

Third Sunday of Easter – Year B

18 April 2021

“Repent...that your sins might be wiped away”

On this, the 3rd Sunday of Easter, I’d like to focus on our reading from the 3rd chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. To fully explore this passage, however, we’ll have to consider both what is there and what isn’t there. In other words, we’ll need to read between the lines.

Our passage begins at verse 13, but first, we need some background from earlier in the chapter. The chapter begins with Peter and John about to enter the temple when a crippled beggar asks them for alms. Peter responds, “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: *in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean*, rise and walk.” And immediately the beggar did so, walking and leaping and praising God as he joyfully accompanied the apostles into the temple. A crowd quickly gathered, and our passage today begins when Peter explains to them what has just happened.

Perhaps unexpectedly, however, our lectionary reading *omits* the crucial punch-line of Peter’s explanation: verse 16—the verse in which Peter reveals who is actually responsible for the miraculous healing. So, we must read between the lines of the lectionary to hear Peter declare: “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can see.” So, when Peter first spoke to the crippled man, he commanded him to rise “in the name of Jesus Christ,” and here Peter explains to everybody that the healing came through faith in that same name.

This passage reminds us of the great power of Jesus' name: healing comes through it, Jesus exhorts us to pray in His name, Peter and the apostles baptized in the name of Jesus, and in Jesus' name, they set forth to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. The name of Jesus is a source of great power for action, for inspiration, and for protection, and I'd like to share an example of that. Last week, Dcn. Dave encouraged us to share with one another the personal experiences we have had with the Risen Lord, so allow me to tell you a story from my own life when I witnessed firsthand the power of the name of Jesus.

Thirty years ago, I led a crew of biologists into a remote corner of the Andreafsky Wilderness north of the Yukon River in western Alaska. One morning, I headed out from camp alone, violating one of my agency's primary rules when operating in bear country—never leave camp alone! My crew had worked hard past midnight the evening before, so I wanted to let them sleep in. There were only a few surveys left to do, and I figured I could quickly finish them and then get back to camp. I carried a gun, as was required by policy, but we hadn't seen a bear in weeks, and I wasn't expecting that day to be any different.

About an hour later, as I was counting birds in a vast meadow of cotton-grass, I looked to the east and suddenly saw a grizzly about a hundred yards away, charging straight at me. I have no idea how it got so close before I saw it, but there it was, and getting closer by the second. I sprinted forward to the edge of a nearby depression to ensure I'd have a clear field of fire if I needed to shoot, and just as I arrived at the near edge of the hollow and raised the gun to my shoulder, the bear arrived at the other side and stopped just 15 yards away. The bear pawed the ground aggressively—growling, lowering and swinging its

head, tearing up the tundra at its feet. I chambered a round and released the safety. Then, as I'd been trained, I began shouting at it repeatedly in a deep, loud voice, but the threatening bear didn't budge. I'd already decided that if it made any move into the hollow toward me, I was going to fire. I distinctly remember thinking, "This morning is going to turn out badly for at least one of us!"

As the tense seconds stretched out, it suddenly occurred to me that I had one weapon at my disposal which I hadn't even considered yet. I was reluctant to use it at first, almost embarrassed, but as the bear leaned forward, I shouted out in that same deep and loud voice, "In the name of Jesus Christ, turn and run away!" At that, the bear's head immediately came up, and a split-second later, it spun 180 degrees around and ran full speed for a quarter of a mile directly away from me, finally disappearing into the alders on a distant ridge.

During the entire episode, the wind hadn't changed, so I know that the bear had not simply caught my scent when I spoke those words. They were uttered in the same voice and with the same volume as all of my previous exclamations. The only difference was that in my final words I faithfully invoked the power of the Name of Jesus Christ.

With that same power, Peter healed the cripple and testified to the crowd at the temple. He was brutally honest, declaring without reservation that the people gathered at the temple were culpable for the death of Jesus. Indeed, he didn't just tell them once; he told them three times in three different ways. Listen to his words! "The God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus whom you handed over and denied in Pilate's presence when he had decided to release him. You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be

released to you. The author of life you put to death.” As it turned out, unlike my experience in the wilderness, where Jesus’ name got me out of trouble, Peter’s witness to the name of Jesus got him into trouble, along with the rest of the apostles. They were arrested, had two hearings before the Sanhedrin, and were flogged, after which the Sanhedrin ordered them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. Scripture then records the apostle’s amazing response: “So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name...And all day long, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the Messiah, Jesus.”

As we have been preaching all year, each and every one of you is called, just like the apostles, to boldly proclaim the name of Jesus to the world—to declare *in* his Name the power *of* his Name. And even though such proclamation should be central to our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are often afraid to do that very thing. Our fear and hesitation most often result from one of two misapprehensions—either we feel in our hearts that we aren’t worthy enough or we think we don’t know enough. Fortunately, in our reading today, St. Peter helps us dispel both of those mistaken perspectives.

To understand the first, we once again must read between the lines in our passage from Acts. As I noted earlier, Peter levels a triple accusation against the crowd for betraying Jesus. They had handed him over to Pilate, asked for Barabbas to be released, and then demanded that Jesus be crucified. Of course, Peter’s accusation could be seen as a bit hypocritical, for who else had explicitly betrayed Jesus three times? That’s right—Peter himself, but here he’s accusing the crowd of the very same crime. But notice what happens next. Despite the

accusation, Peter does not condemn them; he does not declare that they are destined for hell. Instead he says, “Now I know, brothers, that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did...Repent, therefore and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away.”

Although Peter doesn't say so explicitly, we can understand what must've been in his heart if we read between the lines. Because even the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, and the high priest acted out of ignorance, Peter says that even they can repent and be forgiven. How does he know that with such certainty? Because it had already happened to *him*. Because his own sin of triple betrayal was *not* done out of ignorance, but with full knowledge. Peter *knew* Jesus, he *knew* who Jesus was—in fact, he was the first of the apostles to confess Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. So when Peter assures the crowd that they can be forgiven because of their ignorance, he knows it's true because Jesus had forgiven him—one of those who knew him best. In effect, Peter is saying, “If he could forgive me, he will surely forgive you.”

In a sense, this passage completes Peter's transition from betrayal to reconciliation to mission—a transition we could all experience. Peter betrayed the Lord three times on the night of his trial; he was reconciled to the resurrected Lord through his three-fold profession of love on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias; and here Peter is on mission, sharing with the world that even a triple betrayal is not enough to keep us from the loving mercy of Christ. Peter *isn't* worthy to proclaim the Gospel, but Jesus nonetheless invites and commands him to do so. Similarly, we are all also unworthy sinners, but that's exactly who Jesus calls to spread the Good News. On our own, we *are* unworthy, but we are made worthy through the divine mercy flowing from the wounds of Christ.

Peter also makes clear that we shouldn't worry about not knowing enough to proclaim the Gospel. He doesn't deliver profound theological discourses like Augustine or Thomas Aquinas. Instead, Peter simply declares what he knows and what he has seen, and we should do the same. Peter's message is brief and straightforward with three simply-stated highlights. In today's passage, he puts it this way, "The author of life you put to death, but God raised him from the dead...Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away." That's it—the core of our faith. We hear the same three elements from the very lips of the Risen Lord in today's Gospel passage: "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins would be preached *in his name* to all nations."

So, when you first start out down the road of evangelism, when you take your first tentative steps as missionary disciples, just do the same as Peter did—proclaim the core of our faith. It's easy to remember: Christ has died; Christ is Risen; so repent and be forgiven. If you can also share how you personally have seen Jesus work in your own life—so much the better, especially if you can honestly and gratefully proclaim, "Christ has died, Christ is Risen; just like me, you, too, can be forgiven." May God give all of you the courage, the grace, and the inspiration to unleash the power of the Name of Jesus Christ.