

*These Men Had Been with Jesus*  
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So who are we to be as God's people? From "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" in our first reading to "sheep among wolves" and "flogged in the synagogues" as you just heard in our Gospel lesson – Wow, what a contrast. And yet ... as we are about to hear ... perhaps not so much.

We're moving forward with our sermon series on the book of Acts this morning, but it's in our Gospel lesson where Jesus first points the way. As he sent the disciples out to preach, he warned them that things were not going to be easy; they'd even get arrested. *But:*

“When they arrest you, [he says,] do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

Why all this grief? And not only when Jesus was with them, but also after his death and resurrection and his return to heaven, as the church gets launched in the book of Acts. That launch started off with a bang and a vision:

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”

And, indeed, that's how things started off on the day of Pentecost. People who had been raised on the promises of the Old Testament suddenly heard, in the preaching of the apostles, that those promises had now been fulfilled in Jesus. Sins were forgiven in his name; a free and open relationship with God was established – in his name. A lame man was healed – also in Jesus' name.

In Acts chapter 3, as you heard last week, a lame man, being carried by his friends to the Temple to lie there and beg, spotted Peter and John and asked for money. “We don't have any money,” Peter said, “but I'll give you what I do have: in the name of Jesus, get up and walk.” And he did! We read that the lame man – no longer lame – got up and went to the Temple “walking and leaping and praising God.”

Well *that* got people's attention, as you can imagine. And it turned into a preaching opportunity. When the people came running up, Peter declared, “My friends, don't think that *we* did this. No, it was Jesus – crucified and risen from the dead – it was in the name of this Jesus that this man was healed. And God offers *spiritual* healing – and *resurrection* – to *all* of you. Repent, therefore, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, and that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.” [paraphrase of Acts 3:12-19] Great news! And so they did.

Yet not everyone was totally on board with this – in spite of what they were seeing and hearing. There were other eyes watching. Skeptical eyes; perhaps jealous eyes. The leaders of the Temple – including the Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the dead – were mightily

disturbed at what they were hearing. They arrested Peter and John, put them in jail, and the next day brought them to trial.

Now, no one could deny that the lame man was running around the Temple, leaping and praising God – *that* must have been quite a sight. So the religious leaders could only ask, “By what power or in what name did you do this?” To which Peter replied, “I’m so glad you asked” and started preaching again, telling them about Jesus and finishing by saying, “Salvation is found in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

Well that didn’t go down so well with the priests and the Sadducees, but they couldn’t deny that this man born lame kept going by “walking and leaping and praising God,” and so they let Peter and John go, telling them, “*Never ... never* come preaching in the Temple area again.”

Yeah, right. Peter and John replied:

“Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

“We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Hang on to those words. We’ll come back to them.

Well, that’s Acts chapter 4. In Acts 5, we find the apostles back in the Temple area preaching again – surprise, surprise. And again, the priests and the Sadducees – the usual cast of characters – are said to be jealous of all the attention the apostles were getting, and so, once again, had them arrested and put back in jail. Except this time, when they sent the guards the next day to bring them to trial, they found the cells empty – because during the night an angel from God had come, set them free, and said, go back out into the Temple area and start preaching again. Which, as soon as the sun came up, they did.

This was too much. When the priests and Sadducees heard about this, they had the apostles brought in again – this time before the Sanhedrin ... sort of the Jewish Supreme Court – because they were all Jews, after all. This was a big family fight without the cultural differences we see today between Christians and Jews. They were *all* Jews.

“Didn’t we tell you not to preach about this Jesus?” they said. “You’re just stirring up trouble for us, saying it was because of us that Jesus was crucified.” To which the apostles replied,

“We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Well, here we were again. They were about to have the apostles put to death when one of the Sanhedrin’s leading members, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, stood up and said, “Let’s power down folks; cool your jets.” Well, not exactly in those words, but you get the idea.

“We’ve had similar problems in the past,” he said. He named several examples of false teachers who had been popular for a while but eventually gotten themselves killed. His advice?

Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.

Little did he – or they – know how right he was. And so they let them go – and so the book of Acts continues and doesn’t end with the fifth chapter. In the last verses of chapter 5, we read:

Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, [the apostles] never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Now so far, we’ve been hearing of success after success. On Pentecost the church grew from 120 members to about 3,000. Two chapters later, we read they grow to about 5,000. But the church is people, after all – sinful people of limited vision, just like us. Always has been, always will be. And so, as we read, we find that they didn’t get everything right. Isn’t that good to hear? Not that they had failings but that we aren’t the first ones to have them?

It happened in Acts 4 and 5. In a flush of idealism – and not at God’s suggestion or command, by the way – we find an attempt, at the end of Acts 4, to establish sort of a socialist experiment. Noble minded, good in purpose, and certainly helpful, we find people selling all their property – land and houses even – and bringing the money to the apostles. Laying it at their feet, we read. And this money was used to help those in need.

No problem at first. There is no hint of corruption or of anyone taking advantage of the situation – until we come to a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. They sell a piece of property and then give only part of the money to this project. No problem with that. It was their money to do with as they pleased, after all. The problem was they wanted to have their cake and eat it, too – to make themselves look good in the eyes of the church but then lie about how much they were giving. When all was said and done, they lied before God and end up dying – perhaps just of fright, we aren’t really told. Now this is certainly not about to turn into a sermon on financial stewardship; this would definitely not be a good text for that. Rather, the point, as I said, was that, in spite of the early and spectacular success of the church, they didn’t get everything right.

This is the only place we read about this socialist experiment; after this rough attempt, noble as it was, it apparently just faded away. It hadn’t been suggested by God, and it failed because it fell short of recognizing that we’re all still just sinful folks. We are followers of Jesus *because* we are all just sinful folks ... *because* we need our sins forgiven. And we also seek to follow because we are *grateful* forgiven sinners and want our lives to be a thank you to God and to count for others. But we always remain sinful people, and our vision is limited.

What was not limited, though, was what we find on both sides of this idealistic but unsuccessful experiment: the bold preaching of the apostles even when, again and again, they were told to keep quiet. What gave them this bold, confrontational attitude? This ability to take on the opposition, to speak to power, to challenge authority? Well, truth be told, those are really the wrong words. These folks weren’t particularly bold or confrontational – remember, they immediately went into hiding when Jesus was crucified.

And, truth be told, they weren't all that visionary. In coming weeks we'll hear how, deep down inside, they weren't even really fully convinced about going "from Jerusalem through Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth" ... especially that bit about Samaria and the ends of the earth? Like other Jews of their day, they felt that God's concern was with Israel only. That the Gospel was only for Jews. The promise to Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" – well, that had pretty much been forgotten.

So had God's declaration to them at Mt Sinai that you heard in our first lesson – that Israel was to become a nation of priests – to the world. Indeed, as we continue through Acts, it will take an encounter by a persecutor of the church with the risen Jesus on a road outside Damascus, and a strange three-fold vision to Peter on a housetop, to bring before these folks the radical message that "Gentile Lives Matter."

Now, when Peter, and then Paul, first brought this message to the Jerusalem church they were stonewalled. "Gentile Lives Matter?" We're not going there, they were told. And if that somehow has a familiar ring to it, it's because, again, truth be told, our tendency in the church to focus on our own tribe and be oblivious – or even resistant – to God's great concern for those on the other side of the fence (a fence which shouldn't exist) goes back a long way. We in the church have to confess even today to having a checkered history at best – sometimes even problems with present attitudes – when it comes to matters of race. And it started early. It started early.

So, if Peter and John and the others were neither bold nor confrontational, and if they weren't particularly visionary, just what was it that got them out into the temple precincts preaching about Jesus after being told not to do so – twice? The Holy Spirit, for sure. That's one of the things the book of Acts makes clear, beginning with Pentecost and continuing throughout the book.

But there are also two short statements, in their first clash with the religious leaders, which add to the answer. First, in Acts 4:13 we read that the priests and Sadducees were astonished that Peter and John were "unschooled, ordinary men," but they took note that "they had been with Jesus." They had been with Jesus. And then, a few verses later, when told to stop preaching, Peter and John respond, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Yes, excited they were. They had seen and heard so much while Jesus was with them – and then it continued with Pentecost and the healing of this lame man. And I find myself asking, "When was the last time the fact that I have been raised knowing Jesus has energized me enough that I "cannot help speaking about what [I] have seen and heard"?"

I know. It happens. And it doesn't mean we are any less convinced or thankful. If you are married, remember that first time you met your spouse? – and you just wanted to tell everyone how wonderful this person was? – and you couldn't understand why people were starting to roll their eyes after a week of listening to you? But now today – when was the last time you spoke with shining eyes to someone about your spouse? It doesn't mean you love them any less; we just sort of settle in, you know. As wonderful as that person is, and as thankful as we still are ... well, we just sort of get used to the wonder and joy of it all, don't we?

I think we all need a booster shot on occasion. A reminder of just how amazing is the fact that, because of Jesus, we have a relationship with the same God who created us, our world, and the

distant galaxies. A reminder that we can speak with him ... and live totally free from the fear of spirits or demons – or of an angry God – fears that daily grip many people all around the world.

You see, what we who “have been with Jesus” have – and what others need to hear from us, just as the crowds in the temple area needed to hear it from Peter and John – is a life changing, life affirming, life stabilizing message. My friends, you can see that need ... in lives around us. Especially in these times of coronavirus, job loss, racial injustice, angry demonstrations, police reform measures and a struggling economy – in the midst of all of this stress, there are folks around us struggling to deal with it all but without an assurance that there is a solid ground beneath us come what may.

Therefore we will not fear [as we read in Psalm 46] though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Even then ... even then ... Jesus says to us, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

To the ends of the earth ... to the very end of the age. Thank God for those early followers of Jesus who couldn't stop speaking of what they had seen and heard. Thanks be to God they spoke out to fellow Jews with the message of Christ crucified and risen from the dead even when it landed them in prison. And thanks be to God that Peter and Paul later followed with the message “Gentile Lives Matter” – and that they did so even when this bold challenge and reminder to look beyond the tribe was at first met with stony silence and resistance from other Christians.

May we do no less when it comes to reaching to those “outside our tribe” even when it may be socially costly to do so. May we do no less when it comes to speaking of what we have seen and heard – and of Whom we know – to folks unnerved because of all that's going down around us. And as we do, may others come to recognize that “these people have been with Jesus.”

Let us pray ....