

Once
Psalm 131/Acts 3:1-10
Confirmation Sunday
May 14, 2023
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan

Acts 3:1-10

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. ²And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' ⁵And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' ⁷And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰and 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.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Do you have any core memories that loom large in your mind? I have a few. One is the Easter play my church held in the cemetery that bordered the church when I was a child. It took the place of Sunday School and there was a church-wide breakfast afterward. Someone had constructed a huge tomb. Out of what, I'm not really sure. It looked like a combination of paper mâché and stucco with a large, albeit hollow stone that had been rolled away from the entrance. And there it was. Right in the middle of the graveyard. The graveyard that we only went into if we happened to kick a ball over the fence from the playground next door. And even then, you had to sneakily jump the tall fence surrounding it to get your ball back. The cemetery was the first burial ground for the city, and it has graves from

the 1800 and early 1900's. We didn't normally see the gate open, but it was wide open on Easter Sunday so that everyone could stream in. My dad played the role of one of the soldiers who guarded the tomb and fell asleep. I remember his sandals and his centurion style outfit. I don't remember who played the role of Jesus, but I remember the "actor" Jesus standing in front of that makeshift tomb, dressed in white linen with arms raised heavenward as he addressed the audience. During Holy Week this year, some 30 years later, I happened to be at my home church of First Presbyterian of Anderson for a meeting. And this core memory came up. And it was revealed that this Easter drama in the cemetery only ever happened ONCE. I was shocked and the woman who shared that news with me admitted that she, too, was shocked when she found out. We grew up in that congregation together and both of us had these memories of the Easter play that loomed large in our minds. In our minds, this play had been performed every year of our childhoods. In our minds it was a grand tradition. In reality, it only happened ONCE.

I want you to put yourself into the scene from Acts 3. It's the Temple in Jerusalem. The place where Jesus was dedicated as an infant, where he got "lost" at age 12, and where he turned the tables of the money changers during his ministry. It's the Temple in Jerusalem, built on a literal mountain, but not Solomon's Temple. Zerubbabel rebuilt that one in 516 BCE and the Temple of Jesus's time and that of the early church had been greatly expanded by King Herod shortly before Jesus was born. It was constructed of white stone and featured bronze pillars. It had three distinct architectural units, and its expanded mount included the original site of Solomon's Temple. Herod's Temple mount stretched 36 acres...28 football fields! One retaining wall, the Western Wall, still exists today. In the time of the early church, the mount would have been surrounded by a wall which had many gates. Just like any major city in that time, the gates protected the Temple and people entered at different gates for different reasons. Imagine that you go to the Temple often. And every day you see the same person in the same place. A man lying beside the Beautiful Gate. You might call him a beggar. It is obvious that he didn't walk there on his own. You can observe that he has a congenital disability affecting his legs and someone clearly had to place him there. On this day, it is 3pm – the hour of prayer – and you're

hurrying up the steps (remember the Temple sits atop a mountain) to enter the Temple complex when you hear a voice asking you something. You stop in your tracks. Maybe the voice even interrupted you as you were reciting one of the Psalms of Ascent to prepare your heart and mind for prayer. Perhaps it was Psalm 131, the one that Hunter just read for us. The voice asks you for alms. As you're imagining yourself in this scene, you might assume that alms are akin to someone experiencing homelessness asking you for spare change while you are downtown. Alms in the biblical times were different. Simply put, alms are gifts to the poor. But alms are deeply related to faith in God, community harmony, happiness, and righteous living. As the Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible puts it, "Almsgiving must involve facing the poor with whom one lives, and sharing one's food and one's home; it is not simply the giving of financial resources."¹ So you and your companion are in a hurry, you want to make it to the prayer service and you've been interrupted. Because of your faith, you don't ignore the voice. You look intently upon the face of the voice. You take time to really see the person who is asking something of you. And then you ask that person to look at you. And you offer them the very best thing you have – the power of God in the name of Jesus Christ. Dr. Matthew Skinner of Princeton Theological Seminary helps us understand what happens when Peter calls upon the name of Jesus in this scene: "Summoning Jesus's name means Peter calls upon Jesus' power. He presents himself as a mediator, one who wields Jesus's authority for the sake of accomplishing Jesus' purposes. Peter claims no special power for himself but participates in Jesus' ongoing ministry of compassion and relief."²

The first time I ever intently studied Psalm 131, I had my son, Teddy, in the baby Bjorn on my chest and I was in a class at the Montreat Worship and Music Conference with Dr. Carol Bechtel on the Psalms. She reminded us that Psalm 131 is part of the Psalms of Ascent (the fifteen Psalms between chapters 120-134) that are meant to be prayed while going up to the Temple or by pilgrims journeying long distances to Jerusalem. I was the only one in the class with an infant in tow and I think his presence really made the psalm come alive for all of us.

¹ Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible, p. 45

² Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel, p. 26

“I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.”

While everyone oohed and awed over Teddy and his cheeks, I most definitely did not have a weaned child with me and the whole room could probably tell. Mainly because he became restless to be fed right about the time the class was finishing up each day. As the mother of a toddler and an infant at the time, I couldn't fully imagine what it is like to be a mother with a weaned child. We hadn't yet reached that stage of life. But Dr. Bechtel helped me to imagine it. And she likened that relationship to the relationship God desires with us. It isn't a relationship of frazzled mealtimes and a relentless meeting of needs. It's deeper than that, simpler than that. More ordinary and normal. Not so new and all consuming. It's a give and a take. It's something like a habit. Something so commonplace that it happens (or should happen) countless times in one's life – a child content beside a parent. Each person – parent and child - content to be in one another's presence and to have a trusting relationship.

Imagine approaching prayer before God with the words of Psalm 131 –

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;*

Imagine the early church leaders, Peter and John, praying these words as they are hurrying up the steps of the Temple mount. Maybe Peter is muttering them under his breath. Maybe John is reciting them silently in his head. Maybe this psalm has become such a habit for them that they don't even realize they are praying the words. And then something extraordinary happens and they decide to trust their faith, to trust the name of Jesus, and to offer someone in need something transformative. Imagine the man lying at the Beautiful Gate, reciting these words, wishing he, too, could climb the steps like the faithful. Both this prayer and his days have become so ordinary, so mundane, so the same. He doesn't think there's a chance for change, for hope, for something different to happen...even just once. But it does. And his life is never the same.

In the life of faith, there are some things that will only ever happen ONCE. A transformative mission or pilgrimage experience. A moment when the meaning of one of the Sacraments strikes a chord in your heart. A particularly meaningful worship experience. A Sunday School class or Bible study that opens your mind to a new way of understanding. An experience of God's creation that showcases its wonder and beauty. Walking with a loved one on the journey to death. Welcoming a new life into your family. Being cured of a horrible disease. Actress Jennifer Garner has been in the news a lot lately. She has a new show out on AppleTV+ and has been doing the interview circuit this spring. She made headlines a few weeks ago for revealing that her teenage children are not allowed on social media. And this week for her religious faith. She shared on the Today Show on Tuesday that a sermon from her childhood "was particularly moving and is still top of her mind." "As a kid," she shared, "my family and I, we always referenced this one beautiful sermon where our minister talked about taking something hard that had happened and imagining yourself going down to the banks of the rivers and fashioning a beautiful box out of what you find there and placing this hurt carefully in the box and watching it float down the river." For Jennifer Garner, this sermon was a ONCE in a lifetime lesson and she has carried it with her ever since. In juxtaposition to those ONCE in a lifetime experiences, there are things that happen day in and day out – blessings at mealtimes, regular Sundays in the pews, games at youth group, choir practice, Wednesdays at Its Elementary, basketball practices, church fellowship dinners, Lenten or Advent practices, fellowship over donuts and coffee, Bible Studies and Circle meetings. That's what the life of faith is – **big moments** every once in a while that transform, empower, and sustain us, and **little moments** that build like habits and influence our hearts and minds over the long haul. Both matter – big moments and ordinary moments. Wednesday afternoons spent on the church playground **AND** that ONE Easter Sunday play in the cemetery next door.

I didn't realize it when I chose these texts for Confirmation Sunday, but together, these Scripture readings are the perfect snapshot of what faith in Christ is over the course of one's life. Just think of the three characters in our lesson from Acts. All three are doing the ordinary, mundane things of faith.

Things they've done before, things they will do again. Peter and John are going to pray at the Temple. The man is asking for alms – literally praying with his words and actions and presence to be healed. They're doing these everyday things when one of those ONCE in a while, ONCE in a lifetime moments happens for all of them...for each one of them. Peter trusts the name of Jesus. Trusts in its power and grace so much that he extends its blessings to another. John witnesses this miracle and the man benefits from it. All are transformed and changed. Here's what the Rev. Will Willimon says about this moment in the life of the early church: "We see that the message of Jesus is inextricably related to its power to heal. The community has this same power to offer the world. Here is a community which does not simply offer suffering people kind words of empathy. This community possesses the same power so manifest in the ministry of Jesus."³

Confirmands, maybe this day, this moment, will just be an ordinary day of worship that, like a habit, builds on top of all the other Sundays in your heart and soul and mind. And that's wonderful. It's beautiful. If you tend habits like this over the course of your life, they will sustain you. But maybe for some of you, Confirmation Sunday is a ONCE in a lifetime experience. Maybe you'll always remember the feeling of being anointed with oil and the magnitude of answering the membership questions in front of this loving congregation. And that is transformative. It is meaningful. It will also sustain you.

To all of you worshipping with us today, what core memories loom large in your mind? What ordinary things of a faithful life have become such a habit that they are like breathing to you? Think upon them. Make space for them. Give thanks for them. And be ready for those ONCE in a lifetime moments where you are called to claim the name of Jesus the Christ, to share its power with the world, and to participate in Jesus' ongoing ministry of salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen

³ Acts Interpretation Bible Commentary, p. 44

