

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse  
Sunday, April 14, 2024

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## **Acts 3:1-10**

*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they were filled with wonder and astonishment at what had happened to him.*

Beloved, there was one thing that I was most excited about for worship this morning, and that was a chance to sing "O God Beyond All Praising." Landry and I have been conspiring for weeks about this worship service and before any liturgy was written or worship assignments made we knew, "O God Beyond All Praising" would set the tone for this service.

As you may have noted by virtue of the fact that it is printed in your bulletin, that hymn is not listed in our hymnal, nor was it included in the "Celebration" and "African American Heritage" hymnals I grew up with. It wasn't a song I was familiar with, its tune had never fallen on my ears. It wasn't until seminary, during my final year when I was overwhelmed, exhausted, uncertain about my sense of call, and frightened about everything that lay ahead of me that was unknown. It wasn't until one afternoon during service in Marquand Chapel on the campus of Yale Divinity School that I first heard, "O God Beyond All Praising."

I felt like I had been thrown back on my heels. I'm not trying to be overly dramatic. But there was something about the tune to which this hymn is set that cut right through me and caused me to marvel, there was something about the way the notes conspired to produce a sound that

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reminded me of the sublime beauty that is only found in God. And by the time I processed the sound I was hearing and added the words to it, I was moved to tears. Did you hear what we sang just a few moments ago? “O God beyond all praising, we worship you today and sing the love amazing that songs cannot repay; for we can only wonder at every gift you send, at blessings without number and mercies without end: we lift our hearts before you and wait upon your word, we honor and adore you, our great and mighty Lord.” Wow. When was the last time you spoke about God like that? When was the last time you spoke about God with that kind of awe?

And that tune, that incredible tune, THAXTED. It was composed by Gustav Holst as part of his work *The Planets*, where he gives musical expression to his interpretation of each planet. This that day in Marquand Chapel, testified without even using words to the utter sovereignty and incomparable majesty of God.

Why have I spent all this time talking about music when there has been a perfectly good scripture read into our hearing that I haven't yet addressed?

Well simply put, it's because this hymn is beautiful, and we as human beings need beauty. Beauty in our lives does more than we give it credit for. Beauty in our lives and in the world calls us beyond ourselves and beyond the narrow concerns that punctuate our lives. Beauty enlivens our spirits and inspires us to imagine and wonder and marvel. Beauty connects us to God. As one friend said have you ever noticed how each morning God uses the sky as a canvas to paint a masterpiece. Or how God commanders the leaves into open air stained glass on which to cast God's light upon us. And we all stood in awe on Monday as the moon passed before the Sun and reminded us that the heavens are always declaring the glory of God.

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Many of you know that I serve at Church Health and one of the things that struck me during my first tour of our clinic was the abundance of art that adorns the walls. Beautiful works of art that warm what would otherwise be a cold and sterile environment with beauty, beauty that whether well or infirmed, wealthy or poor, cuts through our condition and reminds us that there is something more in this world.

It's no wonder then that in front of the Temple where Peter and John are going to worship, someone decided to construct a Beautiful Gate. We don't know which family it was in the congregation that pledged the funds to construct it. We don't know which firm was contracted to design it. We don't know the names of the workers who labored to construct it. But the text tells us it was beautiful. So much so that its beauty landmarked it. Its beauty became a fixture within the landscape of Jerusalem. Its beauty became a monument to be marveled at. Each day faithful folks on their way to worship would pass through this beautiful gate and I can imagine some of them would pause every now and then in awe of its beauty and then continue making their way inside the temple to worship. This beautiful gate, this beautiful edifice, constructed as a monument of human love for God, would set the tone for worship every time they walked through it.

And yet, in the shadow of that very beauty, there are people. People who are not able to make their way into the temple, people there in the shadow of that beauty who are languishing in poverty and despair and pain and neglect. There in the shadow of the beauty, people have been crippled and made unwell, not just by physical ailments but by the very conditions of the society. There in the shadow of that beauty, in the shadow of that beautiful edifice, people are languishing. I wonder, if it looked like Idlewild. If the soaring buttresses we sit under follow the curvature of

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that beautiful gate or if the glow of the stained glass light that falls upon us this day mirrored the golden gleam of that beautiful gate.

We sit in the midst of beauty this morning. And I wonder if we too have fallen into the same pattern as those worshippers in the Temple; where we no longer allow beauty to convince us of what is possible and what can be transformed, but rather we allow beauty to comfort us as we as we do our best to ignore the things that unsettle us.

That's the pattern these worshippers have fallen into, each day as they pass through the beautiful gate and marvel at its splendor and find their preferred pew in the temple, they raise their eyes to behold beauty, while just below their line of sight are people begging in order to survive.

And if beauty is supposed to call us beyond ourselves. If it is supposed to help us to imagine what is possible. If it is supposed to connect us to God. What does it say that the beautiful gate inspired folks to do nothing more about this unnamed man in our scripture lesson's condition than to carry him to the doorstep of the temple and position him at the gate so that he can beg while they worship.

That's the scene we enter into in the text. While worship is unfolding, this man is begging at the very entrance to the temple. And he sees Peter and John walking up on their way into the temple and asks them for some spare change. And the text says that Peter and John stop, look at him, and transform his very life.

Now I don't want to paint Peter and John as the heroes of this text. Because so often we make heroes out of our forebears in the faith and in doing so put them high up on a pedestal and make them into unassailable great men and women of the faith that we can only ever aspire to, and

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in doing so lower the demands of discipleship upon our very lives and lower what we expect of ourselves.

Peter and John are not heroes. I've got a funny feeling and sneaky suspicion this isn't their first time walking through the beautiful gate on the way to worship. And the text tells us this is not the first time this man has begged for alms at the front door, he does it every day. In fact I don't think this is the first time Peter and John saw this man. The text tells us that Peter looked "intently at him." Peter looked at this man with intention and deliberateness.

And perhaps what the text is pointing us to is that this is not the first encounter between Peter and John and this unnamed man but this is the first time Peter and John paid attention. The first time they paid attention to what might have been on the sign the man was holding. The first time they paid attention to the fact that this man had made himself as small and as insignificant as possible in order to beg for his survival.

"Look at us." Peter says to this man who had gotten into the habit, while sitting in front of a beautiful gate, to lowering his gaze to the dirt pathway along which he sat each day. "Look at us." And the man does, he looks at Peter and John expecting, expecting most likely to receive silver and gold, expecting to receive an act of charity. And instead he gets something he wasn't expecting, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk."

Beloved, the sinfulness this text exposes is not just the apathy of those who gathered for worship at the temple. The sinfulness this text exposes is that they were all complicit in a culture where the best that the most vulnerable in their community could hope and expect was a hand out or an act of charity, rather than the transformation of their very lives.

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Peter articulates something we are uncomfortable with, that silver and gold are not enough. Yes, we may need dollars and cents to meet the acute needs of our most vulnerable neighbors. But if our sense of mission, charity, and philanthropy begin with a dollar sign and include a decimal point then all we're really doing at best is trafficking in the maintenance of the status quo and at worst contributing to the reproduction of human misery in excess. What if we imagined beyond what we expect of ourselves and what the most vulnerable in our city expect of us.

Beloved, that was not the first time Peter and John worshiped at the temple. It probably wasn't the first time this man had seen them pass him by on the way to worship. But what changed with this encounter, is that Peter and John have something more than silver and gold to offer this time. Their lives have been set upon by the Spirit. Their eyes have been given new vision by the Spirit. Their tongues have been set aflame by the Spirit, and so they are not content to just meet this man's low expectations, they are compelled to transform his life and the conditions that have maintained his brokenness. "[I]n the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Take my hand and do what you never thought was possible.

And here's the thing. I don't think Peter and John transformed this man's life for the accolades. I don't think they did it because it was the "right thing to do," or even what people would expect of them as Jesus followers. No, I think the Spirit clued Peter and John into something that we in our western obsession with rugged individualism and a cultural Christianity that claims Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, the Spirit clued them in to something we lose sight of.

I think Peter and John realized that their lives were inextricably bound to this man's life. They realized that their encounter with this man had to amount to more than just a handout, more

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than an act of charity, more than being moved by pity. To put it in Idlewild language, it quite literally had to be more than just a meal.

I think Peter and John realized something we all need to remember: Our salvation is not a personal pet project that we accomplish on our own. Our salvation has a mutuality to it. Our liberation from the things that weigh us down require one another.

I am not well until you too are well. I am not free until you too are free. And so long as I participate, so long as I am complicit, or even ignore the things that hold you bound I am unable to live into the fullness of the relationship that Christ has called me into. I need you to be whole and free so that I might be also.

This flies in the face of our pull yourself up by your bootstraps, me-first-ism culture in which we live, and it should. We are not called to go along to get along, we are not called to acquiesce to this culture that more often than not reduces us to the sum total of what we do, what we earn and what we contribute. That way of seeing the world is ill suited for people whose lives have been claimed by God.

Beloved, we sit in the midst of beauty, a beautiful edifice along Union Avenue in a city where over 130,000 people live in poverty, where the number of school aged children that are homeless sits at 2,691 as of Easter Sunday, where two police officers have been killed in as many months, and where so many others have had their lives snatched from them that we never know about because they were the wrong color or had an insufficient bank balance. We sit in the midst of beauty, and in the shadow of that beauty there are lives that are not well, lives that are not whole, lives that are in need of transformation.

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Perhaps the reason we have been uneasy and unfulfilled and exhausted and in despair as a community is because God is nudging us beyond merely marveling at beauty and beyond the expectations we've set for ourselves and the way things work, into a world transformed by the reality of the resurrection. The resurrection means that a new way is possible, that the impossible becomes commonplace if, if we have the courage to give what we have, to give what the Spirit has gifted us, even our very lives for the transformation of our world, to the glory of God. Amen.