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# **The Surprising Acts of God II: Inside~Outside**

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## The Surprising Acts of God II: Inside~Outside

During the Eastertide season, Louise, Ed and I will be preaching from *The Acts of the Apostles*, a book rarely proclaimed during worship outside of Pentecost Sunday.

This sequel to the *Gospel of Luke*, written by the same author, continues the recurring theme the power of the holy spirit to raise up what we put down.

*Acts* narrates the birth of the church by a few brave followers from a graveyard and all those who hear Jesus' command to take this gospel "to the ends of the earth."

Louise/Cassie read the first healing recorded by the apostles of a lame man, raising him from the ground to dance with joy, astounding the bystanders.

Before I read Peter's sermon to them, please pray with me.

*Dear God of Surprises, we gather at a time and place so far from this healing, and yet we wonder, just like those witnesses long ago, is it possible for you to restore us? What can we trust of your power then and now? Silence in us any voice but your voice that in these words we might hear afresh your truth and commit ourselves to be witnesses for those yet to believe in your eternal power. Amen.*

### **3:11-19**

<sup>11</sup> While the man clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished.

<sup>12</sup>When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified this servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though Pilate had decided to release him.

<sup>14</sup>But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you,

<sup>15</sup>and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

<sup>16</sup>And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know;

and the faith that is through Jesus has given him

this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

<sup>17</sup>“And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.

<sup>18</sup>In this way God fulfilled what God had foretold through all the prophets..<sup>19</sup>Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out,

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Amy Herman built a company teaching leaders from law-enforcement, medicine, technology, and education sectors to see more accurately what is directly before them. You'd think an ability to perceive the world is table stakes in these professions.

*As a former museum educator* at The Frick Collection in New York City, she was fascinated by the way people interacted with art: what they saw and imagined, what they ignored, and the gaps in-between.

*As a trained lawyer*, she realized if people could stare at static art and miss what had been there for hundreds of years, errors would arise in eyewitness accounts at times of crisis.

Using art as her training medium, she would ask these leaders to study classical paintings, sculptures and monuments.

Then she asked them to describe what they saw in a painting – for example, a woman wearing a foot-long, four-layers of starched collar, as in a Vermeer painting from the seventeenth century.

Her work is so simple. If these leaders honed their capacity to see art with clarity they could apply this newly found skill in other areas of life.

Her thesis is so simple and yet as complex as the paintings they study.

Herman acknowledges that “when I tell them we’re going to get their neurons firing and increase their brain-processing speed, looking at old paintings and

sculptures is definitely not the first thing most people think of.

“They imagine something more high-tech, involving Google Glass, at the very least.” Such accomplished professions want something to enhance vision and would bristle at the idea of a fixing a deficiency.<sup>1</sup>

The act of observing something is objective, whereas how we perceive those details is subjective.

We perceive and jump to conclusions, based on factors that are unrelated to the problem before us.

At the surface, we may be tired or in a hurry, therefore overlook details, and accept easy explanations.

And when we probe more deeply, we learn how our values and life experiences shape what we see and believe.

We live with major blind spots and assumptions so deeply ingrained they become our version of the truth before we open our eyes.

We live with stories of ourselves that depend upon our context and relationships and when something rattles that, we are forced to reconceive of ourselves.

We often we fear speaking out, to ourselves and others.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Herman’s book *Visual Intelligence* and her numerous podcasts, videos, and company inspired these references.  
<http://www.artfulperception.com/index.html>

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In our reading today, the man depended upon others to drop him outside the gate to the temple so worshipers enroute could see his impairment as he begged for alms.

Since Hebrew custom prescribed giving alms and if he positioned himself in a worshiper's path, he accommodated both his need for money and another's need to express piety.

He set up an efficient transaction just like marketers today who strive for prime product placement in grocery stores or present buying alternatives when shopping online.

Not playing that game anymore, Peter stares at the man, seeing far more than withered limbs.

And as the man sought alms, Peter cut him short "Look at us...I have no gold or silver."

Essentially saying, "Let's stop pretending that you even bothered to look at me and perhaps we can end this ridiculous charade."

Then Peter offers him Jesus Christ of Nazareth and with his helping hand, the man stood, and began to dance, praising God.

Now we get to the heart of our passage: a formerly inarticulate fisherman's curt, impromptu, sermon.

Peter knew that those who saw this healing misunderstood. In their rigid world of cause and effect transactions, something extraordinary occurred.



Kind of like our propensity to wander in the self-help section of bookstores and consume endless blogs.

When we presume God is no longer involved in our lives, we are driven to control our environments, pushing us further from an intimate relationship with God.

Peter understands this posture from his own experience and launches in a sermon questioning, “why do you stare at us?” and preaches, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob is the same God who raised Jesus. Their God, Peter’s God, the one God looks beyond all the ways we ignore, block, and betray the gift of life, to restore life.

Peter accuses them and their rulers of ignoring the truth of Jesus and preferring to keep things the way they were. They let a murderer go free and killed the author of life.

Such searing words. But they came from one who had himself betrayed Jesus at the hour of Jesus’ greatest need.

Peter preaches: God cannot tolerate such a travesty of justice, and so God responds, not by punishing Jesus’ killers and betrayers, but by raising Jesus from the dead and renewing God’s indomitable commitment to life in Jesus’ name.

God’s power raised Jesus, forgave Peter, raised this lame man, and can so much more.

Then Peter softens, calling them “friends,” and offers grace by saying “You acted in ignorance.”

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With this he harkens back to Jesus' words in the *Gospel of Luke* while hanging on a cross, "Father forgive them, they do not know what they do," the Centurion's witness that Jesus was an "innocent man," and Peter's own discovery of how crippled he had been in not believing.

Peter offers to this vast crowd the chance to repent; to change their hearts and lives, to believe miracles of life happen and can happen for them.<sup>2</sup> God is here and salvation is now.

The truth about Jesus is not always comfortable to tell or to hear. At times and places the truth has been downright dangerous, even deadly.

Many, if not all, of those who heard Jesus that first Easter would give up their lives because of that truth. And yet, the church spread to the ends of the earth from those who mustered the courage to be his witness.

What kind of miracle will it take to shock us to see the tragedies in front of us?

What will it take for us to see the people others will discard as not part of a system but God's beloved children?

What will it take for us to name the deadly transactions we have grown so accustomed to that we think are

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<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Ed David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) P406-411.

either beyond repair or too essential to our economy to abandon?

What will it take for us to stop, and risk as Peter did, to break the cycle?

We turn a blind eye to pervasive reasons why a thirteen-year-old carries a weapon, or why a nineteen-year-old who needs mental health care instead receives a gun.

The toll of human life lost due to an unwillingness to see the reality of our lives continues to rise in mass shootings and murders and the split-second decisions that destroy the lives of everyone involved, including those of us from afar who feel the drumbeat of one more shooting, too many more senseless deaths.

Where is God in all of this? Look.

We find God weeping with those mourning.

God shakes God's fist at the feeble backtracking of justice and protection of laws.

Those who are firearm enthusiasts and those who shun any exposure to weapons are to share equally in the reform we so desperately need.

Just like the ways we see one thing but not what is presented, we have the same failure in listening.

When someone says the word "gun," anxiety rises and hearing shuts down since too many will immediately presume the sentence will continue with "gun control" rather than listen to the plea to end "gun violence."

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This will continue to divide us if our long-held positions take priority over seeing young, tender life bleed out time and time again.

There is another way.

This story from Acts may be of an individual man or may be read as all of all people who had fallen to the ground, unable to break away from long-standing practices.

The miracle of *Acts* may recur in our lives as we take a long hard look and accept the hand of God offered to us by another.

Let me close with a reflection from Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber.

She describes scenes from movies that, no matter how many times she watches them, she claims she cannot keep from crying all over again.

“Being immersed in art can do this – excavate a belief buried inside and hold it up until our eyes adjust to the bright truth of it.”

There is that scene from *Good Will Hunting* when Matt Damon’s character, had tried to cover the pain of his childhood abuse with a veneer of toughness and bravado.

His therapist tells him over and over that “it wasn’t your fault” and he brushes it off. The therapist won’t stop repeating “it wasn’t your fault,” until finally Will breaks down sobbing unburdened by the truth and relief of it. He does not need to live in that story any longer.

And there is Robert DeNiro's character in *The Mission*. Set in the 18th century he portrays a seemingly irredeemable mercenary and slave trader in South America who kills his own brother in a fit of jealousy and says to a Jesuit priest that he is beyond saving.

In his mind, redemption is not possible. yet the priest gives him penance anyway – to carry a large net full of the trappings of his past – armor, weapons, gold, and walk with it on his back for miles, carried up steep cliffs and waterfalls.

An easy metaphor for the dead weight of his own shame. After an exhausting, painful journey, when DeNiro finally hoists himself to the top he is cut free from the net by someone who had every right to instead cut his throat, and as the contents fall down the cliff, he collapses into sobs. It was his fault. And he is redeemed.

Bolz-Weber concludes with “I have felt like both of these characters at varying times in my life. Carrying both the weight of what I cannot be blamed for and the weight of what I can. The older I get, the more I realize how blurry the line is between the two, how often there are mitigating factors to our own complicity, and how we are at times in complicated systems we didn't actually create.”<sup>3</sup>

No one is ever beyond redemption. The sooner we change our hearts and lives to be brave witnesses, the sooner we will live in the kingdom to which Jesus invites us.

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<sup>3</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, “304 Dr. Ray Christiansen,” *The Confessional*, <https://nadiabolzweber.com/304-ray-christian/>



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