

Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper. D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE JEHOVAH'S BY-STANDER

Acts 4:1-22

Text: "...for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." Acts 4:20

I hope you will keep your Bibles open to the fourth chapter of Acts this morning, for there are some important things I would like to point out to you about the verses we read this morning.

In verse 1, the Bible tells us that Peter and John were speaking to the people. I would like to stress to you how unusual this is. Remember who these men are. They are, to use our own vernacular, real country boys. They had been raised and had lived in a rural part of Palestine and were fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, which in reality is just a large lake. They had little contact with metropolitan areas and little or no experience in public speaking. Yet, here they are, in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem, and they are making a public address to the sophisticated city-slickers. The Bible even tells us in verse 13 that they were uneducated and common men. And not only were they speaking, but they spoke with such force, with such power, with such conviction, that in verse 4 we are told that many of those who heard them believed what they said. Yes, they obviously spoke with great persuasive ability, for we are told that five thousand men believed them.

Now, what in the world had brought them to this rather incredible moment? What compelled them to speak out and why were they able to speak with such power? Well, let me share with you some things the Bible tells us were happening to them that led to this astonishing event.

First, I want you to notice that they believed something. They had some deep and profound convictions. In verses 10,11,12 this is what we read that Peter said to the rulers: "be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Let me call to your attention about five important things in that statement. First, they said that Jesus was the Christ, or the Messiah. They believed that this man Jesus from the city of Nazareth was the promised Messiah of God. That's the first thing. Jesus was the Christ. Second, they spoke of his crucifixion. They knew his death on the cross was no empty sign, no common event. They believed that Jesus had died for their sins and the sins of the world upon the cross. Then, third, they spoke of his resurrection. They believed that God had raised him from the dead. (1) That meant that sin didn't have the last word for in Jesus sin had been defeated. (2) It meant that death didn't have the last word for they knew that as Jesus was raised, so they had the assurance of their own resurrection to eternal life. (3) They didn't serve a dead master, but rather a living Lord. So, to say that God had raised Jesus from the dead was a great affirmation of faith. So, first they said Jesus was the Messiah; second, that he had died for the sins of men; third, that he was a resurrected, living Lord. Then fourth, they believed that this living Lord was a miracle-working Saviour. He was a Saviour actively involved in the lives of the faithful and that's why the crippled man had been healed. Finally, they believed that Jesus was the only means of salvation. "There is," they said, "salvation in no one else."

So, the first thing I want to share with you about Peter and John is that they had some deep convictions. They believed something. They were excited about what they believed. What about you? Do you have some deep conviction this morning that you are excited about? Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you

believe he died on the cross? Do you believe he was raised from the dead? That he is a living Lord who gives you eternal life. Do you believe that he is still a miracle working God? Are you excited about what you believe? Now, the second thing we can observe from this scripture is this: their own lives had been changed by what they believed. Even the Jewish leaders, we are told in verse 13, knew that something radical and transforming had happened to them. As the Bible puts it, "they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

That phrase has always intrigued me. Here were two disciples of Jesus who had a quality about their lives--they had a demeanor about them--they had some startling characteristic about them--that other people recognized that their lives had been affected by Jesus. Do you remember the story about the woman at the well? When Jesus was in Samaria and he stopped and his disciples went into town to buy food. He waited at the well. This woman came and began to talk with Jesus. She came to believe that he was the Messiah and she made a commitment. She ran back to town to tell the people that she had found the Messiah. They believed her because they saw some change about her. They recognized that she had been with Jesus.

Do you think that you and I have that quality about our lives? Is there anything about our lives, are there characteristics about us, is there some quality of life evident in us, that people recognize that we have been with Jesus? Over New Year's weekend, Sydney and I went to Florence, S.C. where I preached in an inter-denominational series of services sponsored by some laymen. One day, at a luncheon meeting, a man got up and shared his testimony. He was a leading psychiatrist of that area who had just come into an exciting and new relationship to Jesus. There was a sense of excitement about him. His eyes glowed and sparkled, there was an exuberance about him. And the moment he began to talk, you knew that he had been with Jesus. Well, is there that same aura about us? At work in the office, at home with the family, at play with our friends, is there some quality about us that others know we have been with Jesus. Well, that is what we learn about Peter and John. First, they had some convictions, and second, their lives had been dramatically, so radically, so excitingly changed that others knew they had been with Jesus.

The third thing the Bible tells us about these two men is this: they had an inner compulsion to tell others about Jesus. You know, when I begin to compare myself to Peter and John, I feel a little embarrassed. As a Christian, do you feel the same way? What they were doing in sharing Jesus wasn't exactly popular. In verse three we are told they were put in jail for it. And then, in verse 18 the Bible says they were ordered not to teach or speak at all in the name of Jesus. But do you remember what they said? They said, "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

Well, that puts me to shame. I've never been thrown in jail for my witness. Have you? I've never been ordered to shut up by the authorities. Have you? I suspect if you and I were arrested for being Christians there wouldn't be enough evidence to convict us. Then the fourth thing I would call to our attention about our scripture is this: they were incredibly successful. In verse four we are told that many who heard them believed and that the number of converts came to about five thousand. Have you ever wondered why they were so successful? Have you ever wondered why they could share Jesus with such power that people responded--that people wanted to have what they had? Well, I think part of it was because, first, they believed something, and second, their own lives had been changed by it, and third, they were bold to share it, but there is another reason why people responded. The clue is found in verse 8. There we read, "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit. And there is the secret. When you believe the gospel, when your own life has been changed by it, and when you are compelled to share it, the Holy Spirit is at work in what you say to reach out and touch the hearts and lives of people. Have you ever been to a Billy Graham Crusade? I have been to several of them. They don't do anything special. They have a choir and some music and some singing and prayers.

Billy gets up and preaches. Then he says, "If you want to commit your heart to Jesus, I want you to come". And from all over the auditorium people begin to stream down. And why? Because the Holy Spirit is at work cutting the hearts of people. Do you remember, a few days before the event in our scripture, how on the day of Pentecost Peter stood up and preached? And the Bible says, in Acts 2:37, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said...what shall we do?" Yes, that's the work of the Holy Spirit. Billy told me once when he was going to California on his Crusade, he and Grady Wilson pulled off the highway onto a dirt road and the two of them got down on their knees and committed their hearts and their lives to Jesus to be used by Him. The Holy Spirit has worked through them ever since.

I have been studying lately about the great religious awakenings that have affected America so greatly. There have been three of them. The first was in the 1740's that it began. It began under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. He was not much of a pulpiter. He was very near-sighted and he read his sermons. This sermon that he preached that really began the first great awakening was entitled "Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God". In his near-sighted way he held the sermon up to his face so close you couldn't see his face. Yet as he began to preach this sermon, grown men grabbed the pew in front of him--others wrapped their arms around the pillars holding up the roof to keep from sliding into hell. What was happening? The Holy Spirit fell on them. I believe we live in a time when another great awakening is coming. I believe we live in a time when God is going to move across this country. I believe God is going to use this congregation in a special way to be part of what he intends in this city and in America. I want to be a part of it. That's what this dinner is about Friday, February 9. You don't want to miss this. You want to be a part of what God's going to do.

Let me ask us a question this morning. Do you have any convictions about Jesus? Do you believe he is the Son of God--the Messiah God promised? Do you? Do you believe he died for sins--and more specifically, do you believe he died for your sins? Do you believe that God raised Jesus from the dead so that he is a living saviour, a saviour who still works miracles in human lives today? And do you believe his resurrection is a proof, a testimony, a guarantee that as God raised him, you will be raised also and you shall have eternal life? And do you believe, as the Bible teaches, that there is no other way for men to be saved?

Well, do you really believe that? Has your own life been changed by it? And are you sharing it--compelled to tell other people?

Flip Wilson once did a funny skit. In the skit he is a Christian and someone asks him what kind of a Christian he is. He replies that he is a Jehovah's By-Stander. The person asks what a Jehovah's By-Stander is and Flip replies, "Well, they asked me to be a witness, but I didn't want to get involved!" Are you a witness to Jesus or just a by-stander?

The other day I was going home. It was already dark and the streets were slick. I had stopped at the stop sign at the entrance of my subdivision when through my rear view window I saw an approaching car go out of control, cross the road, go over an embankment and turn over. Could you have just driven away without going to be of help? Well, neither could I. A number of us got out of our cars and ran to help. Fortunately, the man was not hurt. As a matter of fact, I got the worst injury of all when I slipped on the ice and sprained my ankle.

Listen, there are so many people who are out of control in life and have skidded off the road. There are so many people today who are in life's ditches. Oh, how they need a saviour. Oh, how they need to know about Jesus. Will you be a Jehovah's By Stander?

Suppose you are walking down the street in your neighborhood. And suppose you see the roof of a neighbor's home suddenly burst into flames. Would you run to tell him that his house was on fire? Well, there are a lot of our friends and loved ones and neighbors whose houses are on fire, spiritually speaking. And the Bible tells us that Jesus is the only way. Will you be a by-stander when they are perishing.

I believe we live in a time of great spiritual need. There is so much unhappiness in the world, so much trouble, so many children going wrong, so many families breaking up, so many people with a lack of purpose and direction in their lives. There is a desperate need in America and in our city for a spiritual awakening and a spiritual renewal. People are perishing for lack of a Saviour. I believe God is calling you and God is calling me in a special way to witness for Jesus. Dare we be by-standers when men are perishing? I believe God is getting ready to do a mighty thing in our nation, in our city and in this congregation. Let us begin to speak out for Jesus, to share with others the good news of God's forgiveness in Jesus. Let us speak out with boldness to tell men of God's love. When Peter and John shared their faith, because men had a need and because the Holy Spirit was working with power through the witness, people's hearts were cut and they responded. God wants to use you and he wants to use me. Let us commit ourselves right now to putting ourselves at the disposal of the Holy Spirit to be used by him to share Jesus. Then, should men perish, let it not be said of us that it was because we were by-standers.