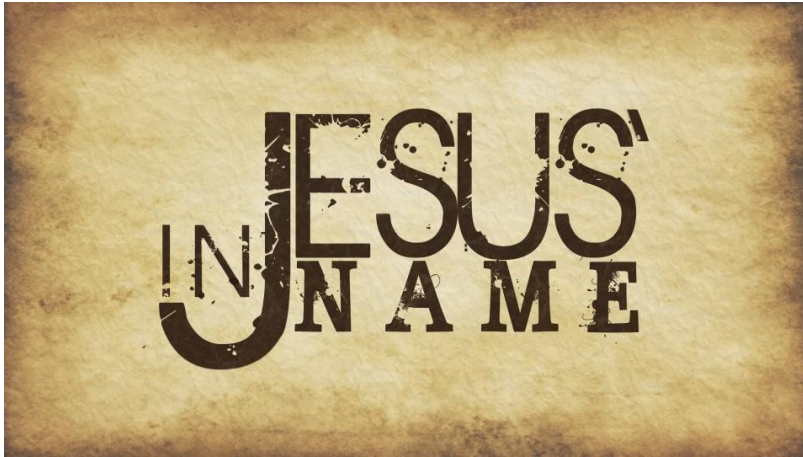


Sermon – September 17, 2023  
“By what power or by what name did you do this?”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 4:23-31

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill open hearts, and anoint these words as a blessing for your people by igniting our continued transformation into Christ's image and leading us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! Let me ask for continuing prayer over the Good News Club at the Northumberland Elementary School and for all of the clubs that are meeting at this time. We had twenty children at the Good News Club last Wednesday. We were blessed to spend time with them and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with them in word, deed, and fellowship. The Fairfield Bible study is approaching the end of the Book of Revelation and will be starting a new study in a few weeks. Let me encourage all to consider joining the Thursday morning study time as we move into a new book and we come together to study God's word.

We are continuing our journey through the first fourteen chapters of Acts. Let me provide a high-level summary of where we have been over the last three weeks. In chapter one, the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven and then waited until they were clothed with power from on high before they moved out into Jerusalem to be witnesses for Jesus. The church was born when Holy Spirit was poured out and the new church began to grow. Peter and John were

going into the temple complex to pray and stopped just outside the Beautiful Gate that leads to the court of the Israelites, where Jesus healed a lame man through them. The lame man walked with Peter and John into the inner court of the temple and a crowd that was there to pray gathered around them as the now healed lame man was walking, leaping, and praising God. Peter shared the Gospel with those in the crowd, telling them to repent and believe in Jesus in response to their questions of “What does this mean?” and “What are we to do?” Here, where Peter is proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, is where we come down to ground level in the Book of Acts.

Peter, standing with John and the now healed lame man, is just ending his sermon to the large crowd when the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees arrive and arrest Peter, John, and maybe the now healed lame man. We should notice a growing boldness on the part of the temple leadership as they arrest Peter and John while they are engaged with the crowd. When they came for Jesus, it was at night, but now they act in broad daylight or at least the evening hours. But in spite of the arrests, 5000 come to believe in Jesus. Even with the arrest of the disciples, the Gospel moves forward.

We might wonder why Peter and John are arrested. Does the healing of the lame man outside of the temple inner court somehow break the Law? Does it break the Law to teach the people in the inner court of the temple? What offense has Peter and John committed that they need to be arrested? Let’s look at the scripture and see if we can understand their arrest. The crowd and all people would agree that healing the lame man is a good thing, so that would not be their offense. The scripture holds two key details that help us understand why they are arrested. First, those who come to support the arrest are the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees. The captain of the temple is the second in command to the High Priest. He and those with him may have come in response to the large crowd gathered and the fear that a rebellion of some kind was developing, but the key to understanding the arrest is the presence of the Sadducees. The Sadducees were the wealthy aristocrats in Jerusalem who were the ruling class for Israel. They were connected to Rome and collaborated with Roman authorities to keep order in Jerusalem and Israel. The Sadducees were not looking for a Messiah because they believed that when the Maccabees, earlier leaders of Israel, broke free from Greek rule, the age of the Messiah had begun. They saw themselves as ruling over Israel and leading Israel in the Messianic age. The Sadducees also denied the idea of the resurrection of the dead. Luke tells us

that they were “much annoyed because [the apostles] were teaching and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. They would understand Peter’s teaching the 5000 as “unauthorized preaching by unprofessional preachers.”<sup>i</sup> The reason for the arrest is that Peter, by proclaiming that Jesus is alive and has healed the lame man through himself and John, is proclaiming Jesus as the firstborn of the resurrection. Peter is proclaiming Jesus, who the Sanhedrin had put to death, as alive and working. Peter is claiming that the end of the evil age has begun, Jesus the Messiah has risen from the dead, the firstborn of the resurrection, and the kingdom of God is at hand. The Sadducees are annoyed, threatened, and seek to end this teaching. They arrest Peter, John, and most likely the now healed lame man and put them in jail for a trial the next day.

Can we imagine what Peter and John might be thinking as they spend the night in jail waiting for their trial? Only a few weeks earlier, Jesus had been arrested, tried, found guilty, and crucified by these same leaders. Peter and the other disciples had hidden out in the upper room with the doors locked for fear of the authorities. Now Peter and John are in jail, awaiting their own trial by the same authorities. What might be going through their minds?

The next day comes, and Peter, John, and the now healed lame man are taken before the Sanhedrin and made to stand before them just as Jesus had been made to stand before them. The Sanhedrin was the ruling body of Israel. It consisted of about 75 people and included the High Priest family, the captain of the temple, the elders of the tribes of Israel, and distinguished rabbis who were considered authorities on the Law and its application. Members of the Sanhedrin were drawn from both the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Pharisees, we might recall, did believe in the resurrection from the dead and were still waiting for the arrival of the Messiah. Jesus stood in this same place only a few weeks ago and the outcome of his trial was death, so as Peter and John step into this place of trial they have that memory in the back of their minds.

Then comes the now familiar questions we have heard often in Acts spoken to these defendants. We have often heard the questions, “What does this mean?” and “What are we to do?” in our journey in Acts, and we will hear them spoken in many forms as we move forward in this book. Here the questions are asked by those who are struggling with holding onto their power. They ask, “By what power and by what name did you do this?” Recall that Jesus silenced the Pharisees when they asked him this question. Now we have Jesus’ disciples standing in front of this distinguished gathering having to answer the same question. Don’t miss that Luke tells us

that before Peter speaks the first word to answer their question, Peter is filled with Holy Spirit. Peter answers as one who is filled with power from Jesus and is ready to be Jesus' witness before a group of Jewish leaders whom, unless he was on trial, he would otherwise never have had the chance to address. Peter does not hesitate. Instead of shrinking in fear before this group, he shares the Gospel with them. He declares to the Sanhedrin that the formerly lame man, whom they all know and who is standing before them, was healed by Jesus, whom they killed but whom Peter and John are preaching as resurrected. Peter tells them Jesus is still at work as seen in the healed man who for much of the last 40 years has sat outside the Beautiful Gate begging for daily bread. Peter makes it clear that the leaders, the Sanhedrin who are listening to him, are responsible for killing Jesus. Peter quotes to them a scripture these learned rabbis would recognize as messianic. Peter quotes to them Psalm 118:22, telling them, "This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."<sup>ii</sup> The rabbis present would have understood this text as applying to Israel. They believed the world had rejected God, but Israel was the cornerstone that God would use to restore all things to Him. What Peter is telling the judges sitting there listening to him is that Israel is not the cornerstone; they have the idea of a Messiah wrong. They killed Jesus, God's Messiah, yet God has raised Jesus from the dead and Jesus is now at God's right hand working as a resurrected person. That work can be seen in the healing of the formerly lame man who happens to be standing beside Peter and John. Peter's point is that the resurrection has begun, with Jesus as the first to be resurrected. Peter tells the Sanhedrin the kingdom of God is breaking in and you who killed Jesus are not part of it, repent and believe! That is a "drop the mic moment" or, in an older tradition, a moment when you could have heard a pin drop. Peter has silenced the Sanhedrin; they have nothing to say in opposition or in their defense. They recognize that Peter and John are not educated men. They have not been schooled by an esteemed rabbi and taught the Law. They are outsiders yet they have used the scriptures to make their point, to take the Sanhedrin to truth just as Jesus had done. The members of the Sanhedrin also recognize that Peter and John are Jesus' companions who were so distraught by Jesus' death that they had hid in fear, but who now boldly and with surprising courage and command of the scriptures stand before this group and effectively defend themselves under circumstances in which even highly educated men would struggle to succeed. We should note what the Sanhedrin does not do; they

do not send Peter and John to see Jesus' tomb to remind them he is dead. They do not produce Jesus' dead body as evidence that Peter and John's teaching is false. They have no body or they would produce it and end the trial. Their response is to have Peter, John, and the lame man removed from their presence so they can talk. As JD Walt describes this moment, they go into "executive session." They close the doors so they can discuss what to do without those on trial hearing their discussion. They ask each other one of the questions we hear throughout Acts: "What will we do with them?" They have a choice. The members of the Sanhedrin can repent, align with Jesus, declare their belief in him, and become Jesus' followers. That door is open to them; Peter has made that plain. It is obvious to all in Jerusalem and on the Sanhedrin that a notable sign has been performed through Peter and John. All of Jerusalem seems to have known the lame man at the Beautiful Gate. While we might want them to emerge from their executive session and tell Peter they have decided to follow Jesus and they are surrendering all of the temple income, all of their lives, and all of their high positions to follow Jesus, that is not what they do. Instead, they threaten Peter and John and charge them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Peter again courageously steps up and tells the Sanhedrin they will do what is right in God's sight, "for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."<sup>iii</sup> Peter, John, and the now healed lame man are released after they are threatened again to keep quiet about Jesus. We might find it interesting to realize the Sanhedrin will not speak Jesus' name and contrast their hesitancy with Peter and John not being able to stop proclaiming it.

We should commend the courage we see emerge in Peter and John as they are filled with Holy Spirit and are transformed from men hiding in fear in an upper room behind locked doors to men boldly standing in front of the rulers of Jerusalem and sharing Jesus with them. We also are to be those who wait for power from on high and then go out into the world to be Jesus' witnesses. Most of us will not stand before rulers and proclaim Jesus, but we are to be Jesus' witness in this place and all of the places we are led. How do we move from a church that is not actively witnessing for Jesus to a church, the people of God filled with the spirit of God in the world? Let's look at the early church's response to Peter's and John's experience with the Sanhedrin.

Peter and John leave the trial and go to the church. They go to their friends, their fellow believers in Christ. When they arrive, they don't start talking about calling down fire on the Sanhedrin or praying that Jesus will take vengeance on them. What they do is report what

happened to the church. They share their experience in the temple and trial and how Jesus is working through them to bring about the kingdom of God. When the church hears what happened, they praise God. They praise God for what He is doing through them as witnesses in Jerusalem. They lift up their voices and give praise to Jesus. Then they pray. Let's look at how they respond in prayer and see if we can begin to adopt some or all of their approaches. Notice that they begin with praise to God and God's sovereignty over them and address God as the creator of all things. They begin their prayer with attributes of God. Next, guided by Holy Spirit, they begin to pray the scriptures. Here they use the first lines of Psalm 2, a psalm that is known to point to the Messiah and the nations or Gentiles' work to remove the Messiah. "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed,"<sup>iv</sup> In their prayer, they apply the familiar text to the rulers of Jerusalem who are working and threatening the early church and Jesus' continued work through the people of the church. They do not ask God to strike down the rulers. Their focus is asking for boldness as Jesus' servants and to speak the Good News with all boldness while Jesus continues to work signs and wonders through them in his name. Recall what has happened. Jesus healed a lame man as a sign, but he has also used the healing and Peter's bold words to bring 5000 men from death to life. Jesus is at work building the kingdom of God. The church is boldly proclaiming Christ and when persecuted, they ask Jesus to help them to be bolder witnesses. When they have prayed, God responds, shakes the place where they are gathered, and they are all filled with Holy Spirit and speak the word of God with boldness.

In the prayer they offer, I think we can begin to find a model of what a church might look like in the easy time of witness and in times when persecution grows. We find an image of what Jesus is asking his church, us, the gathered body of Christ, to be. We are to gather together and share with each other what Jesus is doing through us in this community and all the places we are led. We are to give praise to God for Jesus' work through us. As those filled with Holy Spirit, we are to be Jesus' witnesses and then come and share our experiences, our challenges, and our needs with each other, and then join together in prayer, asking for greater boldness and the presence of Jesus acting through us as we seek to share the Good News in our community. We are to be those who have a focus on God and understand Him as sovereign. We are to pray the scriptures, allowing Holy Spirit to bring to our minds scriptures that apply to our situations. We

also are to ask Jesus to give us courage and boldness to speak the word, and we are to ask Jesus to stretch out his hand to heal and work signs and wonders through us in Jesus' name. We are to ask Jesus to fill us with Holy Spirit and to be used by him to bring people in our community from death to life. Let us seek to be open to fresh filling of Holy Spirit, to linger in this place before God and seek to meet Jesus here. Let us share with each other how Jesus is working through us in the lives of people we meet, come to know, and with whom we are growing in new depths of relationship, as we seek to share the Gospel and be Jesus' witnesses in this place. Jesus cleared the temple that it might be a house of prayer. What do we need to set aside so that we also might become a church where we share our witness experiences and pray for greater boldness?

*Pray with me. Jesus, we confess we lack the courage of Peter and John to stand in the power of Holy Spirit and speak the Good News we now carry. Fill us with Holy Spirit that we might boldly speak the word of God right here, right now with all of the love you have given in your word to us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

Benediction: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Linger before God in this place, wait for power from Jesus, and then go out as one sent to walk the Long Road. Go forth into Jesus' mission to all people, speaking the word of God with boldness. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Stott, John. The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV Act 4:11-12 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 3260-3261). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> NRSV Acts 4:20.

<sup>iv</sup> NRSV Psalm 2:1-2a Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 1237). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.