

POWER

SHERARD EDINGTON

Acts 4:1-12

Our reading from the Book of Acts revolves around one specific question. And that question, which is part of our reading, is this: *By what power or by what name did you do this?* The question is being posed by the leaders of the Jewish nation. They are asking this question to Peter and John—two of Jesus' apostles. On the previous day, Peter and John had performed a public healing. They were also preaching about Jesus and the resurrection. The leaders want to know by what power they accomplished this healing, and in whose name do they preach resurrection.

All of this takes place in the early chapters of the New Testament Book of Acts which is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. As you know, Jesus was tried and executed. Three days later, he was raised by God. He appeared to his followers and taught them before he ascended into heaven. He commanded his followers to remain in Jerusalem until God sends them a sign. This sign appeared on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and gave them power. The arrival of the Holy Spirit at that place attracted a crowd and Peter preached and the crowd responded and thousands were baptized.

Some time after Pentecost, Peter and John are going to the temple at Jerusalem to attend afternoon prayers. At the gate of the temple they pass a disabled beggar. This man was a fixture at this location and everyone recognized him. The man asks Peter for a handout, but instead of giving him a few coins, Peter heals him and the man walks. The healing instantly creates a stir among the people and right there Peter begins preaching to a gathering crowd. He tells about Jesus Christ and how in him there was healing and a resurrection of the dead.

Because of this commotion they instigated, Peter and John are arrested. Apparently, their preaching had annoyed the temple priests as well as the Sadducees. The priests were annoyed because someone was preaching on their turf and causing a disturbance. The Sadducees were annoyed because they did not believe in a resurrection. Because they had the authority to do so, they had Peter and John taken in for questioning.

The next day, the high council of Judea convenes to interrogate Peter and John. The man who was healed is brought in as well. The high council was likely part of the Sanhedrin—the ruling rabbinical council of Judea. Present at this meeting are *rulers, elders, and scribes* along with the High Priest—a man named Annas—as well as other members of the high priestly family. It is impossible to overstate how elite this group is. Judea was ruled by the Romans and had no real king. However,

the temple leadership was as close to royalty as one could get. This was not some local magistrate holding Peter and John; it is the nation's highest authority.

Peter and John are brought before this council and are asked, *By what power or by what name did you do this?* That question tells us everything. We know that Peter performed a miracle with the power of God—Yahweh. This council consists of the leaders of Israel—Yahweh's people—even the High Priest of Yahweh and yet they cannot recognize or accept God's work in their midst. It is telling that they don't accept God's power as unique. They assume that other powers exist because they themselves serve other powers. They serve the power of wealth and position.

The leaders are aware of how tenuous their power is. They rule only at the whim of the Romans. If they cannot keep their people in line they know the Romans will replace them. As the message of Jesus Christ becomes more popular among the people, they worry their hold on power might be lost.

The one power they do possess is the power to take life. This was demonstrated when they handed Jesus over to the Romans demanding his execution. They possess the power of the state to inflict death. So, when Peter and John start healing the lame and preaching about God's power to give life, the leaders are greatly annoyed and seek to put a stop to it. They know their own power; they want to know what power these Christians possess.

So, Peter addresses the council, but he is not alone when he does so. He is filled with the Holy Spirit. With great confidence, Peter tells the leaders that if the reason they brought him in is *because of a good deed done to someone who was sick*, and if they want to know how that man was healed, then *let it be known to all of you*, he says, *and to all the people of Israel, that this man (the man who was healed) is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth*. That is your answer. That is the name. That is the power.

Peter also reminds his interrogators that Jesus is the one *whom [they] crucified*. I want to be careful here. This is not meant to be a blanket condemnation of all Jews over Jesus' death. Rather, Peter is addressing those specific individuals directly responsible for Jesus' execution. He lets them know that although Jesus was crucified, God raised him from the dead. What power made this possible? The power of Yahweh through Jesus.

Then, as a further accusation of their culpability, Peter places Jesus in the context of scripture by quoting Psalm 118. This psalm tells of the *stone* which the builders rejected. This council that Peter has been brought before are supposed to be the spiritual engineers for their people—their architects, their masons, their carpenters. As builders, they should be fashioning their nation as a spiritual house, a spiritual kingdom, God's kingdom. Peter, however, indicts them for their negligence because they overlooked the key component of what they should be

building. They rejected Jesus to be the cornerstone of God's people. They crucified him although he was the stone necessary for the salvation of Israel. And they did this to protect their own power.

In the end, the council can't deny that the healing that took place. They are aware of the popular support that Peter and John and the others enjoy. So, they order the apostles to never again speak in Jesus' name. Peter, of course, tells them that they cannot do this. They will always be compelled to testify to all they have seen. So, not knowing what else to do, the frustrated council lets them go.

As spiritual descendants of Peter and the apostles, we too should be compelled to testify to the world about the saving deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, to proclaim how through him there is healing and salvation. Despite the fact that he was unjustly executed by the state, we must continue to say his name, to pray his name, to confess his name, to heal in his name, to forgive in his name, to give in his name, to love in his name. For in his name we find the blessed power of God.

In the letter of 1 Peter, we find our calling to be part of God's kingdom. There we read: *Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood...* (1 Peter 2:4-5).

As Christians, throughout most of the year, we reflect on what it means to be disciples of Christ—how to live lives of compassion and service, how to reflect the actions of Jesus in our world. But the season of Easter invites us to focus our attention on the great power of the resurrection—God's power to give life.

We know too well from our experience that the powers of this world seek to take life. Taking life is not just killing. It can also be destroying dreams or undermining potential. When a child is convinced that they will never amount to anything because of their gender, or their skin color, or their poverty, or their neighborhood, then a life is taken. When a person is denied justice or education or health care then a life is taken.

As Christians—as a church—we must confront the power of death and lift up the power of life. The powers of this world seek to take life. We follow the one who gives life. Those with the power to take life are annoyed by those with the power to give life. May we always be annoying.

Our goal should be that for every action we take, every word we speak, someone should want to ask us, "By what power do you do this, in whose name?" And should be able to respond, "Jesus Christ."