

## When the Lame Leap

Jacob's mom knew there was something wrong with her baby as soon as he was born. Normal newborn cries echoed against an otherwise ominous silence that filled the room. The attendant midwife exchanged furtive glances with the other women helping with the birth.

"What's wrong with my baby?" She demanded! She saw when they placed him in her arms. Jacob's feet were badly deformed, turning sharply outward at his ankles. He could never possibly walk. Jacob would be a cripple.

Growing up Jacob watched the other kids play. As they ran and chased each other, he occupied himself with other things—what toys his dad made for him, and small games. Often he just stared at his twisted feet and wished. Sometimes in his dreams at night Jacob ran and jumped with the rest. He hadn't had that dream for a long time.

In Jacob's world, there were no wheelchairs; no therapies; no surgeries to correct malformed feet and ankles. He could not work. And when his dad died, Jacob was forced to do the only thing he could do: sit in public places and beg.

Back then, beggars were an accepted part of the public landscape. In a culture without welfare, needy people appealed directly for help. There was less shame then, and others didn't look on them as we look at beggars today.

We have names for those who ask for money on the streets: bums, panhandlers and worse. The terms are pejorative. We're highly suspicious, distrustful. Even when we do give them something, it's usually just enough to get rid of them and then only to salve our conscience.

It wasn't that way in Jacob's world. Giving to the needy was generally considered to be one of the most respectable, honorable things you could do. It was a highly prized public virtue.

Every day Jacob sat at the main entry point for the place of worship that dominated his community. There was a huge gate, some seventy-five feet high, with two massive doors decorated with Corinthian bronze. Jacob made a humble living there by the generosity of others. He had been there every day for years. And now he was almost forty.

One day—like any other day—friends carried him to the gate. It was time for the late afternoon services and Jacob could expect a crowd. This was a good time to beg.

On this day Jacob saw two men passing by. He asked them for money. They stopped and stared at him. The larger man said simply: "Look at us."

Jacob stretched out his hand, expecting some coins.

The larger man deferred. They didn't have any money. And that's when Jacob stepped into his dream. The man leaned toward him and said: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Then he took Jacob's extended hand in his own strong grip and helped him to his feet. Jacob felt his ankles straighten, and unused muscles flex. For the first time in his life he stood upright. He took a few tentative steps, and that constrained little boy still inside him spilled out everywhere. He ran. He jumped. He strutted. Every once in a while he stuck out a foot and just stared at it. Jacob shouted; he laughed and cried and praised God. And he clung tightly to the two men who had effected this miracle.

Now the people who had come that day for services were there for a prayer meeting. If prayer meetings back then were like prayer gatherings today, they were dignified, sober affairs.

Jacob's childlike leaping and yelling attracted everyone's attention. People quickly recognized him as the beggar they passed by on their way to services. He had been there every day for decades. They had seen his distorted feet. They knew he was crippled. And now here he was walking and jumping and praising God. The crowd that rushed to him was astonished.

How many of you have heard this story before? Luke recorded it in Acts 3:1-10. We've added a few apocryphal details for our telling, but it's the same story.

At the end of chapter two, Luke said of the emerging church that "Everyone was filled with awe. And many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles." Chapter three is a 'for instance,' a snapshot of just one miracle for the photo album of the newly-birthe church. This is the kind of thing that went on in those early beginnings.

Later, the writer of Hebrews would explain: "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him [the apostles]. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" (Hebrews 2:3-4).

Miracles like this were like billboards attesting to the validity of the apostles' message. Isaiah had predicted that in the time of Messiah: "Then will the lame leap like a deer..." (Isaiah 35:6). And here was a man lame from birth, leaping!

Once again, Peter saw the opportunity and stood up to preach. He had everyone's undivided attention. He began by deflecting attention away from himself. He testified to Jesus. Let's read v. 11-26.

Is this how you would present the gospel? Glance through it again and think how this would sound to your unsaved neighbor, or a co-worker.

Peter is preaching to a Jewish crowd that had been complicit in Jesus' crucifixion. They had known Jesus. They had heard him preach in that same spot on Solomon's Porch in the Jerusalem temple. They had witnessed his power. They watched as Pilate, having flogged Jesus mercilessly, put him forward with the words: "Behold the man." And they had screamed for his crucifixion.

Jesus had come as Israel's king with an offer of God's kingdom. They had rejected him and crucified him.

Did you notice all the titles Peter confers on Jesus. They are rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Peter weaves them into the case he makes against his audience. Jesus is God's *servant* whom God has glorified. Any observant Jew in that crowd would have instantly connected that to another text in Isaiah: "See, my *servant* will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted" (Isaiah 52:13). They had disowned God's servant and handed him over to be killed.

Jesus is the holy and righteous One. They disowned Jesus and traded his life for that of a murderer.

In a stunning paradox, Peter says they killed the author of life. But God raised him from the dead.

Peter goes on to identify Jesus as the prophet who was to be like Moses. "Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people." Jesus is someone one ignored only to one's eternal peril.

Peter makes his point: Jesus made this crippled man well. This miracle of healing is God's stamp of approval on Jesus, your Messiah. He is the one you handed over to be executed, the one you disowned, the one you exchanged for a murderer, the one you killed.

His sermon is a defense of Jesus as Messiah and an appeal to their conscience. It is a very

Jewish appeal rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and directed at the very people who had clamored for Jesus' crucifixion. Peter spells out their horrific guilt in large script.

Look at v. 17-21.

Peter says they acted in ignorance, as did their leaders. As bad as it was, their rejection of Jesus was not wilful—not a knowing refusal to receive him in spite of a clear understanding of who he was. Their unbelief was culpable—they should have known—but it was not the same as if they had really believed he came from God. They did not.

In God's name, Peter offered them a second chance to receive their Messiah. It required a deep change of mind and a clear change of direction. Having rejected Jesus, they had turned away from God. If Israel would repent and return, God would forgive them, restore them, and send them their Messiah Jesus.

When Peter talked about their sins being wiped out (v. 19), he used a word that copyists used. Writing paper back then, both papyrus and parchment, was very expensive. And the inks they used dried on the surface of the paper. If a document was no longer needed, they wouldn't shred it. They recycled it. They would take a wet rag and wash off the ink. They ended up with a fresh page upon which something new could be written.

Peter tells the crowd God wants to do that to their sins—wash them away so the record of their lives is wiped clean.

Peter's sermon is a powerful word underscored by a powerful work. As Peter spoke, the man who had been healed clung to him. The miracle was right there in front of them. They could not ignore it.

And guess what happened?

The first time Peter preached, how many responded? About three-thousand. What happened this time? Look at the first four verses of chapter four. Another two-thousand people received the message—and—Peter and John got arrested and thrown into jail. Pastor Walt is going to unpack that story for us next week.

Peter and John were being faithful to their calling. Jesus had told them: "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

In his message, Peter told the crowd: "You killed the author of life, But God raised him from the dead. We are *witnesses* of this" (Acts 3:15).

Jesus did not call them to a certain standard of success. And he had warned them that their testimony would be costly. Some would respond with faith; others would react with unbelief and anger. Even though two thousand souls believed their message, the nation as a whole rejected it.

So they could not measure their ministry entirely on the basis of outcomes. If people responded in faith, that was God's doing. If people reacted with persecution, that was Satan's opposition.

The measure of their ministry was faithfulness to their calling. Peter and John saw the opportunity to talk about Jesus, so they did. Some people got saved. Peter and John got tossed into jail.

We have said that Luke is recording the story of the church. It's the very beginning of the story we find ourselves in. This is our story. How do you connect with what happened here?

We've probably never witnessed a miracle as dramatic as the healing of this congenitally crippled man. We've never preached to two-thousand people, much less had two-thousand

respond in faith to what we had to say. And I doubt that any of us have ever been arrested for talking about Jesus.

But what about faithfulness? We have the same calling. We're all called to bear witness to Jesus. We have a story to tell of what he has done in our lives. We have been entrusted with God's good news of reconciliation through faith in Jesus.

We have vastly different venues in which we operate. The apostles preached to thousands. We talk to individuals where we live and work and play. But God measures the success of our witness by our faithfulness to him and to his story, not by how many respond. And while we probably won't get arrested for talking about Jesus, we will certainly face social pressure to say nothing. God-talk in America has been largely marginalized. We might be shamed or embarrassed by people we know.

So how's our faithfulness? How are we managing our fears and anxieties about personal rejection when opportunities arise to talk about Jesus? By the way, Luke will give us a powerful example of how those early believers managed their own anxieties. We'll see that in two weeks.

Paul wrote: "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2).

We have been given a trust. We're witnesses. By our lives and with our words, we testify to the reality of Jesus Christ and the power of his gospel. We aren't called to be successful as Americans count success. Just faithful.

Be faithful.

Would you pray this prayer with me in response:

"Holy Father, I confess that there have been times when I have been unfaithful to your calling on my life to be a witness. I have been silent when I should have spoken, fearful when I should have been bold. Please forgive my unfaithfulness to the trust you have given me. Give me courage to face my fears. Make me wise and good, and when you provide opportunities to talk about Jesus, help me to recognize them, and to speak with gentleness and respect, and with clarity and conviction.

I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen."