as if they are unclean? Do we engage them in the most basic need people have, the need to be touched and affirmed as a person. Or do we help from a distance because we think they are icky? I don't think we can separate the hand and hug this man receives from his healing.

We must be people who humanize those we help, treat them in a way that reminds them and everyone around us that they are people, and being reminded of that basic truth is as important as their urgent need.

Connecting Deed & Word:

Peter goes on from here to talk about Jesus. I want to talk about it at length; I'm not going to. It's great, though, man! Peter lays out the history of the world in what he says. He's painting a new picture of what God has been up to and is up to and will be up to. All of a sudden, Peter is totally articulate, and an amazing theologian, and I'll just never get over the fruit the Spirit has borne in his life.

The healed man just got done dancing around and praising God and now he's clinging to Peter and John, and we read:

...all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. 12 When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? 13 The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. 14 You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. 15 You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. 16 By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

17 "Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. 18 But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. 19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of

refreshing may come from the Lord, 20 and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. 21 Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. 22 For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. 23 Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.’[a]

24 “Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. 25 And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’[b] 26 When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

Two results come from this: Peter and John go to jail for the night. They’re disturbing the peace, and they’re disrupting the order of things, the way things work. The civil and religious authorities, in their power,

cannot bear that. Truth disrupts, though; it always does in a world run by liars. This will come back around in their lives.

A final question we might ask is simply how has bearing witness to the truth of God inconvenienced us, recently? How are we doing living in a world so often run by liars and lies?

But also, people listen to Peter. They hear him. The Church grows, as it's been growing slowly and surely since Pentecost.

Peter connected this deed he has done with the God who enabled it, the Lord who he serves. Peter connected the dots for those around him: What you have seen done was done by the grace of Jesus, the Messiah. And people respond. We must bring our actions together with our motivation, our service with our faithfulness.

We read this:

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. 2 They

were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. 3 They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. 4 But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

Let's end.

Conclusion:

And we'll end remembering what we've been invited to consider:

When we offer what we have to others, do we treat them as people, humanize them and make them feel valued? Or do we avoid them? Peter and John allowed this man to cling to him, and literally lifted him to his feet. How do we treat those we help?

What do you have to give? Peter and John knew their resources. Do you know yours? Wealth is not the only power in our world, and we have more power in and among us than Israel before Jesus ever could have dreamed of. What do we have to give?

What are you asking for and what have you received?
What are you asking for and what have you received?
This man was asking for money; he was instead given strength and brought into a community. Why does it matter that we recognize what we've received from God?

Do we recognize the power of quiet compassionate service? Do we believe our kindness, whether it's celebrated or unseen, positions people for miracles? If we don't, we take far too narrow a view of God's power, and perhaps excuse ourselves from simple kindness.

And lastly, do we see people? Do we notice the things going on in the people around us? Who has become scenery to us? At work, on our block, in our church, or on our streets? We have to see people in their need as people in need, not objects who deserve whatever they're getting.

Bearing witness to the truth of God's love and power may inconvenience us, but that inconvenience is worth trading in exchange for someone's life-giving healing. I hope we are blessed with those kind of

inconveniences, and we can connect all the good we do, whenever we do it, with the very specific power of Jesus, the savior of the world.