



Acts: Repeating Jesus

TEXT
Acts 3:1-10

February 9, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus asked, “Who do they say that I am?” Answering that question wasn’t so hard. But then Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” That’s not as easy. It’s more difficult because it’s not a question of information. We can’t answer that question with an idea or a thought. We answer that question with our choices, our lives. “Who do you say that I am?” The answer to that question is “in-fleshed.”

Today we turn to Acts. Acts is the story of “God on the ground”¹ after Jesus has returned to God.

Luke tells us (the writer of the gospel of Luke also wrote the books of Acts) that Peter and John went to the temple to pray. But on their way, they came upon a man who couldn’t walk. That’s the way it is when we come into the presence of God, particularly when we come in the name of the crucified. We can’t even get in the door without seeing the trouble of the world. The Lord’s sanctuary has never been a sanctuary from the hurt of the world. It all ends up in here. Both our brokenness and the brokenness of the world ... it’s all waiting at the door.

Sometimes I want an escape. Sometimes I want a sabbath

from the suffering of the world. I want a break from the hourly crisis that shows up on our phones.

Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *The Poisonwood Bible* is a story about a missionary family. It is also a commentary on how economic colonialism and the Christian missionary movement both “conquered” Africa with the assumption of saving and civilizing her, but both left a record of questionable success. Nathan Price is a fundamentalist missionary and an abusive father. He arrived in Africa with his family, a “pound-able” Bible and vegetable seeds. He was going to plant a garden to feed the people and win their trust to win their souls. But the garden failed. Oh, the plants grew in the rich soil, but they produced no vegetables. It confused him. But one day he was in the vegetable garden with his daughter Leah, and he picked up a bug. That’s when it hit him.

“There aren’t any pollinators.”

“What?”

“No insects here to pollinate the garden.”

“Why, but there’s a world of bugs here!”

“African bugs, Leah. Creatures fashioned by God for

the purpose of serving African plants. Look at this thing. How would it know what to do with a Kentucky Wonder bean?”²

I thought of this when I read this week the article released by the *Journal of Science* that said bumblebee populations in North America have declined by 46 percent. The scientists say it’s a consequence of climate change.³ Bumblebees are pretty important pollinators. It would be bad to lose them. And I wished I hadn’t heard that news, because I know that while many in the world are responding, we in this country seem to be captured by fear. Some are afraid of consequences coming as a result of the changing climate. And others are afraid of the adjustments to the way we would have to live our lives, and the consequences of those adjustments. And so, we just sit captured by our fear.

And sometimes I just want sanctuary. I bet you do too. That’s OK.

But God won’t let us stay there. For when we come to pray to God, particularly the God of the crucified, somehow, we will always find the brokenness in ourselves and the brokenness of the world waiting at the door.

So, of course, the lame man is at the door of the temple. And,

of course, Peter and John stop. They don't give him money, but they do heal him. He jumps up praising God. As dramatic as this story is, I'm struck by a few words in the story which come between Peter and John coming to the temple and the man jumping up. It says Peter and John looked intently at him. And then they said, "Look at us." And his eyes were fixed on them. Why do you suppose Peter says, "Look at us"? What is this lame man supposed to see?

Mark Labberton is an evangelical pastor and seminary president. He says a young person came to his church. Mark recognized he was new to the community, so he struck up a conversation with him. He learned he was a grad student at the University of California. He asked him, "What brings you to this church?" He said he had recently been asking some significant questions about his life and that had led him to church. "I've been to a number of churches, and they talk a lot about Jesus and about the world, but what I want to know is, if I hang around your church, will I meet folks who are actually like Jesus?"⁴ Will you meet folks who are like Jesus, here, in church?

Were someone to ask you that question about Village, what would you say? Are there people like Jesus here?

Years ago now, I was preaching at a church conference in Virginia. There were folks from all around there, and they shipped in preachers to preach for the week. Preachers who have to be

flown in are always better than the ones you know in real life. After I had preached, a gentleman came to me. He didn't say anything at first, but rather stood there with a big smile. He said, "You don't remember me, do you?" Well I have to say, that's not my favorite way to begin a conversation. Folks who ask that question still go to heaven, but they are the least in the kingdom of heaven.

I said, "Help me."

He said, "Oh, come on, you don't remember Dayton Hall?" This is bad. He told me his name, and I still didn't remember.

I said, "I'm sorry, Dayton, where did we meet?"

"I'm not Dayton Hall," he said. "We lived in Dayton Hall in college."

I didn't live in Dayton Hall. I was very confused. But then it hit me: "I'm sorry, you have confused me with my father, Tom Are. He lived in Dayton Hall in college."

"You are kidding," he said. Now I know that children can look like their parents, but let me ask you, do I look 90 years old to you? Never mind, that's a rhetorical question. He said, "I drove three hours to see your dad." I apologized. He said, "Don't apologize. To tell you the truth, for the last hour, I thought I was with him, and it was wonderful."

The truth is, there is a lot of my dad in me, and I'm grateful for that. But I don't know how much Jesus there is in me.

But if I understand the text, when Peter said, "Look at us,"

I think he knew this man, if he looked closely enough, would see Jesus in them. Luke's experience is that the risen Christ shows up in the church. Peter and John do exactly what Jesus did. It happens over and over again in Acts — so much so that one scholar has said the followers of Jesus "repeat Jesus."⁵

But is that us? He asked, "If I hang around your church, will I meet people who are like Jesus?" I don't know. Because I know I fall short. The essence of Christ is love, a consistent, persistent, life-changing love. I've seen that in the church. I've experienced it in this church. But I also know that I so often fall short.

I hadn't been your pastor very long and was still getting to know you. I was in Ace Hardware getting some bungee cords. I shouldn't have stopped because I was in a hurry. I don't remember why. But I was driving by, so I stopped. I found what I needed and got to the register, but the package didn't have a price on it. "I'll go back and get another one," I said. I got another one. I waited in line again, but with this one, the package was broken.

She said, "Oh, I think you'd better get another one. A broken package, some of the bungee cords may have slipped out."

So, I go back a third time. I find one with package integrity and an intact bar code. I wait in line again. She rings it up, and the little paper that prints the receipt — well, it was out. "This will just take a minute," she said. She was a little optimistic about

that. Finally, she printed out my receipt and, with a big smile, she said, “Have a nice day.”

I said, (I shouldn’t tell you things like that; you would never do things like this.) “I’ll try ... with what’s left of it.”

Then she said, “See you Sunday.” Oh my. I fall short.

“If I hang around your church, will I meet people like Jesus?”

Sometimes there is a gap between who we know we are supposed to be and who we are in the moment. I’m not like Jesus at all. But, then sometimes I am. And what Luke wants us to do is lean into that bold calling. Not give up. Trust that the love of God not only claims you, but shows up in you.

“Would I meet people like Jesus here?”

Yes, you would. Not perfect. Not all the time. But the truth is, the closest I have ever come to knowing Jesus is in the church, is with God’s people — for it is among the people of God that I have known forgiveness and welcome that is genuine. It is among the people of God that I have known generosity and a sacrificial love. And it is among the people of God at this church that I have seen a bold hope and a desire to choose the high road even when we are afraid.

It probably makes you a bit uncomfortable, and it should, but the answer to the question is yes. The truth is, we are a mix. But these days, I think the world needs us to trust in the risen Christ. We need to trust that Christ will show up, even among us.

We do it like this: If you choose to get married or have done so, you make some remarkable promises. “I promise to be loving and faithful in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health.”

And promising to love is a big promise. Paul describes love: It is patient and kind, not arrogant. Patient is the first one on the list. I’ve already admitted to you that I don’t excel at that!

So, suppose in the interest of avoiding hypocrisy, when I said, “I, Tom, promise to be loving and faithful ...” I could have said, “I, Tom, promise to be loving ...” but full-disclosure, I’m not always patient. There was this time I was in Ace Hardware, and it didn’t work out very well. So, can we exclude patience?”

No, we say the vow, knowing that we won’t live up to it every day, but also knowing that we can’t be who we are by reducing love to something less than love.

Faith is like that. So, in the midst of a broken world that doubts that love is a power, trust this: The holy love of God — the God who made the stars and the bumblebees; the God who wept and died on Calvary; the God whose love is still alive in the world — that God loves you by name, and that love lives in you. So, lean into that. There are folks who are looking for Jesus, and if they can’t find him among us, where do we recommend they look? So, lean into that bold calling and trust the love of God to be the love of God through you, and sometimes folks will

see it, and they will see what they have been looking for. They will see Jesus.

¹I am grateful to Willie James Jennings for this turn of phrase. *Acts: Belief* (2017), p. 1

²Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), p. 80

³<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/06/climate/bumblebees-extreme-heat-weather.html>

⁴Mark Labberton, *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today* (2014), p. 26

⁵Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (2017), p. 100

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.