

McCabe United Methodist Church
The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!

“I Wanna See You Be Brave”

Sermon on selected verses of Acts 3-4:31 (5/21 & 5/22/16)

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Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to you, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

If you have been around The United Methodist Church for a while, it's possible you've heard someone jokingly refer to their heart being “strangely warmed.”

Like, say, you've just experienced a wonderful choir anthem, or a fantastic worship song – maybe even a sermon that helped remind you of God's ever-present Spirit – you had a spiritually uplifting conversation with a fellow Christian...or you witnessed a child or youth offer an act of kindness.

These are soul-filling experiences that make our spirits sing and that remind us that God is working among us. Well, in talking about these kinds of experiences, United Methodists sometimes say, “My heart was 'strangely warmed' when that happened.” And United Methodists sometimes say that because it was a phrase used in 1738 by one of our founding Methodist fathers, John Wesley.

John Wesley was a pastor in the Church of England and started a movement within the Church of England that eventually became The United Methodist Church. In 1738, however, Wesley was in a season of doubt after some major, major disappointments in life and ministry.

John Wesley's ministry was all about helping Christians become more enthusiastic in the way they lived their faith...and this was not being received by everyone in the way he hoped it would be received.

Plus, around this time back in 1738, he'd made a mess of a significant romantic relationship...so, Mr. Wesley was struggling.

He was feeling lost...wondering if God really did love him, concerned that perhaps Jesus really hadn't saved him.

In his despair, on May 24th of 1738, John Wesley decided to go to a Bible study that was taking place on Aldersgate Street in London. While at this study, someone read from Martin Luther's preface to the book of Romans...and, while this person was reading Luther's words, John Wesley felt his heart was "strangely warmed."

As quoted from one of his journals, John Wesley wrote about this experience, saying, "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

"About a quarter of nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt *my* heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, in Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."¹

Because this is the closest weekend to May 24th – the day on which John Wesley had his heart-warming experience – this marks our yearly celebration of what we call "Aldersgate Day."

The story of John Wesley's heart being strangely warmed, at a time when he was struggling spiritually, is a great story for us to keep in mind as we dive into today's particular section of Acts.

Because, as we go through the book of Acts this summer, we're going to encounter a fair amount of struggle: story after story of the early Church struggling against religious and political authorities as they seek to spread the message of Jesus Christ.

Yet, through the struggle, we'll also encounter a people with hearts on fire – desperate to share with others the love and hope they know in Jesus Christ.

¹ As told at http://en.wikipedia.org/wik/Aldersgate_Day. Emphasis added.

Last week we began our summer series on the book of Acts with a focus on chapters one and two, paying particular attention to the story of Pentecost...the story of the early Church members experiencing the Holy Spirit coming to them like wind and fire, enabling them to speak the message of Jesus Christ in languages they did not know.

The message of the Pentecost story is that the love and hope of Jesus Christ is for *everyone* – no matter who you are, where you're from, what color your skin, what language you speak. The message of Jesus is for everyone. And that's the message that drives the entire book of Acts.

But, as I said last week, if the message that Jesus Christ is for everyone is what *drives* the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is what *fuels* it. Thus the title of this series...*The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!*

In today's reading, some of the first apostles encounter a major roadblock as they seek to spread the good news of Jesus: they encounter the Jewish religious council.

As the story goes, Peter and John were going to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray one afternoon around 3:00. When they got near the Temple's "Beautiful Gate," a man who had been born lame begged them for some money. This man was regularly at the Temple, begging near the Beautiful Gate – it was his way of providing for himself as one unable to work due to his disability.

Peter and John didn't have any money to offer him, so they did him an amazing one better: they healed him. The man's feet and ankles became strong, he jumped up and started walking – it was a miracle and the healed man praised God for it.

A crowd of people gathered around Peter, John, and the healed man, amazed at what they were witnessing: they *knew* the man had been lame and so they were astonished to see him up and walking. Peter proclaimed to them that the man had been healed by the power of Jesus Christ and then he encouraged the crowd to repent of their sin, to put their faith in Jesus...and he preached that, in doing so, they would find their own strength miraculously renewed.

Now, the crowd was excited about Peter's proclamation. However, some religious leaders showed-up...and they were not particularly excited. See, not only was Peter preaching and healing in the name of Jesus, he was *also* preaching about the hope that can be found in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

The religious leaders did not want that message to spread because it would diminish their power and authority...so they put Peter and John in jail. The next morning, the two men were called before the religious leaders for a trial of sorts.

Peter and John knew the religious leaders had the power to keep them in jail – or worse...considering they had worked with Rome to have *Jesus* executed.

But, as they stood before the council, Peter was “filled with the Holy Spirit” and he, again, preached the message of Jesus. He did this at his own risk... he could have backed-down to keep himself safe, but he didn't.

After Peter preached to the religious council, the council conferred among themselves about what should be done.

Since so many had seen the miracle of the man being healed outside the Temple, they didn't figure they could contain the news of that miracle – a miracle performed in the name of Jesus. And they couldn't find any other legitimate reason to punish Peter and John further, so they simply told them to stop preaching and teaching about Jesus. They threatened them and let them go.

Unfortunately for the religious leaders, the message of Jesus could not be contained: that's what happens when people witness a miraculous healing...they are drawn to the *source* of that healing. They want to know more.

When Peter and John were again among the other apostles, they told them about how the religious leaders had threatened them to stop preaching and teaching about Jesus.

Like Peter and John, the other apostles heard the threats but they refused to back-down. Instead, they prayed to God that they would be *brave enough* to speak the message of Jesus.

As today's reading concluded, "After they had prayed, the meeting place shook. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and bravely spoke God's message."

"Lord, listen to their threats," the apostles prayed. "We are your servants. Make us brave enough to speak your message."

I love this prayer of the apostles. I love it because they don't ask God to take away any fear they have...rather, they ask God to make them *brave*. They prayed not that God would make them fearless, but that God would make them *brave*. Isn't that a prayer we should all be praying?

We all experience fear at various points in our lives: some of us deal with fear at a daily, minute-by-minute level, where fear is chronic... others of us deal with fear more circumstantially – where fear comes and goes depending on our immediate circumstances or on events in our community and world.

Fear is a basic, human emotion that we all experience at least on occasion. Anyone who says they never get scared is either lying or is unable to properly identify the feelings they're feeling when they're feeling them.

It's natural to be afraid on occasion. Many circumstances in our lives and in our world justifiably incite fear: violence in homes and neighborhoods, as well as terrorism in our country and abroad...life- threatening health and medical issues. Those are *big* things that stir-up fears inside of us.

But other, somewhat less dramatic circumstances stir-up fear as well: changing jobs...graduating and looking ahead to what's next...losing an important relationship and moving on or trying again with someone new after getting your heart broken... taking the initiative to make new friends or to pursue new interests... saying "yes" to a new adventure or saying "no" when you realize you're letting someone down.

These aren't the big things like violence and terrorism, but these are the fears of everyday life for most of us.

And, like the earliest apostles, some of us may even fear talking to others about the love and hope we find in Jesus: we might fear getting rejected or being uncomfortable or being challenged. We also might fear getting involved at church in a new way: if that's the case, we might fear failure.

Many years ago, I went through a season of life where I spent most of the time gripped with fear. Weeks went by and there was no improvement in my spirit. I lost sleep night after night...I couldn't focus...I was terrified. Eventually, I realized I needed to do something in order to move beyond the fear. So I thought about times in my life I knew I'd been brave – whether recent or years before. I then wrote those experiences on little slips of paper, folded them up, and put them into a clear mason jar. I put the jar on my living room coffee table...and, whenever I found myself stuck in fear, I opened the jar and took out one or more of the slips of paper.

Reading about my past experiences of bravery reminded me how God had brought me through fearful moments before – and it worked like an answered prayer.

The message of today's reading from Acts chapters three and four is not that we should be fearless. No. The message is that, *when we fear*, we should pray that God will make us brave enough to push *through* the fear. Because, when it comes to sharing the message of love and hope in Jesus Christ, it's too important to get bogged-down in fear.

One of my favorite Christian songs of the last several years is the song “Build Your Kingdom Here” by Rend Collective. The entire song is a prayer to God to be filled with the Holy Spirit – that we might be part of building God's kingdom on earth.

The first line of the song's refrain is, “Build your kingdom here / let the darkness fear.”

If anyone or anything is going to *fear* the message of Jesus Christ – if anyone or anything is going to *fear* God's kingdom – it should be darkness that fears...not *us*.

This day and always, may our hearts be “strangely warmed” to the presence of God's Holy Spirit among us. And may our prayer be that, like the early Christians, God will make us brave enough to proclaim the love and hope of Jesus Christ. Amen.