

Acts 4:1-22

We Cannot Stop

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Do you remember your child's first steps? What a beautiful moment! It's the exact time when they cease being infants and begin the next stage: toddlers. They immediately feel less helpless, less tiny: they are literally reaching a major life stage right before your eyes. It's a real miracle. Believe it or not, Zoey started walking at 9 months, and I have the video evidence to prove it. Her first steps were on April 21, 2009, which was three days after her 9 month birthday. Sadly, I wasn't there to witness it; Angie was in Ontario with her family for spring break when it happened. But 9 months! It's like we were raising her in the African Serengeti amongst the lions and jackals, like a baby wildebeest running from birth, she was up and moving so soon! She had places to go, and she wasn't gonna let anything stand in her way. She had goals, man. She was going somewhere. Tegan: not so much. Twelve months old. Much more casual than Zoey, which is generally true even today. But for both girls, and for your kids, those first steps are so wondrous and awe-inspiring. Even though we know it's coming, it's still such a powerful moment to witness for ourselves, watching someone take their first steps. It is truly miraculous, every time.

However. There is a flip side to having a mobile mini-human in the house. As soon as they can get up and walk, you begin to realize what a deathtrap your living spaces are! I remember watching Zoey toddling around our coffee table, a big black IKEA one with hard, pointy corners, and as I'm rejoicing at her progress, I am also a hypertense bundle of anxiety, imagining her enormous, adorable head careening right into the pointy edge of that calamitous piece of furniture. "HOW COULD WE BE SO STUPID AS TO HAVE A COFFEE TABLE?! DON'T WE LOVE OUR CHILDREN?!?! AND WHAT IDIOT PUTS THE RECORDS HE COLLECTS AT CONVENIENT TODDLER-REACHING-HEIGHT?! AND WHAT IS SHE DOING NOW... LEARNING HOW TO OPEN DOORS? CLIMBING INTO THE WASHING MACHINE?? HOT-WIRING THE MINIVAN???!?" Unforeseen threats and complications. Needless to say, learning to walk is a miracle. But it leads to a few problems.

This was true for Peter and John as well. Last week we read about the miraculous gift of usable legs given not to a 9-month-old or a 12-year-old, but a 40-year-old who had never experienced the simple blessing of mobility. Peter was the conduit through whom the Holy Spirit healed this disabled man, in the powerful saving name of Jesus Christ. He then preaches a sermon, with the formerly crippled beggar hanging off his arm like the greatest living sermon illustration of all time, which galvanizes the curiosity and wonder of the crowds and turns them into followers of Jesus. As with my daughters, and your children, seeing someone walk for the first time was a memorable and astounding miracle... except this one was completely unexpected!

However: what we'll see today is that, as with a toddler, the miracle of new walking leads to serious issues for Peter and John. Unforeseen problems. Serious threats. But will the apostles panic? Will they surrender to their fears and uncertainties? Will they wither in the face of trials and persecution, as they did on the night of Jesus' arrest and execution? No. Like 9-month-old Zoey, Peter and John had goals, and there was no stopping them. They could not be stopped. Not by weakness, not by threats, not by prison, not by fear. **They could not be stopped.** Today we will examine why that is. Let's read Acts 4:1-22.

We've only gone a couple chapters after Jesus' glorious ascension and already the believers are facing very real persecution. Acts 4 marks an important occasion in the history of the church; it is the first occurrence of a crucial theme to the Book of Acts (and the New Testament as a whole, not to mention the life of discipleship we are each called to), and that is the theme of **perseverance through persecution**. At every turn, the early church met someone actively trying to shut them up, or lock them up, or round them up, or finish them up. As always, the radical life of self-sacrifice and gracious community we live out and proclaim; the salvation we experience in one (and only one) name alone, the saving Name of Jesus Christ: **this radical life and powerful message force a reaction**. And that reaction is often negative, and occasionally violent.

Although at this point in the story of Acts the crowds respond positively to the Kerygma, the leaders do not. In fact, if not for the favourable reaction of the crowds, the Temple leaders would have begun stamping out these Jesus followers immediately! This was familiar to Jesus as well: in the last several chapters of Luke's Gospel, as Jesus is in Jerusalem battling the Jewish leaders, they try over and over again to trap him in His words so they can arrest Him, and He just frustrates them more and more. Eventually they have to arrest Him under cover of night, approaching a gentle Rabbi with clubs and swords, hauling Him off in chains when the people can't see their injustice and rise up against them. They had to sneak around at night like dogs to arrest Jesus, because the people could see His authority and power. The Temple leaders could see it too... and they recognized Him as a threat to THEIR power and authority. That's exactly what's happening in Acts 4 as well.

Hearing a great commotion and recognizing these two hooligans as a couple of Galilean followers of that meddlesome Jesus character, the Jewish leaders swoop in with guns a'blazing. Ignoring the fact that the beggar they KNEW had been crippled since birth 40 YEARS AGO was now walking and dancing and praising God for His salvation, they instead zone in on two troublesome aspects of Peter's speech: 1) they **seem to be speaking** with the authority of (and having an even greater impact than) their Master, Whom the Temple leaders despised, and 2) the content of their speaking seems to be **centring around the resurrection** of the dead. Specifically, the resurrection of that rabble-rouser Jesus. For the Sadducees who held most of the power in the Sanhedrin, these two things were doubly troubling. First of all, they could not continue losing authority (and thus prestige, power, and profitability) because of Jesus. And secondly, the Sadducees disagreed with the Pharisees on many points, but one major difference was the two parties' conflicting views on resurrection. If Peter's message about the truth of the resurrection was accurate, that would mean the (ugh) Pharisees were right (yuck). And the LAST thing the Sadducees wanted was to admit the Pharisees were right, because (again), that would undermine their positions of power, prestige, and profitability. **No matter how you cut it, Peter's sermon threatened everything they really loved.**

And so, despite the fact Peter and John had done something extraordinarily powerful and good just a couple hours earlier... they got thrown in jail with no justifiable charge levied against them. However, as verse 4 says, the damage was already done. Another 2000 men (and many more women and children) were added to the number of believers. **God's plan of salvation runs headlong into mankind's plan of self-serving power. As always, the world flexes its muscles, and the believers are punished, but God's Kingdom just grows like an irritating weed. He simply cannot be stopped. We, His Church, cannot be stopped.**

The next morning, Peter and John are dragged before the entire council, along with the healed man, who was either imprisoned with the apostles (FOR WHAT? Getting healed?!?!) or else called in as a material witness against his healers. The three men are then grilled by the Sanhedrin, the religious leadership council, like a Jewish House of Commons, which includes some familiar names. Remember Caiaphas and Annas? Annas is the High Priest, and Caiaphas was his father-in-law, the former high priest, who remained on the Sanhedrin council with all the authority he once had, as was customary. Just weeks earlier, these two men handed Jesus over to Pilate, and thus bore the chief responsibility for the murder of God's Son, as Jesus makes clear in John 19:11 ("he who delivered me to [Pilate] has the greater sin"). That's Caiaphas. Can you imagine how incredulous and how frustrated he must feel? "What the heck... more Jesus?! We're STILL hearing about Jesus?! I thought we crucified all that Messiah nonsense out of Him! I thought we proved He was no Saviour when we spilled His worthless blood all over Golgotha! WHY ARE WE STILL HEARING ABOUT THAT UNEDUCATED NAZARENE, FROM THESE UNEDUCATED FISHERMEN?"

And that right there was the central probing question: In verse 7, the council demands to know "By what power or whose name did you heal this man?" Basically, "who gave you the right to waltz into OUR Temple and do miraculous things that make us look bad?" It's a desperate question from a group of shallow men who have had their egos bruised. THEY were the educated elite! THEY were God's happy little club of religious insiders! THEY were the ones who had all the rules built up like a safe little cage they could put their Almighty Creator inside of! Authority and power and Divine Will were THEIRS. Not these homeless drifters from backwater Galilee!

In fact, do you know what they actually call the apostles in verse 11? Here are your Greek words for the day: they consider Peter and John to be *agrammatos* and *idiotes*. *Agrammatos*: the "a" is a prefix that means "not", and "gramma" means writing, so "agrammatos" means "ones who don't know how to write". Illiterate, uneducated, country bumpkins. And if I say "idiotes" enough, you'll probably catch on as to what English word is derived from it. We get "idiot" from this Greek word, which means "ordinary, common person". Nothing special, just a regular Joe. An idiot. In other words, the **Sanhedrin see the very real healed man** beside them, and they listen to Peter respond to them with real authority and real power and real well-reasoned arguments based on real Scripture and real events... and the Sanhedrin are really really shocked. They aren't seminary theologians! They don't have a Masters in Divinity! They didn't offer a session at Breakforth! Who are these uneducated nobodies, these idiots, and why do they speak so forcefully, and why do they sound so authoritatively, and WHY CAN'T WE JUST STOP THEM ALREADY?!?!

Well, my dear Caiaphas and Annas, let me address your concerns. Yes, they are uneducated in your eyes. But they had three years of immersive training and intensive lecturing at the feet of the greatest Rabbi in history. They studied the law and the prophets extensively with Him. They watched Him rely on His Father for all His needs. They saw Him show kindness, and grace, and justice apart from Pharisaic self-righteousness. They heard Him speak of mysterious eternal truths through stories of fathers and sons, debts and debtors, sheep and goats, widows and Samaritans, bread and wine.

But most of all, in this moment, standing before their enemies, the very deniers of truth and salvation, they remember these words spoken by their Master, in Luke 21: **"So don't worry in advance about how to answer the charges against you, for I will give you the right words and such wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to reply or refute you!"** Peter and John are remembering that this is not their battle. They need not fear, because, as it says in verse 8, they were filled with the Holy Spirit! HE is fighting the battle; they need only trust they will be given the words to say! Just show up, have faith, and open your mouth... He'll do the rest! Jesus promised that this exact thing would happen, and when it did, they did not need a graduate degree, or an anointing as a High Priest, or a noble birth. They didn't need ANYTHING except the following:

- 1. The indwelling Holy Spirit,**
- 2. Confident knowledge of what Jesus said, and**
- 3. Faith.**

Faith that the Holy Spirit would feed them the words to say to bring glory to The Father and Son. Faith that He is present even in suffering. Faith that He will use even little of us, even in our weakness and smallness and uncertainty and fear. It is, after all, HIS glory at stake, not our own. Why wouldn't He help us? We may end up back in prison, or unpopular with the locals, but shouldn't our attitude be like Peter's in verses 19 and 20, when they reply, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard." **WE CANNOT STOP.** Do your worst, enemies of truth. Bring the pain, betrayers of salvation. **WE CANNOT STOP telling about everything we have seen and heard. It is our purpose, our mission, and our command.**

Wave whatever misplaced authority, or misguided power, or misunderstood religiosity you want in our face all you like: **WE WILL NOT BOW TO YOU, WORLD.** The blasphemous, fear-mongering, hate-spewing, judgmental Christian leaders of our day will not destroy our beloved Kingdom; it will only empower us to greater acts of forgiveness, compassion, kindness and unity. The self-serving, consumption-driven, morality-rejecting anti-Jesus society we live in will not drown us or choke us with its blackness; it will only empower us to shine brighter for our God.

**When others besmirch or belittle the Name of Jesus, whether from inside or outside the church, we will proclaim the authority of His Name and demonstrate its power with a love that is fuelled by His Holy Spirit, and with a message like Peter's: Jesus alone brings healing! Jesus alone brings life!** His Name alone is where true power comes from, power for the lame to walk, and the rebel to obey, and the common idiots of Galilee and Clyde alike to rise up and declare, with one voice, that **"There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we are saved"...** no Name, except the Name of Jesus. When the world demands to know where we get our powerful healing love, we'll tell them. As Peter did. We get it from Jesus.

I may not be the smartest, or most charismatic, or most morally upstanding man. I may not have it all figured out. I may not be good enough. But I know the One Who is. And because of Him; because of His grace, and His power, and His goodness... **I CANNOT STOP.** WE cannot stop. We cannot BE stopped. As a church, and as a Kingdom, even one filled with a bunch of *agrammatos* and *idiotes*, we are an unstoppable force. We cannot stop, and we will not stop, and we do not wish to stop, because in Him we find our courage. In Him we find our power. In Him we find our salvation. In Him we find our life. Not bad for a bunch of idiots! Clyde Christian Bible Church, I believe this about us: **walking with Him is miraculous, and it is dangerous. But whatever we face, we face it with Him. And we cannot stop. And we cannot BE stopped.**