

## Courage

Acts 4:1-22

West Valley Presbyterian Church, June 18, 2023

Since Pentecost, we've been studying Acts, to learn more about the characteristics of the early church, and how we might incorporate those characteristics into our church life now. We've talked about repentance and baptism in Acts 2, and we will have a baptism and a reaffirmation of baptism right after the sermon today. We've talked about repentance and healing in Acts 3. Today we're going to talk about courage, and we'll be reading Acts 4:1-22.

### SLIDES 1-11

"The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. <sup>2</sup>They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup>They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. <sup>4</sup>But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

<sup>5</sup>The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. <sup>7</sup>They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

<sup>8</sup>Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! <sup>9</sup>If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, <sup>10</sup>then know this, you and all the people of Israel: 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. <sup>11</sup>Jesus is

'the stone you builders rejected,  
which has become the cornerstone.'<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

<sup>13</sup>When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. <sup>14</sup>But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. <sup>15</sup>So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. <sup>16</sup>"What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup>But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

<sup>18</sup>Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup>But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! <sup>20</sup>As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

<sup>21</sup> After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup> For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.”

If I were standing in front of the Supreme Court judges, and they were scowling at me and telling me to quit talking about Jesus or I'd be thrown into prison, I have to admit, I would back down. They are far more powerful than I am; I know very little about the law; and personally, it's upsetting when people are angry at me. Now it's true, it's very unlikely that I would ever be standing in front of the Supreme Court. Very unlikely than any of us would be in that position. But, work with me here, because that's the situation that Peter and John found themselves in. Let's see what courage looks like.

First of all, let me explain who the arrestors are: priests, captain of the temple guard, and Sadducees. Priests are in charge of the sacrifices. The captain of the temple guard is the equivalent of a police chief. He's second in command after the High Priest. He commands the temple guards, to make sure that everything stays nice and peaceful and the Romans don't get involved. And the Sadducees are the descendants of the Maccabees. Who are they? They are the warriors who led the rebellions against the Seleucids, kicked them out of Judea, and purified the Temple. The Maccabees are still celebrated at Hanukkah to this day.

Before the Romans came, the descendants of the Maccabees – the Sadducees – were in charge of everything: the army, the Temple, and the Sanhedrin (the court, which was run by the High Priest). After the Romans came, the Sadducees were no longer in charge of the army; but they were still in charge of the Temple and the Sanhedrin. So, yes, when the chief of police, and the judges, and the priests, come up to Peter and John and say, “We don't like what you're saying, so you just come along quietly now”, of course that's what they do.

## SLIDE 12

And what was it that Peter and John were doing that got them so angry? Besides healing a middle aged man in Jesus' name? A man who had been lame from birth, that everyone knew because he sat begging outside a Temple gate every day? Yes, besides that. They were angry because, as it says in v. 2, the apostles were : 1) “teaching the people”, and 2) “proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.”

The Sanhedrin – high class, highly educated- felt that Peter and John had no business teaching people, on Temple grounds, since they hadn't proper training. I understand that. Once at the Church of the 49ers in Columbia, a drunk man walked into church just before the Sunday service; and during the sermon he started hollering that he was a preacher and he wanted to talk. I told him – from the pulpit - that it was my turn to talk, and he should sit down and be quiet. He stomped out in a huff and banged the door. So, although I don't agree with them, I can understand the priests' anger that the apostles are taking over the priests' job of teaching people in the Temple.

And then, the content of what Peter and John were teaching was guaranteed to rile the Sadducees even further. They were proclaiming the resurrection of the dead - in Jesus. The resurrection of the dead was a hot button item. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection; but the Pharisees did. And both groups were represented on the Sanhedrin. And on top of that, the person who was resurrected was Jesus, whom the Temple leaders had done their best to get rid of a couple of months before! Add it all up, and what do you get? Lots of anger.

SLIDES 13 -15 (Acts 4:8-12)

In the face of power that's really angry at you, most folks – including me – would probably back down and say, "I'm sorry, I'll never do it again." But Peter and John don't back down. They speak up. They say, "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame, and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: 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. Jesus is the stone you builders rejected which has become the cornerstone. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." Wow. That was powerful. That took courage.

SLIDE 16 (Acts 4:13)

Even the Sanhedrin noticed their courage. They were astonished that these men, who had been trained as fishermen, not rabbis, could speak so eloquently and interpret Scripture so effectively. And where must that courage have come from? The elders noted just one thing: that Peter and John had been with Jesus. Had followed him and learned from him. They didn't mention anything else that could inspire such courage.

And they were quite right. Being with Jesus does inspire courage, because Jesus has courage. The Holy Spirit that was in Jesus is now living in those who were with Jesus when he was on earth, and in those who are with Jesus now that he has returned to the Father. Courage doesn't come from living through storms on the Sea of Galilee. Courage doesn't come from learning to endure cold and rain. Courage doesn't come from intense study. No, courage comes from being with Jesus! It's that simple!

SLIDE 17 (Acts 4:19-20)

Having been with Jesus, Peter and John don't back down: not the first time they're told to stop talking, and not the second time either. The Sanhedrin members had conferred together. "What are we doing to do with these men?" they ask. "That healing couldn't have been natural. God had to have done it. But they have to stop talking, before this spreads any further." So they told Peter and John to stop talking in Jesus' name. They don't back down and say "Yessir." They speak right up again: "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." The Sanhedrin tells them again to stop

talking or else. But they don't. Because for them, courage comes from being with Jesus. They had been with Jesus- and they still were, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Where does courage come from for us? Same place – from being with Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is right here with us. Jesus didn't back down. He spoke up. Peter didn't back down; he spoke up. John didn't back down; he spoke up. And so can we. The Holy Spirit was active in Peter and John as they spoke about Jesus, and he can be active in us when we speak about Jesus. When we are with Jesus, we learn from him how to be more like him. When we pray; when we study Scripture; when we talk with other believers; we are with Jesus and we learn. When we volunteer our work, when we praise God together, when we face difficult situations together, we are with Jesus and we learn. True courage comes from him.

Maybe we don't often see the true courage that Peter and John exhibited. As Christians, we are very fortunate to live here in America. The worst we face for being a Christian here is social ostracism. We aren't beaten for our faith, or thrown into prison for our faith. We haven't had our houses burned down or our daughters kidnapped. But the situation is very different in some other countries. The magazine Christianity Today reminds us that in 2022, 5600 Christians worldwide were killed for their faith; 2100 churches were attacked and closed; 124,000 Christians were forced from their homes; and 15,000 of them became refugees. The most dangerous countries for Christians right now are North Korea; Muslim countries including Somalia, Yemen, Eritrea, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and Sudan; and, surprisingly, India.

I will never forget hearing from lower-caste people in India about losing what little they had when they become Christians; or from an Egyptian Presbyterian woman explaining how she had to keep a very low profile in her apartment complex to avoid being reported to the police by her Muslim neighbors; or from an Iranian man who had come to America to study engineering, converted to Christianity while he was here, and was thrown into prison in Iran when he went back to visit his family.

None of us here this morning are likely to need that kind of courage. But if we do, being with Jesus will supply us with that courage, in whatever ways or in whatever quantities we might need. And we never know! Maybe we'll need courage to defend someone else who is being picked on. Maybe we'll need courage to face a hostile bureaucracy. Maybe we'll need courage to escape domestic abuse. Or maybe, right now, we need courage to face our own weaknesses and do something about them. Whatever we need true courage for, we can find it if we spend time with Jesus. If we open our hearts to him as we pray. If we do our best to listen to him through the words of Scripture and the counsel of godly Christians. May God grant us all the growth we need in true courage! Let's pray.