

## ***Why Stand You Staring?***

By Dr. Dave Neale

### **Behind the Text**

This morning, we return to the lectionary with the traditional readings from the Book of Acts for the weeks of Easter.

We find ourselves at the second public sermon given by Peter. The first was on the occasion of Pentecost. This one is on the occasion of the healing of a man born lame at the Beautiful Gate of the temple as Peter and John go up for the hour of prayer in the afternoon.

So, let's see what the first preacher of the Christian movement has to say. And we are to understand that there was no manuscript, no carefully considered sentences, no hours in the study, as we lesser mortals must spend.

This was the Holy Spirit speaking through Peter, extemporaneously. This simple, uneducated fisherman was transformed into the mouthpiece of God to a waiting world by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The scene is this. It happens on the steps of the Beautiful Gate. There is a man who asks for alms and is instead healed by Peter. The crowd recognizes the man leaping and praising God as the beggar they know; the crowd descends on the two disciples. All are filled with "wonder and amazement" (εκστασις, the word from which we get ecstasy).

Of the Beautiful Gate, Josephus says this: "Now of these nine gates were on every side covered over with gold and silver...but there was one gate that was [outside the Court of the Women] of the holy house, which was of Corinthian brass, and greatly excelled those that were only covered with silver and gold." Josephus, *The Jewish Wars* 5:201<sup>i</sup>

***And a lame man from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple.***  
(Acts 3:2)

For context we also need to understand the nature of alms giving in this culture. Don't think in terms of the way we often treat the panhandlers (you see the pejorative name). Those whom we ignore or perhaps judge; we give something out of a sense of Christian duty.

Here on the steps of the Beautiful Gate think in terms of tender moments of compassion for those that are unable to work and so excluded from a normal life.

I've seen it myself on a couple of trips to Jerusalem. I was really affected by the kindness with which those who "beg" or ask for a handout are treated on the streets of the city.

### **In the Text**

Peter's response to a request for alms: ***Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said "Look at us." And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them.*** (Acts 3:4-5)

So, in our mind's eye we see the beauty of the setting, the hopeful eyes of the man, and the intense interaction between him and the two disciples.

***Peter said, "I don't have a nickel to my name, but what I do have, I give to you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"... The man went into the Temple with them, walking back and forth, dancing and praising God... The man threw his arms around Peter and John, ecstatic. (Acts 3:6-8)<sup>ii</sup>***

It's a wonderful scene and a really happy story.

### **From the Text**

There are two ideas in this passage that are worthy of comment.

Firstly, in the first verse of our reading we have this: ***You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we made him walk.*** (v 12)

And then a correlate in vs 16.

That is, something happens ***...by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong...***

So, let's reflect on what this might actually mean.

This is important because modern evangelical theology has tended to put the emphasis on the believer rather than on the one in whom we believe. That is, if you believe enough God will be present in the situation.

We always think everything is about us. This is a very deep part of western culture, the introspective obsession with self.

You may have heard it put this way, that if you believe something enough, it will occur by **your** faith in Jesus.

But that is not what this means at all. Clearly, the man who was healed had no faith. How could he? And Peter has just said that it was not by his own piety that the man was healed.

'Why are you looking at me!' Peter says. You think I'm special or have some power? The Peter who knows he denied the Lord in his greatest moment of need. Peter, the foremost sinner among the disciples, save Judas.

'It's not *my* power here. This is the power of the resurrected Jesus. This is the power of the *name*.'

He was healed by ***...by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong...***

What does this mean? The language is important. This is really the first time these kinds of ideas are broached in nascent Christian thought. Btw, Luke, the writer of the gospel, is also the author of Acts. And even though Luke champions Paul in Acts, very little of Pauline theology is present here.

This word "by" has dozens and dozens of meanings in various contexts. But here the magisterial Bauer/Arndt/Gingrich has the meaning as "of that upon which a state of being, and action or result is based." (p. 286-287)

The word “name” used this way is new to the Christian story... is shorthand for the victory of life obtained by the resurrected Jesus. The faith that is based upon his “name!” When we speak in the *name* of Jesus we are speaking of the power of the resurrected Lord!

And, ***...and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health...*** Not through the faith of the believer, but the faith of Jesus.

What is our part? How is Jesus’ faith made real in us?

- It is not by our own piety or power that God is present in a situation;
- It is not by dint of believing seemingly impossible things;
- The experience of this faith isn’t based on the strength of our ability to believe.

All of these ideas are misconceptions of modern evangelical theology. It’s egotistical, it’s not biblical and it’s not what God asks of us – to believe harder.

Saving faith is experienced by giving over our souls to the new reality of his “name.” Not by mental gymnastics, but by existential release, by the giving of ourselves to the Risen One. Ego dissolves. Striving ceases. Peace awaits.

Can you see that this comes to the very heart of what it means to have relationship with this transcendent being, our Lord God?

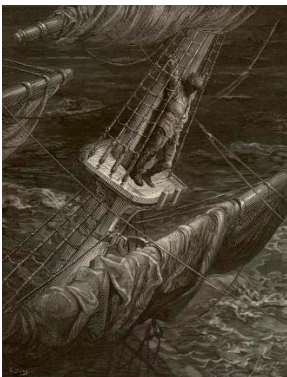
And this is my final point from this passage this morning (the five most beautiful words in any sermon).

***But you have rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of Life, whom God raised from the dead.*** (3:14-15)

After telling his hearers that they were complicit in the crucifixion of Jesus by condoning it, Peter absolves both the common people and the “rulers” of guilt because they ***...acted in ignorance.***

Peter sees himself in this same light. For he too was complicit by his denials of knowing Jesus.

There is a line from the Rime of the Ancient Mariner (S.T. Coleridge), where the mariner, having shot an albatross while navigating the seas of the Antarctic, is blamed by the crew for bringing ill luck upon the ship.



*Ah! well a-day! What evil looks*

*Had I from old and young*

*Instead of the cross, the Albatross*

*Around my neck was hung*

You see, the life that has been released into the resurrection power of Christ is covered with a blanket of grace that we can hardly imagine.

I often think that we hardly understand the love of God all. All I can do in response is release my soul into the Divine Being.

As Peter puts it, ***Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins*** [the ones you know about and the ones you don't] ***may be wiped out.***

Hallelujah and thanks be to God.

Benediction:

And now may the God who has removed the albatross from your neck, and hung there instead the cross of the Risen Christ, bless you and keep in the week come. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> This is most likely the location of Acts 3:12ff. It is a likely place for beggars, being outside of the Court of Women, so that is a good match. It is likely just off of the eastern wall near Gethsemane and not far from the Pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed the man lame 38 years.

<sup>ii</sup> If it puts you in mind of the healing at the Pool of Bethesda we did a couple of months ago, I can see why (John 5:1-9). There also we found a man who had been lame his whole life (38 years) and who was told by Jesus, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." You might recall that this precipitated a great conflict with the authorities, who took exception to the fact that this was done on the Sabbath. Likewise, the healing of the man at the Beautiful Gate and Peter's words to the crowd that gathered precipitated their arrest by the captain of the temple.