

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, On the GO!

(Studies of the book of Acts)

Unanticipated Players in God's Work Study #5

(Acts 3:1--4:4)

Introduction: Who would have ever thought...

You and I know the late Steve Jobs as the mercurial genius CEO of Apple, whose innovations transformed an industry. You might not have pegged him for success, when, back in the '60's, he (along with his college buddy, Steve Wozniak) got his start in tech by hacking phone lines to make free long-distance phone calls.

The great Bob Dylan's first band, The Golden Chords, lost a high school talent competition to a tap-dancing act. Given that inauspicious start, you probably wouldn't have predicted either Dylan's future impact on music or his winning a Nobel Peace Prize.

Seven years after graduating from college, this woman found herself a single mom, living on welfare in the UK. Who would have guessed that five years later, after writing the third installment of the Harry Potter series, JK Rowling would be a multi-millionaire, or that today, she would be one of the most respected authors alive?

You and I love rags to riches stories - and so does God. He loves to exalt the lowly and He delights to use the seemingly useless to accomplish great things.

God has always preferred to use the small and the unobtrusive - things like salt, leaven, mustard seeds - to make big impact.

That's because when we find the small the center of something big, we're not tempted to credit the small. No, we credit the Lord and trust in Him whose power made possible the big victory.

This morning, the Bible gives us a true rags-to-riches story. It's a great story, and it's one that has been among my favorites for a very long time. Toward the end, I'll tell you why.

Luke has told us that, **[Acts 2:43] many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.** Then, he tells us about one of these "**wonders.**"

I suspect that not much time elapsed between Pentecost and this miracle. Days, maybe. A couple of weeks at the most.

A Lame Man Walks, Leaps, Praises God! (3:1-10)

The Wonder of Convergence (vv. 1-3)

Apostles on the way to the temple (v.1)

[1] Now Peter and John were going up¹ to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer.

This scene highlights the Jewishness of early Christianity. It can be easy to forget, but every Christian in the world at this time was a Jew.² It would be some time before the first non-Jew comes to Jesus, and the initial forms that Christianity took were very Jewish.³

For instance, in the first century, devout Jews would go to God in prayer at set times. They would pray once in the middle of the morning, and then once in the middle of the afternoon.⁴

¹ The temple was located at an elevated location in Jerusalem. Temple Mount. Hence, going "**up**" to pray.

² Some may have been proselytes, Gentiles converted to Judaism, but they were still, religiously, Jews.

³ They believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. They would have thought of themselves as completely Jewish.

⁴ The ninth hour was the ninth hour after sunrise. Mid-afternoon.

The apostles, Peter and John, are continuing a custom of mid-day prayer they had followed all their lives as God-fearing Jews. And, since they were in Jerusalem, they went to pray in the temple.⁵

Transition: The power of convergence...

What happens as they approach the temple is a perfect example of *convergence*. Convergence is an important phenomenon.

If fish and fisherman converge at the same time and place, there is fish for dinner. If you hit the lights on Bandera Road just so, you and the green lights will converge all the way from 410 to 1604. That would be what we call a “miraculous” convergence.

Convergence comes into play in Acts 3, because at precisely the same time that Peter and John were arriving at the temple to worship, another unnamed man was also arriving at the temple - NOT to worship.

A lame beggar arrives at the temple (vv. 2-3)

The disabled in ancient societies

This man was a beggar, and in the ancient world it was normal to see beggars sitting near the entrance to temples or shrines, asking for support.

The man was a beggar because he was physically disabled. Jesus frequently dealt with people who suffered from various disabilities, and He always treated them with dignity and with kindness.

Peter and John had learned well from Jesus. They knew that those who suffer - physically, emotionally, mentally - are precious in God’s sight.

⁵ Acts 2 told us that, among other things, the disciples of Jesus were “*continually devoting themselves to...prayer.*” Here, Peter and John, two of the leading apostles were going to the temple to pray. Jesus modeled a life of prayer and taught them to pray. Prayer and praying together was an integral part of life in Jesus from the start.

They watched as this man was placed at the temple’s Beautiful Gate.

This man’s life (v. 2)

[2] And a man who had been lame from his mother’s womb was being carried along whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful,⁶ in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple.

We aren’t told what was the cause of his lameness. It could have been anything, and he might have suffered from other ailments. But it was his lameness that required him to beg.

He had never toddled, walked, or run. In the mainly agricultural economy of the day, he couldn’t work. The only way for him to get by was by means of begging.

Every day, he was carried to the temple to do the one thing he could do. He held out his hand, totally dependent on the charity of strangers.⁷

His arrival at the Beautiful Gate converged with the apostles’ arrival at the temple.

The scene we see (v. 3)

[3] When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he began asking to receive alms.

So, what will Peter and John do? They’re followers of Jesus, so we’re certain that they will be kind. Certainly, they’ll share what they have with this man.

⁶ There is no agreement on the exact location of what Luke calls here, “*The Beautiful Gate.*” In fact, no other reference can be found to the Beautiful Gate in the Bible. It was likely a gateway that led into the Court of the Women, a court large enough to hold the crowd that would gather shortly.

⁷ It is certainly possible that Jesus had seen this man as He had walked into the temple precincts. If so, I wonder why Jesus did not heal him? When Jesus saw him, did He inwardly grin, knowing that his lameness was near an end?

And yes, they do. But they don't reach into their pockets for money.

Connection, at First Glance (vv. 4-5)

Peter commanded, "Look at us!" (v. 4)

[4] But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, "Look at us!"

Notice. They noticed him. They didn't ignore him and they didn't rush past him and they didn't throw coins at him.

No - they looked right at him and spoke: **"Look at us."**

That personal comment humanized this lame beggar. I suspect he wasn't used to the personal approach.

So, quick. What's going through the beggar's mind? Watch him.

The lame man looked (v. 5)

[5] And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them.

Obviously, he's expecting to receive money. He's ready to receive whatever loose change these two men have.

Maybe, given the personal greeting, he's hopeful that he'll get a larger than normal gift from these two men. Peter's opening line would not have been encouraging.

A Miraculous Healing! (vv. 6-8)

What Peter can't give (v. 6)

[6] But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold"

Now, this is just an aside, but I don't think Peter was saying that he didn't have any pocket change on him. I think Peter was saying that he and John were poor.

So, if you were ever looking for proof that serving Jesus doesn't guarantee financial wealth, this is it. Two of the leading apostles of Jesus don't have any money to give a lame beggar.

But what they gave him was more precious than gold.

Peter gives the man what he has (v. 7)

[6]...but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene - walk!" [7] And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened.⁸

So, the beggar's hand was probably already out, in hopes of receiving money. But instead of feeling the clink of coins, he felt the big, burly hand of a fisherman. That hand pulled him to a place he had never, ever been. Peter pulled him to his feet.

Instantly, he was healed in a multi-layered miracle.

Miraculously healed!! (v. 8)

[8] With a leap he stood upright and began to walk;⁹ and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

There is, first, the miracle of healing. The parts of his body that were broken were fixed, just like that. There was a life-time of non-use, but no muscular atrophy. The muscles are instantly strong enough for him to stand and jump.

⁸ This is the first of fourteen miracles recorded in Acts.

⁹ "Granted the truth of the first verse of the Bible, there is no difficulty in believing miracles." (G. Campbell Morgan)

There is also the miracle of walking and leaping. Lame from birth, he by-passed toddlerhood and received instant coordination and agility.

And then there is the wonder of what has happened in this man's soul. He is moving under his own locomotion into the temple, overwhelmed with gratitude to God.

The miracle occurred in a public place, by a direct word in the name of Jesus Christ. The healing was instantaneous, complete and permanent.

And, the miracle left behind a huge wake.

Impressions (vv. 9-10)

[9] And all the people saw him walking and praising God [10] and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. [11] While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.

Here, again, is the pattern of New Testament evangelism.

First, God works. Second, His people speak in response.

Often His work displays His grace and strength in the face of human weakness.

In this case, onlookers were amazed by the display, and THAT set the stage for Jesus' followers to speak - which is exactly what Peter proceeded to do.

Peter Speaks Words of Life (3:12-26)

This Miracle Brought to You by FAITH IN JESUS (vv. 12-16)

The miracle - not a work of man (v. 12)

[12] But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?"¹⁰

Or, *"This is not about us - but I'll tell you Who this IS all about."*

And then Peter waded right in. This is one courageous, bold, speak-the-truth-in-love message!

The miracle - it's God's doing! (vv. 13-16)

[13] "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,¹¹ the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. [14] But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you,¹² [15] but put to death the Prince of life,¹³ the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. [16] And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all."

Peter says that the reason the *lame* man is now the *leaping* man is because of faith in the name of Jesus.

¹⁰ See Mark 2:10-11, where the healing of a lame man was a *sign* that Jesus had the authority to forgive sins. So here, the healing of this lame man is a sign of the power of Christ - after the resurrection - to forgive sins.

¹¹ This name for God emerges on especially solemn occasions (1 Kings 18:36; 1 Chron. 29:18), as it underscores the covenant faithfulness of God.

¹² He reminded them (just as he had done on the Day of Pentecost) that they had asked that the murderer, Barabbas, be released instead of the innocent Jesus.

¹³ Many mental health professionals tell us how damaging it is to arouse a sense of shame and guilt for who we are. Peter's words, though, were aimed at pricking the conscience for sins committed. There is a world of difference.

Peter is at least talking about his own faith in Jesus. He believed that Jesus could empower him to perform this miracle. That's why he said, "**Look at us!**"¹⁴

This was a faith-in-Jesus based miracle. But the focus is not on the faith of the apostles. The focus is on the power of Jesus.

Let's keep listening to Peter's message. His audience didn't interrupt. They listened.

Repent, that Times of Refreshing May Come (vv. 17-26)

[17] "And now, brethren,¹⁵ I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also.¹⁶ [18] "But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. [19] "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord [20] and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, [21] whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. [22] "Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed to everything He says to you. [23] 'And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.' [24] "And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days.

¹⁴ But he may also have in mind the faith of the lame beggar. After all, he did look at Peter. (And remember, Jesus said that faith need not be great. A mustard seed's worth will do...)

¹⁵ "Brethren" = Jewish brethren; not as if they were already Christians.

¹⁶ This comment reminds us of Jesus' words from the cross - "**Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.**"

[25] "It is you who are the sons of the prophets¹⁷ and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'¹⁸ [26] "For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways."¹⁹

Peter used a wonderful image to describe forgiveness. He said that when they "**repented and returned,**" God would "**wipe away**" their sins.

In ancient times, people wrote on papyrus, not on paper. And they didn't write with ink, as we do today. Ink has an acid that actually bites into paper.

First century writing ink simply lay on top of the papyrus, and erasing that writing was a simple matter of taking a wet sponge and wiping away the writing. (See Colossians 2:14).

Peter promised his listeners that as soon as they "**repented and returned**" - as soon as they turned from their sin of having rejected God's Messiah! - God would wipe away the guilt of their sins like ink off papyrus.

By the way, that's what happens to you when you turn to Jesus and accept the free gift of eternal life He offers you. When you place your trust in Jesus, the One who died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin and rose from the dead to guarantee you eternal life, your sins are "**wiped away.**" Clean slate. No guilt before God. Justified.

Today, you can know that forgiveness is yours if you turn to Jesus in faith. And then, forgiven and free, you begin the exciting adventure of life in Jesus, growth in Jesus, serving Jesus - taking next step after next step with Jesus!

¹⁷ Peter addresses his audience as both the descendants of the prophets and the beneficiaries of the Abrahamic Covenant, encouraging them to take the prophets' warnings seriously.

¹⁸ The reference to worldwide blessing came true, as the unfolding of the book of Acts demonstrates.

¹⁹ Note that in this message, Peter doesn't mention baptism.

And (back to Peter), if the repentance and returning of Peter's audience was wholesale and nation-wide, "*times of refreshing*" would come. God would "*send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you*".

In other words, Jesus would return to set up His kingdom!

The crowd's with him, still listening. Peter is gearing up for a rousing conclusion. The conclusion of a sermon is a great time for a preacher to call for application, for action, for faith and obedience.

But poor Peter never got to give his conclusion.

That's because, while, for the most part, his audience was attentive and receptive, there were some there who were furious about what he had to say.

They brought Peter's message to a screeching halt.

In the Wake of a Miracle (4:1-4)

Jail Time (vv. 1-3)

Some VERY upset rulers! (vv. 1-2)

[1] As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, [2] being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

This is an official arrest, carried out by official temple guards. But the men who were behind the arrest were Sadducees.²⁰

The Sadducees were the aristocrats of Israel. They were political animals and valued national stability. Clearly, talk about Messianic hopes was destabilizing.

That's a big part of why they opposed Jesus when He was alive. Jesus was talking about a kingdom, and that made Rome nervous.

Now that His followers are gaining an audience, for the sake of peace with Rome, they opposed them, too.

So, they did what they could to stop Peter and John.

Overnight in jail (v. 3)

[4:3] And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening.²¹

That's fascinating. If you think about Peter and John being put in jail for talking about Jesus after just having performed a miracle in Jesus' Name, it just might give you a headache.

They were doing the right thing, the God-honoring thing. And God - who just proved His power by using the apostles to heal a lame beggar - did nothing to intervene as His servants were hauled off to jail. He didn't rescue them at all.

My point in pointing this out is not that God couldn't have or that God sometimes doesn't rescue His people from trials and danger and suffering. He absolutely can and does! But I don't want us to miss that here, He didn't.

And while we're mulling that thought, listen to what Luke tells us right after telling us that Peter and John were left over night to cool their heels in jail.

Salvation (4:4)

[4] But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.²²

²⁰ The Sadducees didn't believe in angels or demons or the after-life. They believed that the messianic age had been ushered in during the days of Judas Maccabeus - so they weren't looking for a Messiah. Thus, they had been very upset when Lazarus was raised from the dead, as that event disproved their theology.

²¹ This was not, technically, punishment. It was more like safe-keeping until a hearing could be set to investigate their teaching.

²² It is impossible to know how many believers made up the church as of verse 4. Peter refers to five thousand men, without mentioning women and children, a not

So, as unfortunate as their jail time was, we now see the suffering of the apostles IN CONTEXT.

The multi-layered miracle of the lame beggar's healing was followed by the amazing conversion of thousands more people. (and that was even without Peter's stirring conclusion!)

Eternal destinies were changed. People found life in Jesus and their lives were changed. The Sadducees discovered that apostles can be arrested, but you can't cage the power of the Gospel.

And if we had the chance to interview Peter and John during their overnight stay in jail, I think that they would have told us,

"What a great trade-off. We go to jail and thousands are saved? We'll take that deal any day. Jesus told us, 'If they persecuted Me, they'll persecute you.' (John 15:20)

Richard Wumbrand was a Romanian pastor who suffered greatly at the hands of communists during the Soviet era. During his times in prison, he wanted to tell his fellow prisoners about Jesus, but of course, this was not allowed. In his book, Tortured for Christ, he tells of a deal he made with the prison guards.

"It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their [the communists'] terms. It was a deal; we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching. They were happy beating us, so everyone was happy."

So, Peter and John would have told us, *"Jail time is worth it, if by the message we got to give about Jesus some come to know Him."*

To which you and I say, *"Lord, give us the mindset and perspective of the apostles. Help us to see trials and challenges as you see them. May we value the souls of men and women more than our comfort."*

At the beginning this morning, I told you that this story in Acts 3 is among my favorite stories in the Bible. Let me tell you how it became so.

Conclusion:

When I was a first-year student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I took a course every first-year student took, back in the day. It was **Bible Study Methods** with legendary professor, the late Dr. Howard Hendricks.

It was a fantastic class. Every Tuesday and Thursday Hendricks infected us with his contagious love for the Bible.

The last class session of that course was a special treat for the whole student body at the seminary, because the first-year students were assigned to present a Bible passage in some creative way.

So, on that day, in addition to the sixty or so students enrolled in **Bible Study Methods**, lots of upper classmen came to see how the first-year guys did with their creative presentations.

Some of my classmates did puppet shows and dramas and poetic readings. For myself, I decided to write a song.

I became a Christian in the '70's. Therefore, I played the guitar. I played badly, but when it came time for my presentation, I grabbed my guitar and walked down the stairs to the front of the auditorium, and began to sing the song I had written.

Things went OK for a bit, but midway through the second verse, I froze. I forgot the words to the song I had written. I was totally lost. I looked in horror at my classmates who were horrified for me.

As far as I could tell, Dr. Hendricks was not horrified. But neither was he impressed.

I recovered, sort of, finished the song, kind of, and ended on a very low note. I limped back to my seat, humiliated. Before that moment, I only thought I understood embarrassment.

When I tell that story, I can still feel the emotions of the day. It was a bad day, a loss in front of a respected professor, my classmates, and advanced students at the seminary.

The song I had written told the tale of the healing of the lame man we have just seen from Acts 3, and that's the life event I always think of when I turn to Acts 3.

As I made my way back to my seat at the end of the song, my classmates gave me sympathetic nods. I could almost read their minds. "Poor guy" and "He should have prepared more" and "I'm glad it wasn't me". I doubt if anybody was thinking, *"Now there's a guy with a future."*

And, at the beginning of the day two thousand years ago, there wasn't a person in Jerusalem who was thinking, *"You know, I'll be that if God is going to accomplish something of note today, He'll use that lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate."*

Or, *"If God is going to keep the revival that was started at Pentecost going, He's certain to use that hick from Galilee, Peter, to do it."*

But that is exactly what He did. That is exactly what He does, day in and day out, age after age. We could probably devise a biblical formula that illustrates that God works powerfully in inverse proportion to the strength of the person He's using.

- He chose to use the teenaged David to bring down the giant Goliath.
- He chose to pare down Gideon's army from thousands to a few hundred so that no one would think that Israel had won a military victory by her own strength.
- He chose to use Simon Peter, a man who had failed spectacularly, a man without training in the rabbinic schools, a hick from the sticks, to deliver messages that resulted in the salvation of thousands.
- He used the healing of a beggar who had never walked to keep the fires of revival burning in Jerusalem.

This is so important.

When God uses people who are strong, He does so despite their strength, not because of it. Normally, God's method is to work through weaklings and misfits, cracked pots and failures because they (WE) display His strength most gloriously.

The Apostle Paul got it.

When he wanted to describe the kinds of people God was pleased to use, he listed, **[1 Corinthians 1:26] not many wise, not many noble, not many mighty.**

And when he was pressed by the Christians in the city of Corinth to tell them something he was proud of, he told them about the time he was rescued from Damascus by being lowered over the city wall in a basket. Paul's greatest boast was of the day when he became a basket case for Jesus. (2 Corinthians 11)

For a long time after my seminary song fiasco, I stayed away from Acts 3. The story reminded me of my failure. It was painful and I avoided it.

Now, I embrace it. Now, it's my story of hope. It tells me that God uses people nobody would expect Him to use. He pulls players off the bench to make key contributions for eternity's sake.

So, if you have failed, as I have, rejoice. It's a big club. God still wants to use us.

If you are weak, as I am, rejoice. God delights to use us in our weakness to showcase His marvelous strength. Enter this week with great hope. And enter this week, too, with eyes wide open to people in need and for situations of need.

Watch for weakness, human frailty and failure, disease and disaster, suffering and persecution.

It is there that God will most likely be at work. And it's there we'll be, ready to serve in Jesus' Name, ready to speak about our Savior.