

28 February 2010

## When we're Available . . . Who Knows What Might Happen?

Reading: Acts 3:1-4:4

### I. SCENE I: ANOTHER DAY AT THE GATE

Just another day! Another boring day! The days tend to merge into one another when you have a serious disability. Same as yesterday and the day before and the day before that. And tomorrow will be no different, and the day after that, and on and on. Not an exciting prospect.

But one has to be grateful for small mercies. It's a really tough to be a congenital cripple, but at least there were some faithful friends and family who carried him day by day and deposited him in a conspicuous spot next to the ornate gate that led from the outer court into the first of the inner courts of the temple. Day after day, they would do it, month after month, year after year.

You see, if you had a debilitating disability in those days, there was no official social security, no monthly cheque in the mail, no food bank. You were at the mercy of the goodwill of your compatriots. It couldn't have done too much for your self-image to have to beg to survive, but begging was the only way to keep body and soul together. And, in that sense, it was socially acceptable.

You had good days and you had bad days. On some days, people were generous. On other days, they pretended to be engrossed in conversation or made sure they were distracted as they scurried past you. But there could hardly be a better place than the Beautiful Gate of the temple. In all likelihood, it was the so-called Nicanor Gate. Josephus tells us it was made of Corinthian bronze and "far exceeded in value those plated with silver and set in gold." It was over twenty meters high and had huge double doors. Most importantly, you couldn't access the inner areas of the temple without passing through it. So this forty-something-year-old, crippled beggar was in pole position. Some who were going up to pray would likely feel the extra pull of piety and drop a small coin into his receptacle. Hopefully this would be a good day, good enough at least to put some food into his stomach, and maybe even have something for tomorrow.

Ah! Here are two men on their way into the temple at the hour of prayer. They look serious, but they also look happy. "There's a good chance that I'll get something from them . . ."

## SCENE II: READY FOR ANYTHING

We don't know how the day had started for Peter and John. What we do know is that life for them was exciting. They'd been on a roller-coaster ride over the last few months. But since the Day of Pentecost, they had experienced the invigorating life of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus had told them that it was to their advantage that he go away, they simply couldn't take it in. But now, it was like having him with them wherever they went. They were part of a vibrant, living community. Things they had not understood, even when Jesus was with them in the flesh, were now making sense to them. They were making new discoveries every day.

And who knew what a day would bring forth? It was not their job to make all sorts of plans as if the whole responsibility for the advance of God's kingdom was on their frail shoulders. They just had to be in tune with the Holy Spirit. He had taken the initiative on the Day of Pentecost. We can't go far wrong if we simply ascertain what he is doing and follow his lead!

## II. SCENE III: SOMETHING MIND-BLOWING HAPPENS

We can't say what the two men felt as they approached the gate. God sometimes does give us an inkling that something unprecedented is about to happen. But, as far as we know, they had one thing on their minds—prayer! As good Jews, they were on their way into the temple at the hour of prayer.

But they looked like potential givers to the man. Yes, they'd been in the area before, and Peter had preached that sermon on the Day of Pentecost, probably in the outer court of the temple. But when you are immobile, there are many things you hear about second-hand without actually seeing them with your own two eyes. Whether he recognized them or not is beside the point. One way or another, he asked them for money.

As Peter looked at the man, he knew! How do you know when there is a strong prompting of the Holy Spirit? It's hard to say. You just know. As the Scott once said, "Some things are better felt than tell't." Deep down, a strong sense of conviction arises. Sometimes it makes no sense to us, simply because our knowledge is limited. I know of more than one case when someone has been driving down a street and felt a distinct tug to stop the car and knock on the door of a particular house. They haven't known why. What do you say when the door opens and a total stranger looks inquiringly at you? "I was just driving by and God told me to knock on your front door?" What if you get it wrong? But what if that person is in desperate straits, perhaps even suicidal? And God has sent you to as an angel of mercy at that precise moment? I have heard of people who have obeyed and, to their amazement, discovered that God has indeed nudged them at a particular time to meet a specific need.

Of course, we don't go driving down the street, saying, "Which house, Lord?" We can't make this kind of thing happen. It's not a case of experimentation. But it is the sort of thing that can and does happen.

And sometimes, it really helps to go with those little promptings. For periods of my ministry, I have received substantially less money than I needed to live on. And God has always provided our needs, not because of my faith but because of his faithfulness. When God called me, I knew that it would be dishonoring to him for me to plead poverty. On only one occasion did we ever completely run out of food! I mean "completely out of food." No food and absolutely no money to buy food! You say, "That's irresponsible. You should always have some back-up plan." All I will say is that our circumstances were such that we had nothing. Not so bad if it was just Ruth and I, but we had a little daughter as well. Lunch time came and there was nothing to eat. I mean *nothing!* Then there was a knock at the door. One of our church members stood there with a basket. She had no idea of our predicament. There was a big smile on her face. In the basket was piping hot fish and chips. She said, "Someone gave me this kingklip; I had more than enough and I just couldn't get you and Ruth off my mind, so I thought, 'Why not fry some for them?'" It was delicious, and that afternoon there was a cheque in the mail. Now, let me assure you, our cupboards are full, and so is our fridge, but if you are frying kingklip . . . . Jokes aside; there may well be somebody else whom God prompts you to help.

Somehow Peter knew what he had to do. No histrionics! No extra decibels, no stained-glass voice or dramatic intonation. He looked straight at the man as did John. "Look at us," he says. "I'm in luck," the cripple thinks, "I have their attention. So many people won't look at me. But he was about to get more than he could have dreamt of in his wildest imagination. "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have, I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

That's the last thing he expected to hear. But immediately he saw Peter's outstretched hand. In a flash Peter had him by the right hand and instantly his feet and his ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. He could hardly contain himself. Instead of proceeding into the inner courts of the temple, Peter and John did a U-turn with the exuberant man in tow. They made for Solomon's colonnade, the double row of marbled columns that ran the whole length of the eastern wall of the temple's outer court. With them was this congenital cripple, beside himself with joy, jumping and leaping and praising God. Apparently, he wasn't crawling before he could walk or walking before he could run.

Now, isn't this all a bit over the top? Well, if you had been lame for over forty years and you had hoped to receive a few dimes but instead had been completely healed, you too would be jumping. And if it was an outright miracle, you'd be able to!

I must remind you: this is Luke, MD who is recounting the event. Dr. Luke knows very well that even if the cause of lameness is healed, a man who has never walked in his life cannot simply walk and leap and jump! If you read his Gospel and compare it with Matthew and Mark, you notice that while he doesn't use medical jargon, he understands anatomy.

But Luke had the sense to understand that genuine miracles don't have naturalistic explanations. Come to think of it, there can be few things as stupid as to call something a miracle and then try to explain it in terms of natural processes. *It is precisely because it is a miracle that we cannot adequately account for it.* Miracles are not God's usual way of working. Usually he coordinates natural events in the most remarkable way in order to bring about a desired outcome. Miracles have always been exceptions. But when there is one, it defies explanation! If you can explain it, it ceases to be a miracle. So, if Jesus really walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee, it was a miracle. If, as some have contended, he knew where to find a sandbank a few centimeters under the water, it was a trick. You don't have to explain miracles. That's the point!

Actually, there may well be some special significance in this miracle. One of the promises associated with the coming of the age of Messiah is contained in Isaiah 35. It reads, "Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy" (Isa 35:6). Of course, the poetic language of that passage refers to far more than this event, but here was a very literal partial fulfillment.

The lame man wasn't the only one running. The frequenters of the temple could not believe their eyes. This man had been a fixture at the gate for as long as they could remember. They knew he was a cripple. So as the threesome headed for the colonnade, they too came running. In a matter of minutes a large crowd has gathered in utter amazement.

### III. PETER SPEAKS

So here's the picture. The man doesn't quite know what to do with himself. He is holding on to Peter and John. You can hear the crowd gasping and jabbering. As he had done on the Day of Pentecost not long before, Peter raises his voice and addressed the flabbergasted crowd. It is clear that he had attended a Baptist seminary, because his sermon has three main points. Actually, probably not! There's no alliteration. Actually, it is a masterpiece of a sermon. I wish we could look at it in depth.

Let me confine myself to its most basic outline:

**Introduction:** Why does this surprise you? Don't, for one moment, think that we did this by our own power or godliness.

Point 1: **GOD HAS GLORIFIED HIS SERVANT, JESUS.**

- A. You crucified him.
- B. But God raised him from the dead.

Point 2: **THIS WAS ALL PART OF GOD'S GREAT PLAN.**

- A. You were acting in ignorance.
- B. This is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through the prophets.

Point 3: **REPENT AND TURN TO GOD.**

- A. Your sins will be wiped out.
- B. Times of refreshing will come from the Lord.

He cites Moses, the prophets and God's promise to Abraham that he would bless all peoples through his great Descendant.

Bottom line: Your entire future depends on what you do with him!

#### **IV. SCENE V: THE ARREST**

When Peter and John had made their way towards the temple, their beds were made up. The last thing they had expected was that they would not be spending the night away from home. But when you're available to God, some really unexpected things can happen. The chief priests and the Sadducees and the captain of the temple guard were disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They held the power so they arrested them and put them in jail until the next day.

I've read this account many times, but there is something I had never quite seen. My guess is that the apostles really wanted to testify about Jesus' resurrection and his messiahship *to the Sanhedrin*. They didn't want to do things under cover. They may well have discussed the matter among themselves. But you didn't simply invite yourself to the meeting of the highest council in Jewry any more than you or I could pitch up in Ottawa and insist on seeing the Prime Minister. They couldn't say, "We hear you are in session two days after the Sabbath and we have a matter we would like to bring to your attention. Please place it on your agenda." But within less than twenty-four hours of their going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, they had an audience, and the very matter they wanted to raise *was* the agenda. (We'll hear more about that next week).

## THE IMPLICATIONS

We are not in Jerusalem, nor do we go up to the temple at the hour of prayer, but there are at least three important questions that this passage puts to us.

- A. **What about miracles?** Could something like this happen today? Should it? I said last week that I would not dodge this question. I believe we need to ask such questions and attempt to answer them.
1. There are those who believe **the day of miracles is past**. The name given to this view is cessationism. This is the view that such miracles were common in the apostolic age, but no longer take place. They were there to authenticate the message, but ceased at the end of that age, together with some of the gifts of the Spirit. They were present to "kick-start" the church, as it were, but once it was established, *God withdrew them*. (This view is sometimes substantiated by a misquotation of 1 Cor 13: 10).
  2. There are those who believe that the supernatural gifts and manifestations are **an essential part of the gospel**. They were *never withdrawn by God*, but as the church became more and more settled and secular, they diminished and should be recovered. Just as the church needed reformation of its teachings, it needs a renewal of its life. And some would say that many genuine miracles are being performed today in the name of Jesus.
  3. Let me suggest that often the advocates of both of these positions tend to be extreme. I am reminded of a situation that arose in a European fiefdom. Apparently there were some relics in that community believed to contain supernatural power. Superstitious people used to flock into the area in order to receive healing or some other blessing from contact with the relics. The local magistrate didn't like this one little bit and was determined to put a stop to it. So he erected a large sign at the spot where the relics were deposited. It read: "By order of the local magistrate: God may perform no miracles here!" Now I would suggest that this petty official had a rather inflated view of his power. It is not for you or I to decide what God can do and when or how he ought to do it. He is sovereign and may well decide to heal at any time and in any place.
  4. But John Stott makes a valid point. If we examine Scripture, we notice that miracles do tend to cluster around events of revelation. In the Old Testament, we notice that God performed many miracles at the time of the Exodus and particularly through the prophets Elijah and Elisha. But the ministries of Isaiah and Jeremiah and the other prophets are not characterized by miracles. As we

know there were many miracles in the ministry of Jesus. We are also told that many miracles, some of them quite extraordinary, were performed by the apostles. But, argues Stott, it may be that this is not normative for the entire age.

5. What I find interesting is that from time to time and place to place there are revivals in the church. Some amazing things happen. The spiritual temperature picks up. I think, for example, of the wonderful outpourings of the Spirit in Wales at the turn of last century, in the Hebrides off the coast of Scotland in about 1950, the revivals under the ministry of John Wesley and George Whitfield about two centuries before, the Great Awakening at more or less the same time in the North American colonies. They were all different, but they were all powerful manifestations of the work of God's Spirit.
- B. When I read the sermons in the Acts, there is an unmistakable thread that constitutes the gospel. It is the message about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the need for repentance and personal faith in him. We must proclaim this same gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they proclaimed in the first century. It addresses the perennial needs of mankind.
  - C. As we read this account, it is clear that Peter and John did not plan this miracle or the important events that followed it. *But it is fair to infer that they lived in a state of availability.* When you and I do that, who knows what might happen? God may surprise us with something we haven't dared to even dream about. Why should we limit him?

### Conclusion

It may seem relatively small. But nothing is big or small to God. It may be that he wants to use you to bring your neighbour to Christ. Few things could be better than that. He may want to encourage someone through you. And he may entrust you with a gift that brings blessing and healing to many. When we're available, there is no knowing what the Holy Spirit may do through us.

I challenge you as I challenge myself today! Let's make ourselves available to the Holy Spirit. Think of it. He is here! He is everywhere. And *his* number one desire is to make Jesus known. He doesn't need our expertise or our ability. What he longs for is our *availability*. Someone may be saved or healed or delivered or helped through you. And you will be filled with such joy. There is no higher privilege than to be an instrument in God's hand. Place yourself at his disposal and who knows what might happen!