

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Message of the Spirit"  
SERMON TEXT: Acts 4:1-22  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: June 13, 2021, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

This is sermon number five in a series of the "Acts of the Spirit." If this were a TV drama, right now I'd show you some clips of past episodes to help you be ready for today's installment. Or if today's sermon were a movie, this is where the screen would flash back to two years or 60 days or three days earlier to provide the needed back story.

Those preparatory scenes would show Jesus healing and teaching. Then you'd see the Jewish authorities challenging his right to do those things. You'd see Jesus arrested, crucified, resurrected, and ascending. The screen would provide images of the Holy Spirit coming with Pentecost wind, flames, and languages. Then you'd see Peter preaching, followed by 3000 Jewish people repenting, being baptized, and participating in Christian gatherings for faith development. And then, just prior to today's story, you'd see the Apostles Peter and John going to the temple to pray, encountering a lame man at the temple gate, and healing him in the name of Jesus. Because that amazing miracle drew a large audience, the apostles were able to use that wondrous event as a means to teach and preach. God's Holy Spirit was speaking through them to share the good news about Jesus.

That's what was happening in Acts 4:1 when today's scripture reading begins. As we dig into these verses, let's see what we can learn about this message of the Spirit.

### **1—THE MESSAGE OF THE SPIRIT CAN'T BE SUPPRESSED**

Probably the most obvious fact about the message of the Spirit is that it can't be suppressed. After Peter and John healed the lame man and preached to the crowd in Acts, chapter three, here in Acts 4:1, we are told that "the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them." Those Jewish leaders were annoyed because Peter and John were teaching the people about Jesus, and

with great effect. On the Day of Pentecost, 3000 people had become believers. Now, here in Acts 4:4, we see that the number had grown to 5000. Christian believers were increasing, and the Jewish authorities weren't happy about it. For quite some time, they had been trying to shut down Jesus and his followers. They had hoped Jesus' crucifixion would put an end to this nonsense. But now, since Pentecost, the movement was gaining momentum. So, in verse three, the Jewish authorities arrested the apostles and put them in jail overnight.

Verses five and six tell us that, the next day, the Jewish officials brought out their biggest authorities. "Their rulers, elders and scribes assembled in Jerusalem with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family." This tribunal was made up of the elite of the elite. They wanted the Jesus movement to stop spreading further among the people, so they gave a unified and strong verbal command. In verses 17 and 18, they insisted that the apostles "speak no more to anyone in [Jesus'] name."

Like a U.S. Supreme Court ruling, this order was meant to carry a heavy weight of finality. Like orders from an authoritarian government, it was meant to be powerful and scary. It was meant to be obeyed without question. But Peter and John didn't react as those powerful authorities wanted. In verses 19 and 20, the apostles responded, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." The Jewish leaders threatened Peter and John again, but they couldn't stop the apostles, because public support was on the side of the Christians. Verse 21 tells us that all the people were praising God for what they had heard and seen. The message of the Spirit could not be suppressed.

## **2—MESSAGE OF THE SPIRIT IS IN THE NAME OF JESUS**

A second fact about the message of the Spirit is that it was delivered in the name of Jesus. In chapter three, it was a big deal that Peter and John had healed the lame man who, day after day, had been able to do nothing more than beg for alms at the temple gate. So it was no wonder that the

people were “utterly astonished” when he jumped up and started walking. But the apostles declared right away that it wasn’t by their own power that this miracle had happened. The man’s new health and strength was made possible only through Jesus, God’s holy and righteous one.

In chapter four, as Peter and John were questioned by the Jewish authorities, they continued to speak this same truth. Acts 4:10 indicates that Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, told them that the miracle of healing was done in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, “whom you crucified, [and] whom God raised from the dead.” Quoting from Psalm 118, Peter told them that the cornerstone which had been rejected was in fact the cornerstone that God was using to build a new establishment, a new kingdom, a new people, a new way of life and faith.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus had noted that the name “Peter” meant “rock,” and that, on this rock, Jesus would build his church (16:18). But Peter wasn’t the cornerstone. Jesus was. In First Peter, a New Testament letter that reflects Peter’s teaching, we read that Jesus is the “living stone . . . rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.” And we hear the call for all of us to become living stones too, who will be built upon that cornerstone of Jesus. This is important because, as Peter said in Acts 4:12, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

Yes, Peter and John were a big part of the healing of the lame man, the events of Pentecost, the teaching and preaching, and the conversion of 5000 people. But they weren’t about to take credit for those acts of the Spirit. This was not a message about Peter or John, and it certainly wasn’t a message about the Jewish ruling class. The good that was happening was all in the name of Jesus, and that was the message of the Spirit that could not be suppressed.

### **3—MESSAGE OF THE SPIRIT IS THAT JESUS IS FOR SALVATION AND HEALING**

Maybe our next question then is, What exactly was the content of the Spirit’s message about Jesus? What was that good news gospel that caused 5000 people to believe? Here are some ideas:

*Jesus was a healer.* Jesus cared about people's bodies, as well as their souls. This physical care would not be limited to those who had wealth, power, and natural ability. It was also, and even more for, those who had no options but to sit on the sidelines and beg. In the biblical language of Greek, the words for healing and salvation are the same. Healing and relieving human need is a big part of any salvation that occurs in Jesus' name.

*Jesus was inclusive.* Over and over again, the four gospels tell us that Jesus ministered to those who were stuck outside, and he drew them into a community of hope and faith. So the apostles-acting-in-Jesus'-name did the same thing. For 40 years, the lame man could only sit outside the temple gate and beg. The authorized Jewish faith didn't allow a lame man to enter the gates of the temple because they considered him defective and unclean. Thus, he was excluded from the rights, rituals, and spiritual community of God's holy people. So, in the name of Jesus, Peter and John gave the man not only the gift of strengthened legs, but also the gift of spiritual access and inclusion with the people of faith.

*Jesus also trained the un-educated and the under-educated so they could imagine and work toward God's kingdom.* The ruling class and high-priestly family of that day weren't creating the conditions of God's kingdom. So, something different needed to happen. Not by an armed coup. Not by silencing the opposition with threats and violence. But by faith, hope, love, compassion, forgiveness, and justice. By learning the words of their prophets, by singing the lyrics of their Psalms, and by applying those former inspirations to current times—that's how God's kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. In Acts 4:13, the ruling elite noted the boldness of Peter and John, whom they had deemed to be uneducated and ordinary men. But Jesus had trained them up to be confident leaders, who were able to speak the message of the Spirit, in Jesus' name.

*And finally, Jesus was a believer in new beginnings, fresh starts, and resurrection from the dead.* Part of the message of the Spirit that annoyed some of the Jewish leaders was this talk of resurrection. Sadducees, in particular, didn't believe in an afterlife. But Jesus' followers had witnessed the risen

Christ, and they couldn't help but proclaim this message of the Spirit that--no matter how terrible something is--even something as traumatic and horrific as the crucifixion of Jesus--God can redeem it and bring new life from it. When the apostles called on the people and their leaders to repent for having crucified Jesus, it wasn't so they could make them feel unmitigated guilt. The call to repentance was so those who were responsible could change their ways and begin anew. The possibility of resurrection doesn't have to wait until we're dead. It can begin as soon as we repent of our sins and embrace God's power to bring new life. This was the message of the Spirit that the apostles preached in Jesus' name.

### **CONCLUSION**

This message of the Spirit makes me think of the cicada insects that have emerged in the Mid-Atlantic to Midwestern states in the past several weeks. Have you been following the cicada news? Every 17 years, billions of those bugs emerge from the ground for a frenzied and extremely-noisy mating period of about 4-6 weeks. Apparently, cicadas are the loudest insects on earth. The males sing their masculine song as robustly as possible to attract the females. The females have a different song to let the males know, "I've chosen you; I'm here and ready." Since the soil temperatures reached 64 degrees, the cicadas have been out singing their messages with 17 years' worth of pent-up energy and reproductive imperative. What seemed dead has come alive, and what will die will rise again. God has created some pretty peculiar creatures. But maybe, like Peter and John, cicadas can point us to Jesus. Maybe the cicadas' insuppressible and singular focus on health and new life is a good illustration of the message of the Spirit.