

“By what power or by what name did you do this?” Acts 4:7b

Power is an interesting thing. Like electricity it is often invisible. Turn a switch and that current allows us to have light. Such power when given to people or groups of people can have both positive and negative results. Some leaders exercise their power for the good of all and some exercise power for their own benefit. There are, of course, funny sayings about power – like saying that someone is the power behind the throne, they pull the strings, indicating that someone who is not the official leader is making all of the decisions. The senior pastor at the first church I worked at, where I was the assistant many moons ago, called the choir at that church the War Department. I think it was an insult, indicating that maybe they were the cause of any trouble that occurred at that church. Sounds like power that was not put to good use. (I see that you don't have a War Department here, lol)

Our first lesson today shows us the amazing power, the beautiful power, the life-giving power that comes from God. We hear first of all about the power of the gospel to bring people to faith. It records in this case five thousand men (and that doesn't even include the women and children!) What caused these people to believe in Jesus? Simply the good news of the resurrection of the dead through Jesus Christ. That message, that this man who was crucified and had conquered death, carried with it such power that many lives were changed forever, blessed with the gift of salvation.

Then we continue to hear about the power of God with the controversy of the man who was healed simply by the word of God. We heard about this man last week, but it was such an incredibly powerful event that the “authorities” couldn't let it go. Was this act of healing a challenge to their leadership? Certainly, they thought that these healers were breaking some kind of law, doing something without their approval. But the apostles are able to give a clear answer to the source of the power – the one who can heal and bring new life is Jesus. And they point to a visual image that they should all be able to relate to – Jesus is the cornerstone. The Greek word used here for cornerstone can be translated either capstone or cornerstone and both are appropriate for understanding the key role that Jesus has in holding our lives together. We are probably most familiar with the cornerstone because all buildings have them. They are part of a solid foundation, and we have had some terrible examples of buildings that haven't had solid foundations actually falling apart, like that high rise in Florida. We see the awful results. And we all know of individual lives that are missing the cornerstone of belief in Christ and we see how lives simply fall apart without that gift of faith. Capstone is also interesting because a capstone is what holds up an archway, without it that entryway would also fall down. Jesus above us, our capstone; Jesus beneath us, our cornerstone; Jesus is the key. It makes me recall St. Patrick again who is known for saying:

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

It is a reminder that we are surrounded by the love of God and that our lives belong to God. That is the theme of Good Shepherd Sunday. The twenty-third Psalm is the most well-known passage of scripture, memorized by even those who are marginally involved in the church. The words are incredibly comforting as they speak of the provisions of God who takes care of us now in our daily needs and provides for us even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. There is really a lot of imagery that reminds us of both Baptism and Holy Communion in this psalm – we are led to the still waters of the font where we are also anointed with oil, and we are fed at the table of the Lord even in the presence of those famous enemies: sin, death and the devil. But we do not have to fear because God restores our souls. In a way, I am surprised that this psalm is not more controversial. Because it recognizes something that many people don't want to admit. We belong to God. Our lives are not our own.

What does the world around us like to say? "My body, my choice." And as Christians we do understand that God has given us the freedom to choose. We aren't puppets on a string simply acting out a play, but as Luther says, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." In other words, Christ sets us free from sin and death, but we are not to use that freedom simply for our own desires, but we are set free to love our neighbor. St. John reminds us today in our second lesson that our calling is to keep God's commandments and do what pleases him.

It is such a blessing today to celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday because when we acknowledge that we are Jesus' little lambs we have an assurance that we will not be led astray. We know that if we do not accept the authority of God in our lives, there will be other masters who will seek to take his place. And all of the false gods of this world are terrible task masters. Most people would not admit that money or fame or the

environment or the government were their gods. But we see how so many things that take up our time and energy, how many causes or interests, can dominate our way of thinking and pound us down with their unrelenting demands. Not so, with the Lord of life. He doesn't beat us up with unrealistic expectations. Instead Jesus laid down his life so that he can lift us up so that we can be close to him, rely on him, and serve him in joy and gladness all of our days. None of the false gods can do this one amazing thing - grant us salvation. God's gift is eternal. That's why the church's mission for centuries has been to preach repentance and new life in his name.

The church can do many other things and we rightly should – feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless – those are all scriptural things that are marks of our faithfulness. But all of those things can also be done by unbelievers. The one thing that must always be a priority for the church, our central and essential mission, is to preach salvation in the name of Jesus. No social service organization is tasked with this mission – it is the church's main job to preach Jesus, crucified and risen, for the forgiveness of sins. It is why the church exists. There are many different denominations, many expressions of the Christian church, but this is the word that unites us. It is living under the authority of the word of God, living under the shepherding power of Jesus, that is the defining point for all believers. Some would like to live above the word of God, cherry picking the things from God's word which makes them feel good. But we must always remember who is in charge. Jesus is the one with the authority and we live under his guidance, constantly praying and seeking his will for our lives. That's why the psalm mentions the rod and the staff as a source of comfort because Jesus uses his word like a rod to correct us and like a staff to save us from all evil. We are like sheep who need the shepherd to beat off our enemies with his rod, and to pull us back from danger with his staff. We want and need this protection and correction because without it we will wonder into all kinds of false belief. And so today we hear that clear call that we are to announce his good news and pray for the Holy Spirit to use this word of life to change hearts and minds, to bring hope to the hopeless and peace to those who have no rest. We abide in his word and give thanks to God for our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen.