

Walking and Leaping and Praising God

Acts 3:1-26, 4:1-22

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I learned this healing story as a child, at Vacation Bible School, where I learned a song:

Silver and Gold have I none – but that which I have I give you
In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.

He went walking and leaping and praising God
Walking and leaping and praising God

The story is amazing – amazing to those who witnessed, and mazing to us today. A man lame since birth, who had spent years languishing, and begging, at the Temple Gate, was now not only healed, but strong. Not only better, but amazingly better. Jumping! He who had been once imprisoned by his body and forced to beg to make a life.

And the story recounts that he kept walking, and jumping, and praising God, clinging to Peter and John, and walking, and leaping, and praising. This man's disability has not only been alleviated – he is now a very strong person – one who was born lame and was lame for over 40 YEARS, is now walking and leaping and running around, praising God. And this amazes all in attendance. They are astounded! And they literally rush Peter and John and the formerly-lame man, because they are so amazed.

So, never one to miss an opportunity, Peter begins to preach—to share the good news with all who come around to hear. He reminds everyone that God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob sent Jesus – whom they rejected, whom they handed over to be executed. But God raised this one, this Jesus, and it is HIS NAME, it is JESUS' NAME, which has made this formerly-lame man strong.

And of course, Peter and John irritate the temple higher-ups with their words, and they are taken into custody. But it is too late – already, FIVE THOUSAND people have heard and believe.

The next day Peter and John are brought before said higher-ups, and they testify, powerfully and compellingly – boldly – of this saving good news. The temple authorities wonder what to do, because so many people have already seen and heard what has happened. So they warn Peter and John to keep their mouths shut, which Peter and John indicate there is NO WAY they will do. The temple authorities threaten, but because the formerly-lame man is more than 40 years old, and because so many have already seen and heard, they let them go because they are flummoxed. They can't figure out how to effectively punish them! They can't figure out how to stop this movement!

Friends, there is so much going on in this story, we have to pick and choose our focus today. I will limit my exploration to three things

The meaning of disability among those who follow Jesus
The power of Jesus' name
And the risk of sharing the Good News.

Disability in the ancient world was a sign of a disabled character. That is, it was seen as an outward, physical sign of an inward problem. If you were disabled on the outside, there was clearly something wrong with you on the inside. You had a character defect.

Multiple early documents, monographs, and what we might call research papers were published in the first few centuries of the first millennium on the science of *Physiognomy* that detailed how physical defects reflected the presence of character flaws. And Luke, the author of Acts, undoubtedly knew of these documents.

This story makes clear the early church's rejection of this theory. The followers of Jesus, who knew well societal understandings of physical disability rejected and refuted these wholesale, believing instead that all were broken. All had sinned and fallen short of God's glory. And the existence for some – for many – of disability did NOT mean that there was something inherently WRONG or MORE WRONG than the norm with those people. In fact, their physical brokenness was subject to the power of Jesus, just the same as the brokenness of all other people, just the same as our own sinfulness.

So the first piece of good news here is: Jesus has power over our brokenness, and our brokenness, physical, mental, or spiritual, does not separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. So, to follow Jesus, we must join Peter and John in seeing those with physical disabilities as just like us – just like us in our brokenness, and just like us in turning to Jesus to heal and to save.

Secondly, there is power in the name of Jesus. We baptize using the name of Jesus. We pray using the name of Jesus. And the name of Jesus has the power to heal and to save. Peter makes a point of repeating again and again that it is the power of this name that has saved the man – that has made a lame man into a strong man.

What does it mean to us that the one we worship and serve has a name that is powerful in and of itself? That the name of Jesus has the power to heal and to save?

We need to ponder on this truth and consider our use of this holy and strong name in all we do.

Finally, we need to thank God for the willingness of our forebears, our ancestors in the faith, like Peter and John, who risked much in order to keep sharing the Good News – to not keep silent, to continue to preach, and to teach, and to heal. This work is not risk-free. It is not an easy thing to follow Jesus, nor to proclaim the good news.

It is counter-cultural in many ways. In Peter and John's time and place, preaching Jesus could land you in prison, or subject you to beatings and torture, or finally, you could be executed.

In our time and place, it often sounds to people nonsensical, not realistic, not reasonable, to believe in the power of Jesus to save. It doesn't compute with business sense, nor sound worldly-wise thinking. Even in a church meeting, one can be accused at times of naivete for suggesting that Jesus will save, for thinking out loud that the good news is the point, for encouraging people to keep the faith.

We are a counter-cultural people, my friends. We are not going the way of the world. The child we baptized this morning will come to know, if we do our job, and his parents do their job, and his grandparents do their job – this little one will come to know, if we are all faithful to the vows we have taken in this place that the faith into which he was baptized sounds like folly to most of the world, and proclaiming it as truth is not without risk. And endeavoring to live by it is so much harder than just saying it. And this small one will also come to know, if we do our job and keep our vows, that this life, this life of faith in Jesus, whose very name holds power, this is a seriously and completely alive way of life.

This is the way that one comes to understand life in all its fullness.

The way to which we are called is not without risk, and is also filled with peace and joy and hope. It is in this faith that we gather today. It is in this faith that we welcome this baby into this global fellowship that transcends time and space. It is knowledge of the love that we have together, among us, and to share with others, that keeps us proclaiming and living out this good news.

Peter and John testified that they could not keep silent in the face of the transformative power of this amazing good news. The formerly-lame man went walking and leaping and praising God. May we also speak the truth we know, celebrate its authenticity, share it with the children we welcome through baptism, and sing it out to a world that desperately needs to hear.