

**“The Holy Spirit Acts:
SAY HIS NAME!”**

Acts 4:8-12, 29-33

The Spirit empowers us to speak with boldness.

A sermon preached by
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One of the most powerful things that was done last summer during the non-violent protests against racial injustice was something I had never seen before. Maybe it had been done before, but I hadn't noticed it or read about it. As the protesters marched down the street or stood together and rallied, they shouted, "Say their names! Say their names!" Then they repeated the names of the victims of unjust violence: Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Daniel Prude, George Floyd, and others. Saying their names made it personal. There was an individual, a child of God, who had lost his or her life. It was not an abstraction. There was power in the names.

You see the power of the name if you visit the memorial to the victims of the 9/11 attack in New York City. Almost 3,000 names are inscribed around the reflecting pools where the World Trade Center towers used to be. Every year, on September 11, family members read every single name of every single person that perished that day. It is a powerful and moving sight and sound.

A memorial that has particular significance for me is the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D. C. It's significant because the name of my cousin Greg is on that memorial. Years ago, I visited the memorial and found his name and made a rubbing of it to keep. It was a way to honor Greg and his sacrifice. It was a holy and precious moment. There is power in the name.

The disciples soon found the power of the name of Jesus when they began to preach the good news of his resurrection. To get the full context of today's Scripture, you have to go back to the beginning of chapter 3 in Acts. Peter and John, the two disciples who had first seen the empty tomb, were going into the Temple to pray when they encountered a beggar, a man who had been lame from the day of his birth. He was a fixture at the gate of the Temple; everyone going in the gate had seen him there for years. Instead of dropping a coin or two in his cup, Peter gave him something much better: "*In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.*"¹

And the lame man did! Not only did he get up and shuffle off, but he began "*walking and leaping and praising God!*"² Of course, this caused quite a stir among the worshippers at the

Temple, and when the crowd gathered, Peter had a second opportunity to testify about Jesus. He stood before the crowds and shared the reason for the healing of the lame man: “*by faith in his name (the name of Jesus), his name itself has made this man strong.*”³ The power of the name! Then he shared the gospel of Jesus and called for repentance and faith. Peter must have become better with practice. His sermon on Pentecost drew 3,000 to faith; this second sermon brought 5,000 to believe in Christ.

The incident also alerted the Temple authorities, and they arrested Peter and John and threw them into prison overnight. The next day they had to appear before the ruling Council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. They wanted to know who gave Peter and John authority to do these signs and wonders that they were seeing. Peter never hesitated. He pointed to the lame man who had been healed and said, “*This man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.*”⁴ Then he boldly proclaimed: “*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.*”⁵

The rulers didn’t know quite what to make of these two uneducated Galilean fishermen, speaking with such boldness before their esteemed presence. So they puffed up their pride, and with all the authority their religiosity could muster, they ordered the two peasants not to speak any more in the name of Jesus.

And Peter said, “Oh. OK. So sorry. Pardon us.” Right? Not exactly! He looked the leaders of the Jews in the eye and said, “*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.*”⁶ The Council admonished them one more time, then they sent Peter and John packing. Immediately they went to the other believers, and they called a big prayer meeting.

Now what would you pray for in a situation like that? I think I would probably pray for two things: my own safety and for God to smite my enemies. But Peter and John and the other believers in Jerusalem had one prayer—for boldness in their

witness. “*Now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.*”⁷

Suddenly, as they prayed, the very foundations of the building shook, and they were all filled again with the Holy Spirit, just like on the Day of Pentecost. They all began to speak the word of good news. How? With boldness!

This is how the Holy Spirit worked on the church all the way through the Book of Acts. The Spirit gave them a witness and gave it to them with boldness. This is how the Holy Spirit works in the church today, too, if we open up our hearts, our lives, and our church to receive God’s powerful presence. There are four things I have noticed about the bold witness given to us by the Holy Spirit.

First, it’s **PRAYERFUL**. The Holy Spirit only works through a foundation of prayer. You see this in Jesus, and you see it very clearly in the apostolic church. These people prayed. They prayed for ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven before the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost. After Pentecost, Acts says they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to prayer. Prayer provides the connection with the Holy Spirit that guides our lives and our witness.

Becky Tiribassi, in a book called *Wild Things Happen When I Pray*, says, “God’s Holy Spirit orchestrates our lives to touch others—strangers, friends, work-related people, service-industry workers and more—if we would just open up and be ourselves. How? Be free to be in love with Jesus in front of people. Be an ambassador through whom he can introduce himself. There is a world out there, hungry and searching for Jesus and his love. Don’t keep him to yourself.”⁸

Don’t you like that? Let the Holy Spirit *orchestrate* your witness—giving you opportunities, giving you words, giving you success in sharing Christ with others. It all begins with prayer. That’s the well from which it flows.

Secondly, the witness given to us by the Holy Spirit is **POSITIVE**. The Gospel we share with people is *good* news about God’s love, mercy, grace, and the good news about God’s Son Jesus, who died and rose again so we could experience life

in all its abundance here on earth and for all eternity. This is a bulletin worth interrupting our regularly scheduled programming. This is material for banner headlines. We are saved! We can't wait to share this good news.

When you have good news to share, sometimes you just have to share it, no matter what. Your lips cannot hold back the joy in your heart. Even though Peter knew that it would be more politically correct to remain silent and submissive before the Sanhedrin, he just had to say the name: "*Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.*"⁹ It's Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! That's the good news!

People have left the church in many places because their experience of the church was not positive. They felt judgment and shame for their failures. They heard criticism if they weren't like all the other church people. They were excluded and isolated. That's not the way the fellowship of Jesus is supposed to be. We are a positive people. The world beats us down enough; the gospel is supposed to build us up. We hear bad news every day; we come to church to hear some good news for a change. We feel lost and broken and alone more than we need to; the love of God takes us in and heals our wounds and gives us a community. We can come in here on Sunday on the brink of despair about our jobs, our marriages, our kids, our direction in life, and we can leave here with a ray of hope that God is going to help us through it all. That is the positive witness of the Holy Spirit, and I am grateful to be a part of it.

The third aspect of the Holy Spirit's witness is that it is **POWERFUL**. This is not a human invention. It is not an intellectual philosophy or a type of self-help psychology. The witness of the Holy Spirit is the work of Almighty God in the world, whether it's in the first century or the twenty-first century. The signs and wonders that the apostles did were not magic or sorcery; they were supernatural actions of God. The foundations didn't shake because of an earthquake; it was the presence of the Almighty in their midst. When God is in the house, the weakest of our human efforts is amplified into a mighty work for the Kingdom.

That's what gives us courage to make a bold witness. We know we're not doing this Christian thing on our own power. God is in this with us, and his Holy Spirit is filling our gaps to make us powerful people. So we can stand against the forces of the world and speak the truth to power. Look at Peter and John, a couple of uneducated, poor fishermen from Galilee, standing before powerful, wealthy, educated men of the Jewish Council. Reprimanded for the healing of the lame man, admonished not to speak any more in the name of Jesus, did they hang their heads in shame and cower before the authorities? No! They stood up straight and said, "*Whether it's right in God's eyes to listen to you rather than to God, you decide. As for us, there's no question—we can't keep quiet about what we've seen and heard.*"¹⁰ That is having the courage of your convictions. That is a powerful witness. That's bold.

Finally, the witness the Holy Spirit gives us is **PERSONAL**. This story from the Book of Acts is not just a history lesson. This is a description of the way disciples can live today and every day—grounded in prayer, telling the good news, powerful in our courage. This is a matter of the heart, and it is not real until you open up your own heart to the Spirit of God. This is God's dream for your life and for the life of our whole church—to let the Holy Spirit give us a bold witness for Jesus Christ in a world that needs to hear the news. This life is available to you and me today.

I heard Rev. Will Campbell speak one time about just such boldness. Rev. Campbell was a white Baptist preacher from Mississippi who was active in the civil rights movement and made a career of being pastor to the underdogs of society. Once he heard about a trial going on in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, in which two pastors of a church were on trial for endangering the welfare of a child.

These two men were pastors of a little church up in the hills where they practiced snake-handling. In Mark 16:18, Jesus promised the disciples that they could handle snakes and not be harmed. So when the Spirit moved them, the worshippers in this church would pick up live, poisonous rattlesnakes out of a cage and move around the congregation with them. If they had enough faith, the snakes wouldn't harm them; if they didn't have

enough faith—snakebite! The problem was that there were children in the church building while all of this was going on, and the sheriff had decided that this was a dangerous situation for them to be in, and he shut the church down and arrested the two leaders of the church.

It was obvious to the judge that these men were not criminals; they were sincere Christian men with an unusual belief. On the other hand, this strange practice was obviously putting people at risk. So after a couple of days of testimony in this little courtroom in the hills of Tennessee, the judge rendered a verdict. He convicted the men of child endangerment, but offered to suspend their sentences if the two men would agree never to handle snakes in worship again. Their response shocked the judge and the courtroom. They said, “Judge, we’re sorry, but we can’t promise that.”

“Why can’t you promise that?” the judge asked.

“Because, sir, when the Spirit strikes us, we have to pick up the snakes. Not to do that would be disobeying the Spirit. And neither you nor anybody else can make us do that.”

As the bailiff led the two church leaders away to jail, Will Campbell, who had observed the trial, reported feeling a very deep sadness. Not sadness that these two men were going to jail, but a sadness within his own heart that it had been a long time since he had believed anything with such utter conviction. Their faith, as odd as it was, was boldly personal.

Maybe it’s been a while since you believed anything that strongly. I am not suggesting that we handle rattlesnakes to prove our faith. But I am suggesting that we can stand up for our beliefs and say the name of Jesus with boldness today. If you are lost, anxious, sick, grieving, oppressed, distressed, happy or sad, say the name of Jesus today! His name is a prayer; it’s powerful and positive and personal. It’s the only name you need to know to be saved.

¹ Acts 3:6.

² Acts 3:8.

³ Acts 3:16.

⁴ Acts 4:10.

⁵ Acts 4:12.

⁶ Acts 4:19-20.

⁷ Acts 4:29-30.

⁸ Becky Tiribassi, *Wild Things Happen When I Pray* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) cited in *Marriage Partnership*, Vol. 11, No. 2.

⁹ Acts 4:10.

¹⁰ Acts 4:19-20 (*The Message*).