

Intro

- as Leah mentioned on Easter—teaching team meeting in early march, discussed teaching series ideas. Brought up how hope has been on my mind a lot in this deconstruction/reconstruction process. Had a good conversation
- Got sick a few days later.
 - I’d been ready to talk about hope from a safe, intellectual distance. A distance often afforded by my own everyday privileges. But then things changed very quickly, the topic of hope became difficult, but also all the more important.

Hope Re-visited

- there’s a reason why, even before our world was transformed by pandemic, the topic of hope was on my mind and heart. What I’ve come to realize over time is-- **How we imagine God impacts how we experience hope.**
 - In the evangelical kind of faith that I grew up with, hope came from feeling certainty in God. Hope was a triumphant sort of thing. That just as Jesus “conquered” the grave, God now controls and conquers every difficult and anxiety-producing situation. God knows exactly how this is going to work out. We can feel certain because God is certain. God has a plan and a hand in this.
 - A very triumphant confident clear image of God, where there is always control and a plan, leads to a certain kind of experience of hope.
- But what about when you have a lot of doubts and questions about how God is present to the world?
 - Over the past few years, I’ve become far less certain. I’ve wrestled with a lot of doubts and questions. I’ve been on a journey of learning to relate to a God who is much more mysterious than I ever let myself imagine.
 - So how do we experience hope when we imagine a God who is mysterious and far less certain to us? When our feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness in a difficult situation linger? What does spiritual hope look like in profoundly uncertain and difficult times?
 - I think we’re actually drawn closer to the strange and disorienting hope of the time of the early church after Easter.

Acts 3:1-10

- A couple weeks ago, Leah talked about the strangeness of resurrection, and how disorienting it was for his followers. The impossible had become possible, and yet scars still remained. There was this sense that something radical had changed and begun. It was something that gave them profound hope. But it also wasn’t finished yet. It was still unfolding. The presence and memory of Jesus was still there among his followers. And they felt to compelled to continue on. That’s where we’re picking up today with our story in the New Testament.
- Early in the book of Acts, we learn about how this strange, uncertain hope keeps unfolding after the resurrection. And we get this story involving two of Jesus’ followers, Peter and John, as they walk toward the temple one afternoon.
 - **Read Acts 3:1-10**
“Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time for prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon.”² And a man lame from birth was being carried up, who was placed at

the temple gate called “the Beautiful Gate” every day so he could beg for money from those going into the temple courts. ³When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple courts, he asked them for money. ⁴Peter looked directly at him (as did John) and said, “Look at us!” ⁵So the lame man paid attention to them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, stand up and walk!” ⁷Then Peter took hold of him by the right hand and raised him up, and at once the man’s feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸He jumped up, stood and began walking around, and he entered the temple courts with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰and they recognized him as the man who used to sit and ask for donations at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they were filled with astonishment and amazement at what had happened to him.”

- (The reality of the man at the gate)
 - Peter and John are in their way to the temple. So they’re still in Jerusalem. And the temple is the center of cultural and religious life for the city and for the whole region. It’s not just one building, it’s this whole huge complex with multiple entrances and different courtyards and buildings and rooms. Remember, Peter and John are Jesus-followers. But they’re also still culturally and religiously Jewish. The communities aren’t separate at this point. So they’re walking up to the temple complex to pray and they approach one of the entrances, this big Beautiful Gate.
 - And there’s this man with a physical disability sitting at the gate, perhaps off to the side, leaning near the gate’s structure. And he sits there everyday asking for money. We don’t know exactly how long he’s been doing this for, but probably a long time. This was part of the cultural system, and it’s what he had to depend on to get by. There wasn’t any kind of legal or societal support for him beyond individual charity through religious obligation.
 - So, some people in the community help bring him to the gate each day. But they don’t carry him inside into the temple complex with him. They provide support, but they maintain the status quo. And so the man at the gate knows what is possible for him and what he can hope for. He’ll be outside of the temple, at the gate, and he’ll get some donations of money from people who see him for a moment and then pass on. They’ll enter the temple grounds. They’ll participate in the public life of the community while he remains outside at the gate. He’s gotten used to avoid eye contact, perhaps to avoid how people look at him.
 - He is realistic and resigned about what is possible for him within this status quo.
 - And then Peter and John approach. These two apostles are on their way towards the temple to pray. They see the man at the gate, and they don’t ignore him or pass him by. They stop.
- (Major moment of transformation starts to happen)
 - And Peter says, “Look at us.” And in this moment, something starts to shift. Peter starts to challenge the boundaries of what is accepted and what is possible.
 - The man doesn’t register it at first. He looks up, still expecting for Peter and John to give him some money and then continue on.
 - But then Peter says- I don’t have any money, I’m going to give you something else instead.
 - It’s important for us to connect with the man at the gate’s reality, but it’s also important for us to realize there’s more going on in this story beneath the surface.

- The man at the gate looks at them, and then Peter speaks, “*In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene*”
 - Why does he speak in the name of Jesus? What does that do? What difference does that make? Perhaps you’ve heard the expression before “there’s power in the name of Jesus.” But I think that expression is often misunderstood. For the apostles, the name of Jesus is an invocation, not an incantation.
 - The name of Jesus is not a spell, like the speaking of his name makes something immediate and tangible happen in response. It’s not an incantation, it’s not a spell. For these apostles and for the man at the gate, the name of Jesus *invokes* something. It invokes radical transformative possibility. The same sort of possibility that Jesus embodied in his life, death, and resurrection. He challenged the permanence of the unjust status quo and pointed to the possibility of a different more just world. That’s what’s being invoked for the man at the gate. The name of Jesus here invokes possibility.
- So Peter says, “*In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, stand up and walk!*” and then in the next verse it says that Peter “*raised him up.*”
 - There’s a really important play on words here that mostly disappears in translation. These two different phrases, one translated “Stand up and walk” and the other translated “raised”—they’re the same verb in the original language of this text. And the verb doesn’t just mean to get up in the literal physical sense. It’s much more flexible and bears multiple possible meanings. This same word is used several times in the New Testament when people rise from sleep. It’s also used to describe a metaphorical posture of action, like ‘nation will rise up against nation.’ And most revealing-- it’s also used to describe being raised from the dead. Like in the final chapter of the gospel of Luke, when the disciples exclaim, “The Lord has risen indeed!” It’s the same verb. This is resurrection language and the story of the man at the gate reveals itself as a resurrection story in its word play.
 - We don’t know if the man also literally physically got up and walked, but that’s not the main point of this healing story. It’s much more symbolic than that, which the ancient storytellers were so good at and we struggle with sometimes.
 - The man at the gate experienced a resurrecting hope. He who was once an outsider at the gate now belonged in the temple of God. The name (and life) of Jesus invoked new possibilities that transformed him.
- “They [those visiting the temple] were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him”
 - The story doesn’t end with just the one man. Others are impacted by bearing witness to this transformation

Bridging Summary of Acts 3:11-4:15

- The story continues for the next couple of chapters.
- Peter addresses those who are in the temple and amazed. He professes his faith in the name of Jesus and the power in that name. Despite the execution that tried to stop it and that failed because Jesus resurrected.

- Those who are in positions of power and influence feel threatened by what is happening. The temple is the center of cultural and religious life, but remember the whole region is also under Roman occupation. And so there are local powerful leaders in Jerusalem who keep their own protection and prosperity by collaborating and cooperating with Rome. They keep the peace, even though it's oppressive, and they enforce the status quo. These are the leaders that feel threatened by what's happening in the temple. And so they arrest Peter and John and bring them to trial. They demand to know *"by what power or by what name"* they did this.
 - They recognize how this hope is transforming people and is a threat to the status quo that they want to maintain. Hope in new possibilities is dangerous.

Acts 4:15-21

- *"But when they had ordered them [Peter and John] to go outside the council began to confer with one another, ¹⁶saying, 'What should we do with these men? For it is plain to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable miraculous sign has come about through them, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷But to keep this matter from spreading any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.' ¹⁸And they called them in and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John replied, 'Whether it is right before God to obey you rather than God, you decide, ²⁰for it is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.' ²¹After threatening them further, they released them, for they could not find how to punish them on account of the people, because they were all praising God for what had happened."*
- They say there's not much we can do about this particular sign. It's been done and we can't deny it. But they say we have to keep it from spreading. They recognize that this hope is subversive and they don't want it to catch on anymore among the people than it already has.
- Notice that God has not guaranteed any certain outcome here. Their collective hope is inspired by possibility. Excitement and vision about what might be possible is where the Spirit is at work here and what those in authority feel threatened by. They try to put hope on trial and they fail. Resurrecting hope is already on the move. The people are celebrating and full of praise. They've born witness to possibility and where the Divine is at work. So instead it becomes "impossible" *not* to keep sharing this hope.

Resurrecting Hope

- What does this story have to teach us about hope?
 - **God's Spirit meets us in places of possibility.**
 - The man at the gate was transformed by experiencing new possibility and he couldn't help but bear witness and share it with others, who also became amazed and inspired
 - We can't know how God is at work and we can't be certain about outcomes, but we can take comfort in knowing that the Spirit is always at work in places of more just and loving possibility
 - **Resurrecting hope is an intentional relationship with possibility.**
 - Hope doesn't mean denying your doubts and griefs, doesn't mean denying the present reality of the situation. It also doesn't mean having triumphant certainty about how it'll all work out. It's more about bearing witness to possibilities for a more just and healed world and drawing strength from

knowing that that's where the Spirit is at work too. Hope is more about how we relate to possibility than how we relate to certainty.

- Personal connection story
- Traditions of hope
 - This way of thinking about hope, a hope that is less certain and more about possibility, is not new. Marginalized communities, because of their experiences, often have more intergenerational wisdom and spiritual traditions about this kind of hope and a collective relationship with possibility. For those of us who don't come from such traditions, this is an opportunity for us to learn and to reorient how we hold hope.
 - In the 1960's, people of faith in Latin America began thinking about hope in radical ways. In the midst of suffering and injustice, they began to speak boldly of God's concern for the poor. They spoke of a liberation and hope that would bring justice, and they pursued that possibility together. One of the major theological voices of this movement was Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez. He wrote,
 - *"To hope does not mean to know the future, but rather to be open, in an attitude of spiritual childhood, to accepting it as a gift. But this gift is accepted in the negation of injustice, in the protest against trampled human rights, and in the struggle for peace and fellowship. Its function is not very obvious, but it is real and deep."*

(For discussion)-- In what ways has it been difficult for you to have hope? What possibilities give you hope in this time? Where do you sense that the Spirit might be at work?