

Text: Acts 4.1-14
St Stephen's

Sept 29/30, 2007
Sat/Sun

"Many... All... Only..."

Last week we looked at one of the miracles done by the Apostles, and it was heartening to be reminded of the power of the Lord to heal and transform and redeem and forgive. **Miracle** = "The supernatural intervention of God in human affairs..."

Look at this verse...

"...fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles."

Acts 2:43 (RSV)

Do you see the phrase, "wonders and signs"? **'Sign'** is one of Luke's favorite words for miracles, and it is **an important word**.

You know what a sign is. **A sign is something that points beyond itself** to something else, something greater. **Symptoms** can be a sign of a disease. A good doctor will not treat the symptoms, but follow the direction to understand and treat the disease itself. A **road sign** might say, "Heinz Field, 20 miles". If you were looking for the Steelers game and you saw that sign, you would know what direction to go to get there, you would know how far you had to go, and you would know you were not there yet. You **wouldn't pull over** at the base of the sign and set up your tailgate party and wait for the game to start. Because the sign of the stadium is not the stadium. So you would see the sign, get excited that you were getting close, and keep driving.

The miracles are like that; they wonderful **acts of kindness** and mercy and grace – **and they are signs**. The **healing of this crippled man was pure mercy** on someone who was suffering – and it was a sign of something larger, it said something important, it pointed to something ahead.

I want to show you this in the run-up to our passage today. I want to

draw your attention to **three words**. Look at the verse on the screen (Acts 2.43). Say the word, '**many**' with me... That is the first word I want to think about.

Last week I asked some friends **how many 'many' meant**. How many miracles. How many healings. I would guess 'many' might mean 60... or 80... or so. We don't know. But something like that. A lot. Many.

But notice that **it doesn't say 'all'** were healed. They didn't empty the Jerusalem hospitals. '**Many**' were healed. And apparently **many were not**. So 'many' means 'a lot, but not all'. I was intrigued when Bill pointed out that **Jesus himself had walked by this crippled man** before when he had visited the temple. And so had his Apostles. And neither Jesus nor his Apostles had healed him. Not yet. Isn't that an interesting thing? Remember the word 'many'.

Here's **the second word**. It comes in Peter's sermon in chapter 3

For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets.

Acts 3:21 (NLT)

The phrase I want to look at is, '*the final restoration of all things*', and the second word I want to lift out of this phrase is '**all things**' – say it with me...

Peter is saying **the restoration** of all things **is coming**. The '*all things*' of verse 21 is a great deal more than the '*many things*' of verse 43. This is a big promise. '*All things*' includes... every body, every thought, every relationship, every wounded heart, every sin forgiven, every heart humbled, every knee bowing before the Lord of Lords. It includes every river, every mountain, every molecule, every planet, every solar system, ... *the final restoration of all things*...

I have **a couple of thoughts** that jump up as I think about these two words.

The first is that you and I **live between two words**. We live in

between 'many' and 'all'. We live in the days when many things are being restored, when God miraculously intervenes in human affairs to set things right. The future has started now. It happens **all the time.**

But not every time. But the time when 'all things' shall be restored is coming. It is coming like a freight train. You can hear the sound in the distance. **The many things,** the miracles of this day **are signs** that one day 'all things' shall be fixed.

If you are **praying for some thing that has not yet been fixed,** some one who has not yet been healed, some life that has not yet been turned – **remember the crippled man** in the Temple, remember that more than once Jesus must have **walked by him,** more than once the Apostles had nothing to say to him. But then **his day came.** Jesus had never lost sight of him. And **he has not lost sight of you.** There are wonderful things happening now and great things yet ahead of us, things that will make you jump for joy, laughing and leaping and praising God for his goodness. **Don't lose your hope** of what is to come. We live in between 'many things' and 'all things'.

Another thought that jumps out at me is that **both the many and the all are the work of Jesus.** That is the point of Peter's sermon...

And his name, by faith in his name, has made this man strong whom you see and know; and the faith which is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.

Acts 3:16 (RSV)

Peter is **explaining the signs** here. He is saying that **we didn't heal this man, but Jesus did.** This Jesus who died. This Jesus who you killed. This Jesus who you rejected, God raised. He is alive and risen and it is he who did this wonderful thing. **Look at the signs,** he is saying. **Look** where they point. **Read** what they say. This Jesus, he is saying, is far **greater** than you thought. Far, more **important** than you realized. Far more **wonderful** than you dreamed. **Come** to him...

Then we are told that the religious leaders...

came upon them, annoyed because they were teaching the people

and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them.
Acts 4:1-3 (RSV)

Wow! **Why would they do that???** The answer comes the next day when they hauled them in front of their tribunal.

*They inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"
They ...grilled them: "Who put you in charge here? What business do you have doing this?"*

Acts 4:7 (RSV & The Message)

They were asking, "**Do you have a license?** We don't remember giving you one!" Well no. And what the apostles said next just poured fuel on the fire...

This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Acts 4:11-12 (RSV)

"*Head of the corner*" is usually translated '**cornerstone**', and it's a term taken from ancient **architecture**. When people would put up a large building, the **most important part** of building was laying the cornerstone. It was exactly, carefully cut and shaped and laid, because the walls would take their **direction** from that stone and the building would put its **weight** upon that stone. If it was well cut and laid, the building could last centuries. If it was poorly laid or cut, the building wouldn't last even a generation.

Peter is saying **everyone builds** in life. You build, I build. Everyone does. **The cornerstone of your life** is what you build upon, what bears your weight, what shapes your decisions, what gives you meaning and security and confidence. Your cornerstone could be your family or your education. Some people make their looks their cornerstone (good luck on that one!), or their wealth, or their career.

What **infuriated** these leaders was that Peter and John, who were common, uneducated men, **stepped up** and into the place reserved for

the religious leaders and said, "You've been building on the wrong cornerstone. And you've **rejected the real cornerstone**. And the building will come down if you build like that."

Say, '*head of the corner*'... Say '*no other name*'... This brings me to my **third word** that I want to think about with you today. Say, '**only Jesus**'...

We don't like that phrase. We are pluralistic people who live in a multi-cultural world. We like to keep our **options open** and our **commitments fluid**. I want to tell you why we do this. For 95% of us, it is because we want to **keep ourselves in charge**. The primary reason most people believe in pluralism is to **preserve autonomy**. It is because we believe that **we make the best cornerstone** of the building. That was the primary reason the religious leaders were infuriated with the Apostles. It was an issue of control.

Here's the deal. **We make lousy cornerstones**. We are **cracked**. We buckle under the weight of the wall. We are **crooked**. When people line up on us, the wall doesn't go up straight. Autonomy doesn't work. We are not up to the task.

So, **where do you find a cornerstone** that can bear the weight of your life?

Well, **look at the signs**. That is what they are there for. And once you start looking, the signs are everywhere. There was **the crippled man**, standing next to them. What a sign! And then there were **the Apostles**.

They saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

Acts 4:13 (RSV)

They wondered! Common working men with a grade-school education living way beyond themselves... Put on the spot and squeezed, they taught profoundly from the scriptures... they didn't buckle under pressure, they had lost their fear, they had joy and poise and clarity and courage.

It was a sign. **What did it point to?** *"They had been with Jesus..."*

Later in the chapter we are told...

All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. Acts 4:32 (NLT)

They had never seen people live like this...

They were thoroughly united in the truth...

They were totally trusting in their faith...

They were completely forgiven and forgiving

They were radically inclusive in their fellowship

They were irrationally generous with their money...

Sign after sign after sign. **What did it point to?** *"They had been with Jesus..."*

The **most exclusive** truth claim led to the most inclusive **community**, the most deep-seated **character change**, the most **generous** lives, the most **courageous** witness.

All these were signs that pointed to someone real, someone great, someone true - for everyone. Thousands signed up.

When you build on the cornerstone, signs go up. Broken things get repaired and crooked things get straightened and grace flows and life surges and joy is real. We live in the middle of many signs and wonders and we know that the best is coming and that one great day all things will be restored and we will all laugh and leap and jump for joy. You can hear the whistle of the train coming down the track. And people stop and look and listen.

Jesus said,

I am the way and the truth and the life. Come to me. Bring it all to me.