

“He Didn’t Even Ask for It”

Acts 3:1-10

Third Sunday of Easter

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Our family took a trip to Michigan last week to visit my folks, first time we’d seen them since the pandemic began. It was a wonderful visit. Long drive to get to Michigan, it took between 12-13 hours.

So at one point during trip, when my wife was driving, I took a look at my phone and pulled up Facebook. And as I’m sure is true for many of you, Facebook has figured out some things about me. It knows, for example, that I like watching old sports videos.

Clips from baseball or football games that I watched when I was younger, and it shows me one, and then it shows me another, and I just start to get lost in it...which is what happened at one point during the trip.

I was looking at these old sports videos and before I knew it, 45 minutes had gone by. My wife says, “You don’t want to talk?” “Yeah, sure, I want to talk...I just got sucked in.”

Well, you know, not a big deal when you’re on an all-day trip to Michigan.

It did remind me, though, of the film that came out recently, *The Social Dilemma*. Have you seen this? It’s a film that explores the power and pitfalls of social media.

One of the people interviewed in the film is Tristan Harris—a former design ethicist at Google. Harris remarks:

“...if you’re not paying for the product, then you are the product. A lot of people think, ‘Google’s just a search box. Facebook is just a place to see what my friends are doing...what they don’t realize is, [these companies] are competing for your attention.

“So Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram...their business model is to keep people engaged on the screen.”

Or as Tim Kendall, the former President of Pinterest, describes it:

“Let’s figure out how to get as much of this person’s attention as we possibly can. How much time can we get you to spend? How much of your life can we get you to give to us?”

It’s not a new idea to say that TIME is our most valuable commodity. To say that our ATTENTION is the most precious thing we have to give.

In our text from Acts for today, Peter and John approach the temple at the hour of prayer. And they come across a man “lame from birth.”

Luke writes:

When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms.

This is what the man always did.
He asked anyone who crossed his path for alms.

People would lay him at the gate of temple day in and day out, week after week...he’s become like background noise, just there every day, asking for a bit of money—no need to give him much attention.

So did you catch how Peter responds?

Peter looked intently at him, as did John...

Why does Luke write that?

It's the first thing Peter does with this man.

Peter and John pay attention to him.

Peter says to the man: "Look at us."

And Luke writes: "*he fixed his attention on them...*"

Why all this talk in our text about paying attention?

Why doesn't Luke just jump ahead to the great healing miracle of this story?

I don't know for sure, but maybe the miracle in this story isn't the first point that Luke wants his readers to pay attention to...

Maybe the first question this story asks us is this:

What are you and I paying attention to these days?

After a year unlike any that we have walked through before, where is your energy going? What is it that you are giving your time to?

In a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal*, Jason Gay writes:

"...[I] didn't write the Great American Novel during these past 12 months, or even 10 pages of a mediocre one, or attempt to build a castle from popsicle sticks, or bother to teach the dog a word of conversational French. I'm assuming this is [true for] almost all of us, because those sorts of achievements are hard to pull off in any year, and this past year has been stressful and scattered..."

He goes on:

“The news is full of hopeful predictions about recovery—when we’re going to feel better about getting out in the world, going on an airplane, heading back to the office, resuming the old, hectic patterns we’d taken for granted...Sign me up for all of it...Still: it’s not going to be instant. It’s not going to feel like flipping a switch.”

“This past year has challenged everyone in unforeseen ways, and a lot of us are just coming to terms with it. There are...changes still imperceptible. Hopefully, some of the change is for good. How lovely would it be if we all got a little more forgiving of each other, and of ourselves, too? How beautiful would it be if we all became better neighbors? Patience remains important. So does grace.”¹

What are you and I paying attention to these days?

How much of your time are you giving to being patient with other people?

How much of your energy are you devoting to giving grace to other people?

It would be easy to turn our text for today into a to-do list, of sorts:

How can we pay better attention to the people we see every day?

Extending more patience, being more forgiving, offering more grace?

Good questions, faithful questions, and ones that I hope you’ll consider when this worship service is done.

¹ Jason Gay, “As a Window Opens, a Plea for Patience and Grace,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2021.

But the fascinating part of this story isn't just the way that Peter and John pay attention to the man at the beginning.

It's what the people around him see at the end.

Luke writes:

All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Wonder and amazement...it strikes me that THIS is what Luke wants us to pay attention to.

According to Acts, Easter is not just a divine insurance policy about life after death. Easter is a **WORLD-CHANGING** event, one that overturns the status quo of the lives we live right now.

Easter is an act that springs from the imagination of God, so that we might approach this life, and pay attention in this life, not with the same ol', same ol'—but with wonder and awe at what God is doing in our midst even now to **CHANGE** our lives, and **MAKE US NEW...**

I don't know about you, but this is where the rubber hits the road for me. Because more often than not, **MY** imagination falls flat. My imagination falls into patterns of same ol', same ol'.

I tend to see the world as I've always seen the world,
and I miss things...
things that I should be paying attention to...

Let me give you a small example.

In the first congregation I served as an associate pastor, the youth at that church had an annual summer mission trip. We went to Juarez, Mexico each year—it was a wonderful experience, for the youth who went, for the adult sponsors who went, and for me.

The first three years of the trip were, for the most part, free of trouble. However, during the fourth year we ran into problems with one of the vehicles.

We were headed from Mexico back into the U.S., into El Paso, on a steep hill at the border, when the temperature gage on the van started to climb.

Immediately I turned off the air to cool the engine—no luck.

When traffic came to a stop, I had a couple of the youth get out of the van to diagnose the problem—no luck.

The gage was riding on high, and then a terrible smell began to seep inside the van.

Overheating would not have been a good scenario.

Stranded on a bridge, on a steep incline,

in the middle of rush hour traffic,

with a group of tired and hungry teenagers inside—

this was a problem I really needed to fix.

We slowly made it through the checkpoint, but when we got back on the highway, the smell got stronger. The faster we went, the stronger the smell...so I slowed down to a 15mph crawl until we reached our host church.

This was NOT GOOD.

Without the van, we had no transportation.

It was too late to take it to a mechanic, no one wanted to be stranded the next day...

Then one of the teenage boys sidled up to me, and said, “Uh, Ben...you’ve checked the parking brake, right?”

I responded in the only manner befitting of his pastor.

I lied, and I said, “Of course!”

And then (when this youth wasn’t looking) I immediately looked down to discover that I had been driving to into Juarez and back to El Paso with the parking brake on!

Now what was that?

I wasn’t paying attention to what I needed to be paying attention to...

Of course, it’s one thing when we’re talking parking brakes.
It’s another thing when we’re talking about the gift of Easter.

The way that Easter REARRANGES our vision of the world:
the ways that Easter asks us to see other people,
the ways that Easter asks us to love other people...

When we hear about another mass shooting, or when racial injustice rears its ugly head, will we shrug our shoulders and treat it all as background noise, will we retreat to our echo chambers to hear the points of view we already agree with, or will we work with God and one another, no matter our politics, to imagine a society that does not have to be this way?

As the late, Pulitzer Prize winning poet Mary Oliver once said:
“Attention is the beginning of devotion.”

In other words, take a look at what you're paying attention to, and you'll discover what you're truly devoted to...

Anne Lamott once wrote about a family she saw interviewed on "60 Minutes."

There was a religiously devout mother, a painfully shy father, and their 10-year-old daughter, bound to a wheelchair by spina bifida.

Every year this family made a pilgrimage to Lourdes, in France, where healing is reputed to occur.

Ed Bradley was conducting the interview, and according to Lamott, he was giving the family a hard time for being so gullible. At one point he turned to the little girl and asked her, "When you pray, what do you pray for?"

"I pray that my father won't be so shy," she replied. "It makes him terribly lonely."

This response stopped Bradley in his tracks, but after a few seconds he pressed on, questioning the family's wisdom, saying to the mother that they spend thousands of dollars every year going to France and they still have no miracle.

The mother looked at her family:
 a family held together in faith,
 a family that prayed for each other,
 a family that radiated joy, a joy that by the world's wisdom
 should NOT be present... and the mother said:

"Mr. Bradley, you don't get it.
 We got our miracle."²

² Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions*, New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993.

Oh, how you and I like to be the ones who understand the way the world works. And then God shows up at Easter, and God overturns every assumption we make about how the world is going to work.

This is what strikes me about our passage for today.

The man who was healed had an idea about how the world would work that day. He would ask for alms. Some people would help. Some folks would ignore him. He would go to sleep that night the same person he was when he woke up that morning...and then, the God of Easter showed up.

The God of Easter gave him a gift that he did not even ask for...

Or how about the people who saw the man healed?

They were overcome with wonder and amazement at all that God was doing...which begs the question:

When was the last time that happened to you?

When was the last time the wonder and awe that comes from Easter simply...overwhelmed you?

Have you ever come to a place in your life in which everything became—

a problem for you to solve,
or a task for you to do,
or a customer for you to please,
or a Zoom meeting for you to attend,
or a deadline for you to meet—

and you knew you had lost something in all that—some sense of wonder, of awe, of astonishment at the activity of God and the imagination of God and the ways that God invites us to be God’s people in this world?

Ten years ago, shortly after Steve Jobs died, his sister, the writer Mona Simpson, wrote about his last few hours:

*He told me, when he was saying goodbye,
(that) he was so sorry we wouldn’t be able to be old together
as we’d always planned...*

*On this last night, Laurene next to him on the bed—
His breath indicated an arduous journey, some steep path, altitude.
He seemed to be climbing.*

*Steve’s final words, hours earlier, were monosyllables, repeated
three times.*

*Before embarking, he’d looked...for a long time at his children,
then at his life’s partner, Laurene, and then over their shoulders past
them.*

*Steve’s final words were:
OH WOW. OH WOW. OH WOW.³*

I forget which theologian said it:
“You can always tell a false god from the true God because false
gods will never surprise you.”

³ “A Sister’s Eulogy for Steve Jobs,” by Mona Simpson, *The New York Times*, October 30, 2011.

What are you paying attention to these days?

Let me invite you to do something with me.
I want you to think right now of someone you love.

Someone in your life whom you have tried, at various times, to help or fix or change, and you keep praying for their life to get better.

And all your trying has left you with is exhaustion.
Every good idea you have sinks into a sea of frustrated love.

Every time you try to help, it just doesn't work.
Your imagination has left you with...nothing.

Now hold that person in your mind, and hear the news of Easter:

Easter says that we NEVER know what God will do next, and that the way things are right now is NOT the way they'll always be.

Easter tells us that we follow a God who is DETERMINED to surprise us.

A God whose imagination is so much greater than ours.
A God who loves the world and pays attention to the world in ways we cannot even conceive.

That is the God of Easter.
That is the God who is at work in your loved one's life.

Do you still have that person in mind?
Good.

Now make some room...
in your mind, right next to that person,
make some room for the majesty and wonder
and miracles of God.

And one day, you too will be left saying:

Oh wow! Oh wow...

Amen.