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Sermon of May 15, 2005 Dr. Jim Standiford, Senior Pastor

“THERE IS LIFE AFTER 40”

Acts 4:13-22

Eternal God, pour out your Spirit upon us, that we might be sensitive to your presence, attentive to your Word, and faithful always to your way. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.

It is through the Old Testament prophet Joel, that God spoke these words: “I will pour out my spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

The promise is that God will give to every single one of us God’s spirit. However, sometimes the circumstances of life cause us to wonder, don’t they? Look in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and you realize early on in Jesus’ ministry, that he went through a time of tempting, a time of testing; forty days in the wilderness. I am sure that sometime during that time period he must have felt, “Will I ever survive this? Will I ever be able to make it through?” And yet, he did. His three years of ministry after that time was a time of rich relationship with God. In Jesus’ case we can certainly say, yes, there is life after forty, forty days in the wilderness.

The man in our story today from the Book of Acts, we are told, is forty years old. He has been lame since birth, and yet look what happens to him. He meets Peter and John, and he is cured and made whole. For this man there is life after forty, forty years of lameness.

Our Confirmation Class will be received into membership in the next hour. They have put in over forty hours of study, of working on mission projects, of attending committee meetings, of being mentored by some of our members, and of having class after class. If the kids don’t say it, their parents probably would after all the trips the parents have had to drive: “Is there life after Confirmation?” Let me assure you, there is. After Confirmation comes the fullness of church membership, and all its opportunities and responsibilities. Yes, there is life after forty, forty hours of Confirmation.

I know that I am speaking for a small group here, but there is life after forty years of living too. Some of you will reach that age at some point, but let me assure you, there is life after forty. When I came here a few years ago, a couple of my clergy colleagues came to me, and said, “We want you to join us every Monday morning. We run five miles down around Mission Bay.” I hadn’t been running for quite a few years. I didn’t think I could make it for five miles, so I

discreetly declined their invitation. I later found out that they did run once upon a time, years ago, but for years now they have been walking around Mission Bay. In fact they don't always walk, sometimes they just have breakfast and talk about walking. That's not what I was invited to do. I could have accepted that invitation.

I know a kinesiologist and a knee doctor, whose slogan is, "It's never too late to develop a new gait." I believe that's true in the spiritual life as well. It is never too late for us to begin to run, or to walk, or to leap, or to dance with God's spirit, because God is constantly giving that spirit to us. It is not a one-time deal. It's God's constant gift to us. There is life after forty anything, because of the grace of God.

On this day of Pentecost, when we confirm our students, we will place our hands upon them, and pray God's spirit for them. The spirit will not necessarily move through our hands. Oh, I hope the kids feel something, but the spirit has already been given to them. That is what Joel says. The spirit has already been given to us. On this day of Pentecost, and when we do Confirmation, we are reminding ourselves that we have that spirit, and we are to live in response to the spirit of God, the spirit of grace.

The account that comes to us in Acts, chapter 4, is a marvelous description of a life of faith. It actually begins back in chapter 3. The spirit has been given to all the disciples. Peter and John are two of Jesus' closest disciples. In this account they are going to the Temple to pray. A crippled man, near the entrance to the Temple, calls out to them asking for money. Peter says, "I don't have any, but I will give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." The man walks. He is cured. He does not walk away, but walks with Peter and John into the Temple to pray. Everybody is amazed. Listen to what Peter says to the crowd that stands there in amazement. "It is not by our power or our piety that this happened. It is by the grace of God." There is no personal claim on their part for having done anything. They are but channels of the grace that God is always giving.

Peter then preaches a marvelous sermon. It is a literary masterpiece. I encourage you to look at it at some time. There are clever turns of phrase, like "You have killed the Author of life," and penetrating irony, "You disowned the holy and righteous one, and asked for a murderer in his place." The Council is there (the Jewish Supreme Court). They see this man who is healed. They see these plain, ordinary fishermen with this sense of boldness about their lives. Luke says in both instances, they *see* these things. Remember for Luke, to see something means to understand. They don't understand at all. We know that by what they do. They dismiss the disciples, and go into executive session and talk amongst themselves. If they had truly seen the power of God at work, they would have entered into a time of prayer. But they don't. There is further confirmation of their unseeing when they call the disciples back in, and say, "Don't you ever preach again in the name of Jesus."

Peter's defense is superb. He offers a question to them: "Whether it is right in God's eyes for us to listen to you or to listen to God, you'll have to decide, but we will continue to speak about what we have seen and heard." In the Greek, to hear, to listen, and the word obedience all have the same root. So what Peter is saying is, "It doesn't matter what you think, and it really doesn't matter what we think, it is what God says that we will do."

This story is a marvelous account of the Holy Spirit at work. It is a marvelous passage for us to look at on this day of Pentecost. It is a marvelous passage for our students that will be confirmed.

I tried to talk with the students last night a bit about my expectations for their membership in the church. One of the things that I emphasized was that Confirmation was not a graduation. They have not made it now. Rather it is a commencement. They are beginning; they are beginning their life of service through the church.

There are three elements in this passage that I want to share with you, and I will share with them in the next hour. First of all, Peter and John witness to us what it is that we have to offer others, and that is Christ. Those of us that are a part of the church have been given Christ, and we have him to offer to others. Oh, it doesn't take shouting. It doesn't take anything dramatic on our part. What it takes is faithful living. Our faithful living is the greatest witness there is to the love of God in Jesus Christ. When we live faithfully people will see it. They will say, "Why did you do that?" or "Why did you say those words?" or "Why did you act in that way?" when we do good. When we do good we can say, "It is because of my faith. It is because of Christ." That's all it takes, just a quiet, firm witness. We have Christ to

offer.

Secondly, God gives us humble courage. These men were ordinary folk, but on this occasion they were able to do extraordinary things. They did not brag on themselves. It is not by our power. It is not by our piety. It is by the grace of God.

A few weeks ago we talked about the Book of Romans and how Paul says to them, "Follow the governing authorities." Here it sounds like there is an encouragement towards civil disobedience, when it's a matter of conscience. "Don't do what the authorities say if it runs contrary to what God is saying." Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela would all understand. There are times when our faith calls for us to have a humble courage, and to stand even though no one else may be doing so.

Thirdly, when we live by the spirit, what we offer others helps them find wholeness. It adds to their life, the quality of life, the goodness of their life. It transforms their lives.

In Acts, chapter 2, when the day of Pentecost is described, we are told that the Holy Spirit came and resided on the disciples as "tongues of fire," like the little tongues (our children's dance troupe) that were running around up here. That's a strange description for us in our day, but in Roman times it meant that they received a divine blessing. This is the divine blessing that we all have received. We all have received Christ, and he is now ours to offer to others. We all have received the ability to have a humble courage, and live our faith. We all have received the ability to help those around us. This is the blessing of our lives. This is the blessing of knowing Christ, and having Christ in our lives.

Jesus says to his disciples in Acts, Chapter 1, "I want you to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." They were in Jerusalem. Judea was their home country. Samaria was enemy territory, and of course, the ends of the earth are everywhere. What Jesus was saying is, "It doesn't matter where you are, it doesn't matter if you are among friends, or even among enemies, be my witness, offer the love of God."

Quite a number of years ago I met a woman by the name of Elizabeth Roome. She spelled her last name: R-o-o-m-e. Elizabeth was double forty; she was well into her eighties when I met her in a previous church. She was sharp, witty, and gregariously generous to others. I taught Confirmation Class in those days. She came to me one day, and said, "I want to do something special for the Confirmation Class this year." We talked back and forth several times. She finally decided that on the night before they were to be confirmed, she wanted to host a dinner for the whole class. She picked an oriental restaurant in our community. She said, "I have never eaten sitting on the floor, and I have never used chop sticks. I want to do that, and I want to do that with the kids."

So we did. Mary Lou and I picked her up in our car and drove her to the restaurant. She was as excited as the kids were. After the meal, each one of them came to her and thanked her. Then she said, "Could I address the whole group?" I said, "By all means." She laboriously got up off the floor and stood in their midst. In a very soft, quiet voice, she said, "I want to tell you what Christ and the church have meant to me. It is from Christ, and through the church, that I have learned to give to others. It is the heart of living to give to others. It is what God did to us in Jesus. It is our opportunity to do it to others." Then long before Dan Rather, she said these words, "I hope you have courage, courage to be a Christian."

She died a couple of years later. She left a great deal of money to that congregation. A part of her money was designated for the youth group so they could remodel their room. They did. Over the door they put a sign: "The Courage Roome," spelled: R-o-o-m-e.

We all have received the Holy Spirit. It is God's gift to us. Have courage.

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