

April 18, 2021
Sermon Manuscript

Acts 4:1-22 (ESV)

¹ And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

⁵ On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is

no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, ¹⁶ saying, “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” ²¹ And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

Blessed Powerlessness (Acts 4)

This morning our Acts passage opens with the paragraph where we left off *last Sunday*, and this morning I want to explore how the plot continues from chapter 3, drawing once again from the help of theologian Willie Jennings. Last week in chapter 3 we explored the Apostles Peter & John encountering a man who'd been lame since birth and healing the man, but when that attracted the attention of all who were at the temple, Peter testified that this healing had been done by the Spirit of Jesus whom they - the crowd - had put to death, and he then called them to repentance. Well now, today, we began reading at the beginning of chapter 4, where the rulers of the people - the priests and the captain of the temple and

the Sadducees - got wind of Peter & John proclaiming the Gospel of Christ and had them arrested, to have them brought for a hearing with the ruling Council.

Well, the next day the Council assembled, which verse 5 tells us included all of the “rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.” And verse 7 continues that “when they had set (Peter & John) in the midst, they inquired, ‘By what power or by what name did you do this?’” And Peter essentially makes the same speech to them that he’d made to the common people the day before. Verse 8 says,

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

And verse 13 describes how the Council sized them up, saying, “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished.” #

So, clearly there are some power dynamics at play here. Those who are the most privileged and powerful are feeling threatened by this gospel that Peter & John are proclaiming. Verse 2 mentioned those of the priestly class being annoyed by Peter & John and exerting their power to have Peter & John arrested, essentially attempting to silence them. And then the next day all of the bigwigs trot out - including Caiaphas, the infamous high priest - to question Peter & John, in what to many would’ve been quite an intimidating scene, and intimidation was surely part of the goal. And yet, to these rulers’ surprise, Peter & John didn’t seem to be intimidated by them at all.

So clearly this passage is highlighting a significant power imbalance between the two parties, but in an unexpected way. Because what it really reveals - again, perhaps surprisingly - is that with the inbreaking of Christ’s kingdom those whom the world views as powerful are the ones who prove to be *impotent* at least in comparison to those who are in Christ - operating in His Kingdom - even though the world thinks of them as nothing; in this case as uneducated commoners. In other words, what this episode really exposes are the **limitations of worldly power**.

For example, just notice the level of threat that these rulers feel - despite being so supposedly powerful - the level of threat they feel in response to Peter & John shows their awareness of just how tenuous their worldly power is. They are clearly terrified of losing it. Meanwhile, in stark contrast, Peter & John seem completely at peace. Even though they were imprisoned overnight, they are the ones behaving like they are free. And to the Council’s astonishment, Peter & John are responding to the rulers’ intimidation tactics in a manner that demonstrates their belief that “Greater is he who is in them (Jesus) than these powers in the world.”¹

So this passage reminds us of how tenuous and fleeting worldly power is, which is why it a fool’s errand for us as believers to pursue it, particularly when we have Jesus and the freedom available to us through the way of his kingdom, which operates differently from the kingdoms of the world. And this leads to another weakness of worldly power that is exposed here, which is the Kingdom of God also has a tendency of leaving worldly power befuddled and disoriented, at least for a time. Because the kingdom

¹ 1 John 4: 4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

operates in a manner based upon love rather than fear, worldly powers are often unsure how to respond to it or manage it.

Thus, the end of verse 13 says,

And they recognized that (Peter & John) had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, ¹⁶ saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.

Despite all of their worldly power, for 40 years they'd had zero solutions for this man born lame. And yet, in an instant God, through these nobodies Peter & John, had changed and improved his life forever. Well, for the rulers this is a big problem, because for all intents & purposes these rulers essentially functioned in this context like *they* were God. Not only were they religious leaders who claimed to speak on God's behalf, but what is sinister about worldly power, whether it is religious or not worldly power functions as if it is God; those exercising worldly power use force and threat - either explicitly or implicitly - to ensure that what they say goes. Indeed, individuals or groups **have** worldly power to the extent that what they say does go in the lives of others. And yet, to the Council's credit, they understand that the healing of the lame man had the potential to undermine all of that authority, because of the way it demonstrated *quite clearly* that not only was the council not God or even God's instrument - since God had used other means to help this man in a way the rulers never had - but the healing also suggested that the Council did not even *speak for* God or represent His will - despite being religious leaders and the shepherds of Israel - but that perhaps this Jesus *whom they'd killed*, and now his Apostles, did.

So here in Acts chapter 4, the illusion of worldly power has been completely laid bare. But Peter actually provides the Council members with an opportunity here. Suddenly confronted with how insecure they were, having constructed their lives on the sand of worldly power, at that moment they *could* repent and join the followers of Jesus, just as many from the crowd apparently had the day before (4:4). They could give up their trust in the worldly power they'd acquired and start over: be born again to life in the Spirit. But as we talked about two weeks ago on Easter Sunday, it is easier for those who have little privilege & power in this world to count all of that loss than it is for those whom the world has decided are pretty great. These rulers had spent their whole lives constructing and enjoying little kingdoms for themselves, were they really going to change course now? Well no, sadly they were not; their pride was too great. So while many of the common people *had* repented the day before, not a single member of the Council does here. Instead, they **double down**. Specifically, they double down on *playing God* and seek to reassert control. After conferring with one another, verse 17 says they decide "...in order (to keep the message from spreading) further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.' **18** So they called (Peter & John) and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." And had Peter & John had poor boundaries or weak faith, this probably would've worked. After all, the Council did have the means and power to change the circumstances of Peter & John's lives considerably. But thankfully, Peter & John had very good boundaries and understood who God was and that this council didn't speak for Him. So in verse 19 they "**19** But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, **20** for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.'" In other words, they tell the Council to 'go fly a kite' or as some in the South say, 'oh bless your hearts'.

And verse 21 says, "when they had further threatened them, they let them go." Those who trust in worldly power and are thus seeking to play God in the lives of others will be dominated by fear and thus will often resort to threats. While in great contrast, those who live by faith are free to represent God with uncontrolling love. And this (the latter) would characterize Peter & John's conduct. They had risked

themselves to proclaim the gospel to the people in chapter 3 and their rulers here, but they also clearly respect the other parties' capacity to choose for themselves what they will do; they respect the free will of others just like God does. In other words, Peter & John plant the seeds - they just seek to be faithful - and let God worry about bringing the growth. So even if we didn't know the bigger picture here, by just this comparison of fruits - the Council's resorting to the use of threat versus the disciples' use of love that doesn't seek to control - comparing this, there is little doubt as to who is representing God in this situation. ##

Well, I'm guessing I am not alone in marvelling at how Peter & John were able to conduct themselves and respond with such courage and confidence in these circumstances. And certainly we do not live in a context that is *quite* as hostile to Christianity as theirs. But what I would suggest might make the witness of Peter & John difficult for us to relate to is the difficulty we may have in imagining us ever *allowing ourselves* to be in such a vulnerable situation, of ever sticking our necks out nearly as far as they did. But why is that? Why might even the Council's approach feel much more comfortable and relatable to us than the approach of Peter & John?

Well, the dilemma plaguing Christians in much of the Church - not only in our day, but perhaps since the 4th century (when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire and the Church was given worldly power) - ever since then, the dilemma facing Christians in the dichotomy between worldly power and the kingdom of God, has been the temptation **to try and have it both ways**. You see, ever since then, for the past 1700 years in the West, it's been suggested, or assumed - it's seemed possible - for Christians to have it both ways. And by this I mean it has seemed that we can be Christian disciples - that we can get saved and have Jesus on our side, live by faith on that front - while at the same time we can also pursue the security and glory that the world offers; that we can live by faith, but also cover our bases in case God doesn't come through for us by pursuing worldly power and wealth. But at the root of this is not faith or faithfulness, it's fear. Now, I know that none of us are ever going to arrive at the place of *purely* living by faith on this side of glory. As I said on Easter, we all have our idols. But that doesn't mean shouldn't seek after it; and that the impact on our lives and those we love wouldn't be considerable. The question is: do we even *want* to be rid of our idols? Are we able to see how the idols we cling to cultivate fear and steal us away from resting in God; how our idols cause us to view others - at least those different from us - as threats, rather than people to love as God loves them?

Last Sunday we had the baptism of baby Rose Heinrich, but during it we were all given the opportunity to reaffirm the commitments of our own baptism using the Apostles' Creed. Well, Willie Jennings has a helpful teaching that relates baptism to the new way Jesus invites us to approach life with Him. It's important to remember that water represented chaos in the ancient world. The second verse of the Bible - Genesis 1, verse 2 - describes the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of the earth before bringing order to it in the six days of Creation;² the parting of the Red Sea for the Israelites to be rescued and then it's coming back together to drown the Egyptians chasing after them spoke to how consequential the sea could be to human life; the writings in the book of Job & Psalms about the great sea monster Leviathan, as well as the story of Jonah being swallowed by the whale all spoke to the sea as the place of unknown, totally beyond human control, and rightly so: many people died at sea, never to be seen again. So all of this deepens the significance of Jesus submitting to water baptism. His going down into the water should be understood as a sign of Jesus embracing our weakness, our vulnerability to the whims and ways of this world. That is what the water represents: that which is beyond our control, that happens *to* us in this life. Jennings observes how Jesus did not seek to escape this fragility of human life, but entered into it. And while this ended the world ultimately putting him to death, his

² "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."

resurrection showed that this counter-intuitive way of living is nonetheless the path to glorification for all of us. And so, our baptism is meant to symbolize our willingness to follow Jesus in the trail he blazed for us, in the way of that embraces the currents of life but with Jesus at our side; our baptism is meant to signify desire to live in reality, and God's commitment to help us doing that, trusting our destiny to him, and thereby being freed up to love those around us *whatever* the circumstances; like Peter and John here in Acts.

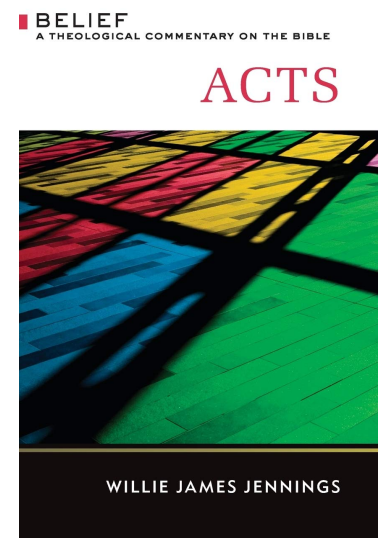
However, our *tendency*, even if we have been baptized or not, is not to *live this way at all*; is not to live by faith, but by fear. The sinful way of living we were born into seeks to hedge, to **reject** the currents of life, by doing whatever we can to insulate ourselves from them; by grasping for more than is ours to control. And yet, this is the approach taken, not by Peter & John, but by the rulers they're encountering. These members of the Council have chosen in their lives to run after wealth and power to insulate themselves from the currents of life. And yet, by insisting upon securing themselves in their own ways (rather than trusting in God) they have gone down a false path that has left them constantly *afraid*, forced to view every other human as a threat, and never able to truly rest. And yet, even the power they've gained - or Jesus might say "the world they've gained" - when God shows up (here in Acts 4) it proves to have come to nothing! #

Well similarly, when we as Christians seek to control the world around us rather than live through it with God, whether we do this in our relationships and in politics and in the things we spend our time and energy doing - even if we do it in the name of Jesus - it is in truth a *denial* of our baptism; not to mention a courting of untold frustration and being unintentionally or unwittingly opposed to the purposes of Christ himself. And to approach the Christian life this way - trying to inherit Jesus **and** the world³ - is the reason why the witness of Christianity has become a joke in America; this hypocrisy is why people are fleeing the Church in droves. #

But Jesus is calling us down a much narrower path - and it's not too late to begin taking it. It wasn't too late for the Council either; their pride just prevented them. But Jesus taught that whoever would save his life (in a worldly manner) will lose it, but whoever is willing to give up on that futile mission for Jesus' sake will save it. And so, the path of true life is in denying the fears of our flesh and encouraging those frightened parts in faith, to trust the way of Jesus. Such faith is what would later allow St. Paul to state remarkably that "for the sake of Christ" he was "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities," as Peter & John faced in Acts 4, because the Lord had taught Paul that "His power is made perfect in weakness," meaning that when he was weak and reliant upon the Lord, only then was Paul strong.

So what trust have we placed in worldly power is the Spirit calling us to repent of today? What are we grasping for in this world because we just haven't been able to trust Him? May God grant us the faith to give these lies up.

Amen.



³ To have one foot seeking Jesus and another foot seeking worldly power.