

## *Sermon Text for July 24, 2016*

By Holly Miller

Isaiah 35:3-10, Acts 3:1-10

### **“Colliding with Christ”**

Today we'll see what happens when a horribly humdrum existence runs smack dab into the power of Christ. Our first Scripture describes the total restoration – physical and spiritual – that takes place when the Messiah arrives. Our second Scripture is from the Book of Acts, Chapter 3, verses 1 through 10. It's a story that takes place on a day soon after Pentecost as the apostles Peter and John are on their way to the temple in Jerusalem for daily prayer. Let's hear what the Lord has to say to us today... Scripture: Acts 3:1-10.

The day began like any other day, and like every other day for him, in a life that experienced no variety. Since birth this life was sedentary; ankles and feet did not work, so he could not either. When he was old enough, begging became his occupation. Every day he would be carried to the temple by the gate and placed on a mat to beg for alms, money given as a gift to those who were poor. Charity was honorable and required by the Jewish law. The temple was a very good place to be for those who were begging, because those who entered the temple at the hour of prayer were in a charitable frame of mind. They tended to be generous.

Now that he was forty years old, it took two men to carry him to the Beautiful Gate. The Beautiful Gate was most likely the main and largest gate, made of bronze and located in the Court of the Women on the east side of the temple, facing the gate of the sanctuary. When, at morning prayer, he was carried there, the gate *was* quite beautiful shining in the light of the rising sun. Today, though, he could barely get his body to move, and it was no easy task for his friends to carry him up the fifteen steps to lay him by the gate just before three o'clock when evening prayer began. In his whole life, he had never once passed through that gate, never seen the other side; neither women nor the unclean nor the maimed were allowed to enter. He was maimed.

He settled into his spot on the uncomfortable mat and began asking for alms from all who passed by. People would toss him coins as they went in to pray, but rarely did anyone speak a word to him. It was almost as though he were part of the ground itself. He noticed Peter and John

heading toward the gate and called out, “Alms, alms for the poor?” He reached out his hand, but was careful to avert his eyes, looking only at the dust on the edge of his mat. Then it happened. Breaking through the daily busyness surrounding him, he heard a command, “Look at us!” He lifted his head and looked in the direction of the two men. Yes, they *were* speaking to him. Expecting his coin, he turned his face directly to them and his eyes met Peter’s. “Look at us!” Peter had said. What did this misshapen man see? He was hoping for a hand-out. Peter was looking at him intently – it almost felt as though this stranger was looking deep inside him – and it was as though he couldn’t stop looking back at Peter.

After what seemed an eternity, Peter spoke to him, “I don’t have any silver or gold.” “Is that all there is then?” thought the man. “...but I am going to give you what I do have.” The man sat transfixed by Peter’s gaze. “...in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” Instantly, at those words, life coursed through his body from his head to his toes, and when Peter took his hand to raise him up, he jumped to his feet. He began to walk, as though he had walked all his life long. Not only that, he walked right through the gate with Peter and John; for the first time in all his forty years, he walked right into the temple. He began to leap, bounding with joy and overflowing praise for God! And everyone was watching him leap and shout to God for joy. “Isn’t that the beggar who asks us for alms everyday outside the Beautiful Gate?” “He has been lame since birth!” “It’s a miracle!”

Let’s take a closer look at this miracle told by Luke in Acts. It is preceded by Pentecost, in which the Spirit of the Lord falls like flames upon the believers, who then live as a community in a radical manner filled with awe and praising God. The apostles performed many wonders and miraculous signs and each day new believers were added to the community.

The end of Acts Chapter 2 prepares the reader for the miracle that follows in several ways. It tells the reader that at this point the Christian believers continued their Jewish discipline of meeting and praying daily in the temple courts, which explains why, in Ch. 3, we find Peter and John heading to temple for evening prayer. Chapter 2 tells us that the believers gave up their possessions, a good reason for Peter saying in chapter 3, “Silver and gold have I none.” We learn that many wonders and signs were taking place, and indeed, in chapter 3, we have a specific wonder performed by one of the apostles.

There is so much to learn about God in these ten verses, but there are two elements I especially want to explore. I noticed that, in verses 3 and 4, there is repetition of a particular verb in the English. See if you can tell what it is: “When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, ‘Look at us.’ And he fixed his attention on them...” Though different Greek verbs are used for each one, all convey similar actions of sight. The first – “he saw Peter and John” – is a simple noticing; the second – “Peter looked intently” – perhaps looking in an attempt to discern the heart of this man; third – “look at us!” a command, is followed by “he fixed his attention” – the beggar chose to obey the command by focusing on Peter. It seems to me those verses are a crucible - that what takes place in verses 3 & 4 is a preparation for the miracle to follow.

All of the ingredients are now there. Previously, the beggar’s focus had been down, inward, on himself; now he changed his focus, he chose to turn from himself and toward the apostles, who were acting as representatives of Jesus Christ. For forty years, his focus had been blurred as he saw only the small picture of himself and his own world. Then, as he turned to the representatives of Jesus, his vision was no longer blurred and he saw beyond himself to the love of Christ. The lame man paid attention to Peter and John when they said, “Look at us,” and he was healed. We too have the opportunity to pay attention, to be transformed in our minds and hearts, to be healed and filled with joy. We have a choice: to look, to turn and fix our focus, our attention, on Jesus instead of ourselves. We have a choice; we can choose life!

The second element we’ll explore is the actual words of healing spoken by Peter: “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” As a direct result of this sign, because the people saw this lame man healed and were filled with wonder and amazement, Peter was presented with the opportunity to teach, explain and share the good news. In his sermon delivered on the temple grounds, Peter makes it very clear that he is not the one responsible for the healing; he says, “It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.” (3:16b) This healing was very visible. Later, when questioned by the rulers, elders and teachers of the law, “By what power or what name did you do this?” Peter responds: “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed” (4:10). The no-longer lame man, standing there right before their eyes, became a physical representation of Christ’s

power to heal and overcome death. Acts 4:14 says, “But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them,” the rulers could say nothing. *They* didn’t have a leg to stand on. Peter clearly identified the agent of healing as Christ. The healing clearly illustrates that Jesus is alive, raised from the dead, and active!

Jesus Christ of Nazareth. What’s in this name? Peter had the power to heal in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth; however, he did not use the name of Jesus as some magical incantation. There is authority in the name of Jesus the Messiah. Theologian and pastor Will Willimon explains, “The name of Jesus unleashes power as it is the direct link between the living and active Lord in heaven and his community on earth. In this name (the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth), Jesus is present, along with his saving power.” His presence and power are at work for the crippled man.

Willimon cautions us not to think of Christ’s resurrection as a one-time event that occurred in the dead body of crucified Jesus. He says, and I quote, “It is a divine demonstration of authority and power, a divine challenge to all the powers that hold us in their thrall. The resurrection is not something we might look forward to someday; it’s a statement about power and rule today. The resurrection of crucified Jesus is a demonstration of who God is, who is in charge, where we are headed.” If all of that is true, that in His name, Jesus is present and living and active, what prevents us from living in that power today? If Jesus is on the move, shouldn’t we be on the move with Him?

Maybe this lame man had dreamed what it would be like to walk, but never in his wildest imaginings did he ever think this would happen. “And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them.” He really had no expectation of change. He was asking for the status quo – to subsist, to exist exactly as he had every day of his life. Instead, he collided with Christ and received transformation; his life was never the same. Never. He was asking for a coin – for some “change;” he received total change. What are you expecting to receive? What do you want in your collision with Christ? To be made whole from all that tears you apart? To be healed from all that hurts and pulls you down? Do you expect to rise up in the power of Christ?

What if the crippled man had not turned, had not fixed his attention on Peter and John? What would his life have looked like then? He would have spent the rest of his life carried around and put down on a mat to beg. Another what if...suppose, after Peter raised the beggar up

and he was healed in Jesus' name, instead of leaping for joy, he sat right back down in front of the gate and continued begging. No one would know that he was healed. No one would see the power of Christ standing before them, physically represented right before their very eyes. Peter and John would have had no audience for their speech. No speech, no intervention by the authorities, no jail, no spread of the gospel, no 5,000 new believers following the Way. All because a healed man didn't respond with leaping and praising God; he sat back down. Isn't that what we mostly do? Sit back down. You have been called: "Turn, look at me!" Imagine the difference we would make if we were living as a physical representation of the power of Christ?

When you are sitting on a mat, unable to move, the world shrinks into self. Your vision is limited, near-sighted, and you see only the smallest picture of life. When you turn toward God and fix your eyes and attention on Him, your world grows. Your vision improves: it is limitless, far-sighted and views the bigger picture. It has clarity and it is focused. Insight and oversight improves. At the same time, and in light of your improved vision, you begin to see self and its relationship to God more clearly. In fact, you begin – just begin – to see as God sees.

Turning implies a newness and a new direction – turning from old actions and toward the new. If your turning takes place under the power of Christ, there will be transformation. Recognizing God, turning your attention to Him and focusing on His greatness, His holiness, His desires, will change your everyday humdrum existence to one of leaping joy, so let's collide with Christ and live in the power of the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.