



Central Peninsula Church

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Acts 4:1-22
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Facing Off Without Falling Apart

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

“As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, ‘By what power, or in what name, have you done this?’ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED** by you, **THE BUILDERS**, but **WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER** stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.’ Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one another, saying, ‘What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name.’ And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.’ When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing

had been performed” (Acts 4:1-22).

We’re almost at the end of what I think is one of the greatest weeks of the year. It used to be that all the bowl games were pretty much on one day, but now we get all the big ones spread out over a week’s time like the last spoonful of marmalade spread over a piece of toast. It started on New Year’s Day with the Cotton Bowl and ends tomorrow night with the national championship game. In-between we had perhaps the most exciting bowl game ever played. It was an epic battle between little known, underrated, David-like Boise State and the traditional power—Goliath-like giant, Oklahoma. Since my son-in-law played for Boise State no one had to convince us that they could win. But no one seemed to believe, and for a few minutes it seemed like they were right, but then the miracles started happening.

In Acts chapter 4 we have another epic battle. And, yes, it pits a little guy, a David-like underdog against a behemoth giant. On the one side you have two unschooled, unimpressive Galilean fisherman named Peter and John. On the other side you have all the power and authority of 2,000 years of religious tradition. It was the first such clash in the history of the Christian church.

Remember all of this took place in the Temple precincts. Earlier in the day, Peter and John were going up to the Temple to pray at about 3:00 in the afternoon when they stumbled upon a 40-plus year old man, lame from birth, begging alms. Peter looked at him and said he didn’t have any money but he did have a name, and in the name of Jesus Christ he commanded him to walk. Immediately Dr. Luke tells us that the man leaped up and began walking and praising God. He followed Peter and John into the Temple and by the time they came out there was quite a crowd. Everyone was amazed because they knew this guy; he always sat and begged in the same spot. So Peter seized the opportunity to tell them that this miracle was not done because of his own power or piety but because of faith in this name of Jesus.

And then, because there was such a commotion, the religious authorities in charge of the Temple were so upset by what was going on that they arrested them. This is the first of many times in Acts when the early Christians would clash with the Jewish rulers. And Luke writes this in such a way that he wants us to be impressed with the array of rulers they’re facing off against. In vv.1-6 he lists no less than eleven different individuals or groups who

opposed them. In v.1 he mentions the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees. In v.5 he mentions the rulers, elders and scribes. And then in v.6 he mentions four people by name: Annas and Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and all who were of high priestly descent. I mean, this is like the starting lineup for Oklahoma; these are all the heavyweights lined up against these two measly fisherman, one of whom has already denied Christ three times.

Sometimes we feel like this, don't we? As a follower of Jesus, when you look at the opposition, do you ever feel small? Do you ever feel small intellectually? We have great centers of learning like Stanford, Harvard, and Princeton where intricate arguments are put forth which seem to refute the credibility of the Bible. They tell us that human beings could not have possibly been created by God, but we're just the random result of natural selection. We feel like this morally as we deal with a daily onslaught of immorality in our culture. Just try to bring up the idea that sexual intimacy ought to be reserved for marriage and you'll be viewed as a nut case. We even feel this religiously. We live in a world where in a place like Saudi Arabia there are over 27 million people, but there is not one single known Arab Christian. No Christian workers are allowed to enter the country. Bibles are banned. Expatriate Christians who work there live under strict surveillance. And that's just Saudi Arabia. How can we say that salvation is found only in Christ when there are so many who may never really hear of Christ except in connection to an American flag.

So we DO at times feel very small. What I would like to do today is look at this story and ask ourselves, what does this teach us about living in that kind of world? What can we learn about this clash between the messengers of Christ and those opposed to Christ? I want to offer seven principles. First of all...

I. We should expect that there will be a clash.

In v.2 it says they were "greatly disturbed" because Peter and John were teaching and preaching about Jesus, that he was raised from the dead and that we will one day be raised up with him. The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection; they didn't believe in life after death. We can expect the world to be greatly disturbed by the gospel. There are things about it that will really bother them. And that's why they resort to intimidation. You miss this in the English translation but when it says in v.1 that the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees "came up to them" the idea is that they came upon them suddenly. They didn't just meander up to them

and say, "Hey, we need to talk about this." One moment Peter and John were preaching, and the next moment they were ambushed by soldiers. The captain of the temple guard was the official in charge of the temple police. He ranked right below the high priest. This is a scary guy! And then they threw them in jail for the night. They didn't have to do that. They could have just said, "Hey, we want you here tomorrow morning to talk about this." But instead they said, "Let them spend a night in jail. Let them cool their heels in there. That will dampen their spirits." But that didn't work, did it? The next day Peter and John stood firm before a meeting of the Sanhedrin. And so the authorities took it a step further. Verse 21 says "they threatened them further." That means they had threatened them earlier as well. When they told them "to not teach or speak in the name of Jesus" they added, "and if you do we'll beat the tar out of you."

When we're up front about the gospel, we shouldn't be surprised when we get this kind of reaction. This is one of the reasons we often shrink away from talking about it. In our culture we won't be thrown in jail, but we may be laughed at. That's intimidating, isn't it? We may be left off the invitation list. If you're a student and you speak up about the gospel in the classroom of a secular university, you might risk getting a lower grade. If you talk about it on your application you might not even get into the school. Those are ways that the world tries to intimidate us into shutting up, which brings me to my second point...

II. You can confine the messengers but you can't confine the message.

Luke shows a sense of irony in vv.3-4. Here these rulers are trying to intimidate and threaten Peter and John. In v.3 they stop them from preaching and throw them in jail. But then right on the heels of that in v.4 Luke says that those who heard the message and believed numbered about 5,000! Remember that there were 3,000 who believed after Peter's first sermon, so now there are 2,000 more, and that's just the men. This is amazing! Peter and John didn't even get to do their altar call, but 2,000 people came to Christ anyway. Do you see the point? You can confine the messengers, but you can't confine the message. You can arrest the messengers, but you can't arrest the message.

I have a friend I keep in touch with. His name is Ziya. I met him in Albania. He is Turkish. He's never been to the United States. Turkey considers itself a secular state, yet it is 99.8% Muslim and if a Muslim converts he is usually disowned from his family. Ziya grew up in a secular Muslim family, but when he was just 17 he went to an Anglican church with ten friends because of an article about it in a local newspaper. The newspaper accusingly reported that the church lures young people to become Christians by offering them wine, 100 US dollars every Sunday, and the possibility of marrying a young British

woman and thus getting to live in the UK. He says despite the fact that they didn't give them any money, didn't allow them to take the communion wine, and provided no prospects of a lovely British wife, he became a Christian there. He wrote me this morning and said, "I'm still broke, sober and single after all these years, but that's how I first met with Jesus..."

You see, you can't confine the message. Even after his family disowned him, he still follows Christ. Sometimes we wonder how we would respond in a situation like that. We wonder if we would cave in and stay silent. This brings me to my third point.

III. We needn't fear what we'll say because the Spirit will help us.

It would be a huge mistake to think that this is all about Peter and John being such courageous men. It would be a huge mistake to overlook what Luke says in v.8, **"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them..."** And it would be a huge mistake to forget the promise that Jesus made to his disciples when he said, **"And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not become anxious about how or what you should speak in your defense, or what you should say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say"** (Lk.12:11-12). Right when we need him the most, not before and not after, he will give us what we need.

I heard a story about some missionaries in Africa who were translating the Bible into the Karre language. They had a hard time translating the word that Jesus used for the Holy Spirit, which is the word *paraclete*. One day the translators came across a group of porters going off into the bush carrying bundles on their heads. They noticed that in the line of porters there was always one person who didn't carry anything. They assumed he was there to make sure everyone did their work. But then they found out he wasn't the boss; he had a special job. He was there in case anyone fell over with exhaustion; he would come and pick up the man's load and carry it for him. There was a word they used to designate this porter which meant "the one who falls down beside us." That became the word they used for *paraclete*.

That's what the Holy Spirit is for us. Right at the moment we fall; right at the moment we need him the most; right at the moment don't know what to say; he'll come beside us and fill us and empower us. We know that Peter had already been filled with the Spirit back in chapter 2. But this was a special filling at a special time which allowed him to speak in the mouth of the lion. He'll do that for us. And sometimes we'll say something and at the time we didn't think much of it, but we learn later on it had an impact. That happens from time to time. Someone will say, "Remember when you said this? That got me. That's what did it." And I'll say, "Oh, that's so cool. Praise

the Lord." And they'll walk away and I'll think, "Did I say that?"

The Holy Spirit will give us just what we need when we need it most. He'll give us the words. But the fourth point is...

IV. We must not compromise the message.

As you look at Peter's message in vv.8-12 it's so pointed and so clear. Notice he addresses them with a measure of respect. He calls them "rulers and elders of the people." He doesn't start out "you brood of vipers." Then he uses a little irony, "Hey, are we on trial here for doing good to this lame man? Is it a crime to make someone well?" And then he gets more pointed. He says, "You know that guy you crucified, Jesus Christ the Nazarene? You know the One God raised from the dead? Well, this man is able to stand here before you because of him. And by the way, salvation is found in no one else. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Now all of us here know that's not a very popular thing to say these days. It's okay to have your own beliefs. It's okay to say you believe in Jesus. People aren't all that offended by that. But if you want to get a reaction then say that there is no other way. If you want to get people upset say that because no one else did what Jesus did; no one else lived a sinless life; no one else was offered up his life to take away the sin of the world; no one else was raised from the dead; no one else ascended into heaven to be seated at the right hand of God; because of that, he's the only way to salvation. People don't like that.

On Tuesday I was listening to the memorial service for President Ford. Tom Brokaw gave a stirring eulogy, followed with another by President Bush. Then the minister got up and read from John 14. I was so glad he chose that text as he began reading. That's the one where Jesus says, "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going." And then remember what Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" He read that too. And then he read Jesus' great response, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life..." But he stopped there and began his sermon. And I thought, why did you stop there? Because Jesus didn't just say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life..." He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, but through Me."

Now I don't know that man and I don't want to be too critical of him. But it seems to me he stopped

right at the point where people get upset. It seems to me he kind of de-clawed the gospel. It's not that we like to offend people. It's not that we say these things with arrogance and a kind of know-it-all, we're right and you're wrong attitude. That's not it. We say this humbly; we say this because we've found it to be true; we say this because he said it.

You might think, "Well, I can't really articulate the gospel like that. I've never been trained in this. I've never been to Bible school or seminary. This leads me to my fifth point..."

V. We don't need to be formally educated to be bold and articulate in what we say for Christ.

Luke makes a very interesting statement in v.13. He says that when these religious leaders saw "the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and recognized them as having been with Jesus." The idea is not that Peter and John were illiterate country bumpkins. The words used indicate that it was that they weren't educated in the right schools; the rabbinic schools. You might say they went to Boise State instead of Stanford. And I love what Luke says next. He says it was then that they realized these guys had been with Jesus. Why that connection? Because it was the same thing with Jesus. John 7:15 says that when the Jews heard Jesus teaching "**they marveled saying, 'How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?'**" It was the same with Jesus as with Peter and John. They were bold and straightforward and clear. They had insight into the things of God, even though they had never had the education the scribes had.

In order to be bold and forthright and clear in what you say for Christ in public you don't need to be formally educated or skilled. What you need is real fellowship with Jesus—real experience with Jesus, the kind of experience that enables you to say: "I cannot but speak what I have seen and heard." I've gotten a lot of education. I like to say that I'm educated beyond my intelligence. One thing I've learned is that there is nothing in advanced education that makes a person a clear and courageous spokesman for the truth. I believe in education. I believe some Christians are called to be scholars. But scholarship doesn't make a person courageous, straightforward and clear. What makes a person bold like that is being utterly sure that he's seen God's truth. You might say that boldness and clarity come from spending time with Jesus. The more you have real dealings with him, the more confident you become and the more you want to speak the truth for his sake.

But even with that, even with a straightforward presentation of the truth inspired by the Holy Spirit there will be those who refuse it. The sixth point I want to make is...

VI. Those who benefit from wrong may turn a deaf ear to contrary evidence for what is true and right.

This is really amazing, and yet very common in the world. The religious leaders excuse Peter and John and begin to confer with one another. And they're really at a loss. In v.16 they say that a great and undeniable sign of love and power has been done by these courageous men in the name of Jesus. All Jerusalem knows this. But then in v.17 they say "Let's threaten them with harm and try to keep them quiet about this Jesus." Verse 16 states reasons to seriously consider the truth of what Peter and John say. Verse 17 describes the behavior of a people who aren't interested in the truth, but only in the benefit that they get from falsehood. It's like saying: "Look, people with diabetes are being healed by this new drug; quick, let's ban it from the world." When people are getting benefit from a wrong, they turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the mounting evidence that they should change.

It's still true today. The mind perceives reality selectively in order to justify what the heart desires. We wonder how something like Nazism could survive and even thrive just 65 years ago. How could the average person in Germany rationalize what was going on? How could a person live a normal life, go to work, love their children, feed their pets, and yet all the while know that Jews are disappearing all around them. It's because those who benefit from wrong often turn a deaf ear to contrary evidence for what is true and right. But we do the same thing today. We perform intricate surgeries on prenatal infants in order to save their lives. We can convict a person of two counts of murder if they kill a mother with child. But all the while we still abort millions of babies each year? How does that happen? It's because those who benefit from wrong often turn a deaf ear to contrary evidence for what is true and right.

Here is the last point...

VII. When push comes to shove, we must obey God rather than man in our call to be witnesses for Christ.

Verse 19 tells us how Peter and John respond to this blind threat. "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." This must have been so frustrating to the rulers. Why? Because Peter assumes that he has to choose between heeding God and heeding the rulers. This means that the rulers aren't speaking for God. Peter doesn't express any apology for this assumption at all. He just says it. And with a disarming

simplicity he speaks as if they must operate on his assumption. The issue, he says, is whether we obey you or God. You tell us what we should do. To answer that was to admit they were NOT on God's side.

In most cases, we're called to obey the governing authorities, but not when they tell us to do something God has told us not to do, and not when they tell us not to do something God has told us to do. The basis for Peter's response is the utter assurance that Peter has that Jesus is alive, that he is Lord of the universe, that he healed the man, and that obeying him comes before obeying any human ruler. Peter says, "We must speak what we have seen and heard." They have an experience of the living Jesus that has made them utterly unstoppable. They're witnesses. All of us are witnesses. All of us should stand up and tell it like we see it. Let the chips fall where they will. Don't worry if people don't even agree with you. Your job is not to win. Your job is to bear witness. One of the great obstacles to our speaking out in public about the truth is that we think we have to win. But Peter shows us that our calling is not to win. Our calling is to bear witness.

CONCLUSION

More than anything else, this story ought to give us confidence. We can have confidence that when the world tries to stop our witness, the message will continue to bear fruit and the messengers will continue to speak out.

On July 15, 1986, Roger Clemens started his first All-Star Game. In the second inning he came to bat, something he hadn't done in years because of the American League's designated-hitter rule. He took a few uncertain practice swings and then looked out at his forbidding opponent, Dwight Gooden, who the previous year had won the Cy Young award. Gooden wound up and threw a white-hot fastball past Clemens.

With an embarrassed smile on his face, Clemens stepped out of the box and asked the catcher, "Is that what my pitches look like?" "You bet it is!" he said. Although Clemens quickly struck out, he went on to pitch three perfect innings and be named the game's most valuable player. From that day on, he later said, with a reminder of how overpowering a good fastball is, he pitched with far greater boldness.

Sometimes we forget the Holy Spirit within us and how powerful our witness can be. We can have confidence that when the world tries to stop our witness, the message will continue to bear fruit and the messengers will continue to speak out.