

“Notable Signs”

Acts 4:1-20

4th Sunday in Easter – May 7, 2006

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

This story begins with a 40 year old man who can't walk. He had been lame for as long as anyone could remember. And we don't know whether he had any faith in God himself. But we do know that he depended upon the faith and sympathy of other people who believed in God, because he parked himself every day at the gate of the temple hoping that faithful people, on their way in to pray, might have mercy upon him and toss him a few coins.

Neighbors carried him to the temple gate every day where he held out his hand and waited. He didn't have to shout out, “Hey! Could you help a poor crippled man? Could you spare a couple quadrans?”

The lame man didn't have to identify himself because everyone in Jerusalem seemed to know who he was. They'd seen him for years at this same place. He was a fixture: the lame man at the temple gate. We don't know his name. Maybe the locals didn't know his name either. But on this day, in this place something happened to him that sparked a new chapter in the history of Christianity.

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After the first Easter, it became increasingly clear that the people who believed that Jesus really was the Messiah – the people who decided to keep Jesus' life going by living the way he lived – those people experienced things that clearly revealed the hand of God. They saw how souls could change, how bodies could change. But even more amazing was this: they suddenly had – in themselves – the power to heal in the name of Jesus Christ.

Although they were followers of Jesus and of course we call followers of Jesus Christians – remember that Jesus was a Jew and his first disciples were all Jewish. And so Peter and John – as good Jewish men – were heading up to the temple for 3:00 prayers when they encountered a man they had probably passed many times before: the lame man.

Peter stared intensely at the man, lying there by the gate, and the man – thinking he might receive a handout – stared back at Peter and John. But Peter said,

***“I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you;
in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”***

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I remember a friend who tried this at home. As part of her spiritual discipline, whenever she found herself in a scary or uncomfortable situation, she said – out loud:

“I claim this space in the name of Jesus Christ.”

It wasn’t supposed to be a magic trick. She didn’t expect a bolt of lightening to flash in front of her eyes. She probably didn’t even expect God to suddenly heal the beggar sitting at the Metro entrance when she took the subway, or the co-worker down the hall in the wheelchair. But she knew it changed *her* and when she was changed, her world changed.

Lee was once in a car accident on her way to work, in which another car crashed into her car at an intersection. She before she got out of her crumpled car to meet the offending driver, she said – out loud – *“I claim this space in the name of Jesus Christ.”*

When she met the man who had hit her, her entire demeanor was different than it would have been. This accident was making her late. Her car was crunched. But the situation was different with the recognition that this accident scene was now Christ’s space. It belonged to him. He ruled in it, no matter what happened: “Hi, I’m Lee,” she said. “How are you?”

Immediately she could see that her face and her voice calmed everything down.

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When Peter took the hand of the lame man and helped him stand up, immediately everything was calm . . . at least for a moment.

The man stood up. In fact, the Bible says “he jumped up.”¹ And he began to walk and he walked with Peter and John right into the temple.

As a person the book of Leviticus would call “blemished,” this lame man would have been excluded from offering food sacrifices in the temple. He would never have been allowed to go anywhere near the holiest places once inside the temple gates.²

But now he leaped and he praised God and he walked right in, clinging to Peter and John on either side of him. He couldn’t help it! For the first time in his forty years, he was walking.

(If he had no faith before, he clearly had it now!) And Peter made it clear that this was not their doing. They were not miracle workers. The power was not theirs. God had done this.

¹ Acts 3:8

² Leviticus 21:18-20

And Peter once again talked about Jesus. And people listened. And about 5000 people came to believe . . .

. . . which brings us to where we are today: the temple authorities were very worried about these followers of Jesus.

Notice who is opposed to Peter and John here:

- the priests
- the captain of the temple (he would be the temple police chief – apparently violence would break out every once in a while and law enforcement would come in and haul away the perpetrators right there in the temple.)
- the Sadducees³ were there. They were aristocratic Jews who famously didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead.
- The high priest – Annas – and all his priestly sons and sons-in-law.⁴ Priests came from “priestly families” who were used to being in charge by virtue of their family heritage.

Keep in mind that, if you were Jewish, you were considered to be among the chosen people, the holiest of all the people God made on the earth. And within the Jewish faith, the tribe of Levi was the holiest tribe. And within the tribe of Levi (the Levites), the priests were the holiest people. And of all the priests – the High Priests were the very holiest. So what we had here – worried about Peter and John – were some very holy men. The holiest of men.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst.”⁵

These pillars of religious conviction and tradition who gathered together to try and figure out what to do with Peter and John had lost all sense of calling. In the ancient Hebrew scriptures, it was clear that the priests – of every stripe – were called to bring people to God, to teach them to glorify and praise the living God, to teach them and show them how to obey God.

But they'd lost their way.

³ The name “Sadducee” comes from the Hebrew word *tsaddiqim* or “righteous ones.” They believed only in the first 5 books of the Hebrew scripture – the Torah. They sided with the Roman powers and lost much of their credibility as faithful Jews because of it.

⁴ Annas was high priest from 6-14 AD. His son-in-law Caiaphas (Luke 3:2) became high priest in 18 AD. John (or Jonathan) became high priest in 37 AD.

⁵ Found in *Reflection on the Psalms* by C.S. Lewis.

Here were two Jewish men – Peter and John – who were being better priests than the temple officials. They had brought even an unclean beggar to God who had had no use of his legs since birth. But now the man could walk and leap and dance. What were the priests going to do about this?

What were they going to do about these notable signs of resurrection?

You would think the temple leaders would be overjoyed at the power of God. You'd think they would celebrate "a good deed done" in God's name. But instead, they were threatened. Why these were merely "uneducated and ordinary men!" They couldn't let them out-preach them!

Instead of letting the men preach and tell the story of God's power, they tried to stifle their talk and keep them quiet. But jail was no deterrent. Threats were no deterrent. Clearly Peter and John were not intimidated by this band of temple officials. They were respectful but clear:

We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.

<p>We are here today because we have seen and heard amazing things. Or we are here because we want to see and hear those things.</p>
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But it's not easy. It's not easy to notice those God moments anymore. And I wonder why.

Is it because we live in a place where the news is saturated with stories about powerful human beings? We live in the center of the political universe and we still tingle a little when we see the presidential motorcade or catch a glimpse of a member of the cabinet. Even seasoned workers on the Hill cannot act nonchalant when brushing by famous senators or Supreme Court Justices.

I know that if I have some kind of "brush with greatness" whether it's George Clooney at the Darfur rally or Sandra Day O'Connor at the theatre, I'm going to tell people. I might even tell strangers.

But if I have a brush with the holy, if something amazing happens to me – a God thing – will I be bursting to tell strangers that story? Or maybe the problem is that we are so desensitized, we can't even identify "God moments" through the day.

Or maybe we are so worn down, so tired, so overbooked that we are very excited about anything?

<p>When was the last time you could not help but speak about something you had seen or heard?</p>

Was it about a happy thing that had happened to someone you love? (*Somebody's getting married! Somebody's having a baby!*)

Was it about something that happened to you? (*"I got a raise!" "I won the Pulitzer Prize!"*)

Was it a juicy piece of gossip you couldn't wait to share, even though it was a little nasty, and certainly not necessary to pass along? (*"Did you hear that so and so's husband left her?"*)

Or was it because you had a moment when you had witnessed something that only God could have done? You were a part of a moment when God's hand was upon the situation and there was peace for the first time in a long time? You felt a joy and a presence in spite of circumstances to the contrary, and it was clear that you were in the God's space. It had been claimed. You had been claimed.

Have you had any of these moments in which you couldn't keep your mouth shut? You couldn't keep from singing?

My hunch is that there are some who have experienced such peace, but there are many more who long to experience that peace.

And that's why we're here.

God calls ordinary people to claim this space in the name of Jesus Christ. To claim war zones and hospitals and prisons and schools in the name of Jesus Christ.

To say it out loud:

- I claim this federal office building
- I claim this homeless shelter
- I claim this park
- I claim this AIDS clinic
- I claim this church in the name of Jesus Christ.

And then to let God work through us to make it so. We find that – like the song we sang earlier – we cannot help but share the amazing things we see God doing, the peace the Spirit allows us to have even in tumultuous times.

*My life flows on in endless song,
above earth's lamentation.
I hear the clear, though faroff hymn
that hails a new creation.*

Refrain:

No storm can shake my inmost calm

*while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,
how can I keep from singing?*

What notable signs are being done through us that tell the world we are trying to follow this Jesus? The very first Christians were known by their faith in spite of all tumult and strife.

How do people know us?

Try this at home: ***I claim this space in the name of Jesus Christ.***

And see what happens next.

Let us pray: Glorious God, Maker of all beauty and goodness, focus our eyes on your Son that we might ourselves be raised from our disabilities and our woes. And lift us up so that we might lift others in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.