

Acts 4:5-12      The Beautiful Gate  
April 25, 2021

It is an obscure reference. The story in the 3rd chapter of Acts involves the only mention of it in any literature and it is not found in archeological sites. It is the “Beautiful Gate.” Although attempts have been made to pin it down, its location is unknown, as are its features.

There was a crippled man who sat asking for alms. Peter and John came by and he asked them for money. What happened next is best related in the Bible’s own words;

“Then Peter said, ‘Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.’ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.”

Peter and John ended up getting in trouble over this incident, of course, because sometimes doing good *is* the source of trouble. They used it as an occasion for an impromptu sermon, in which they spoke about

Jesus, and how he had been killed by a conspiracy between Pilate and the Temple leaders, and Herod, but how he had been raised from the dead and that the power that raised him was the same power that healed the crippled man. By the way, they were let go in the end because the formerly crippled but presently healed man was standing right there, and the members of the counsel couldn’t say much about it.

It all happened at one of the temple gates, and even though no one else ever mentioned it, they said it was the gate called, “Beautiful.” They used a word that means, “timely,” or, “welcome in the moment,” rather than pleasing to the eye. And they had named the gate after it. I am sure it was a beautiful sight too, to see the man walking and jumping around, praising God.

The other image of the day comes to us from the 23rd psalm, which envisions God as a shepherd. The psalm presents a philosophy of life by describing how God has cared for us by providing for our most basic needs, restoring our inner lives, and guiding us towards what is right and good.

The psalm acknowledges life’s precarious nature by speaking of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and how life is a journey through it, and of feasting in the presence of enemies. And it proclaims God’s presence in terms of discipline, and abundance, and concludes by ensuring a life pursued by goodness and mercy and eternity in God’s presence.

The Gospel of John proclaims that Jesus *is the* Good Shepherd and here in this text Peter proclaims before the council that it is in the name of Jesus that salvation comes. It does not take much imagination to hear Peter's confrontational approach with the members of the council, "*you* crucified him, *you* rejected him," but the whole situation has been changed because he has been raised. Like the psalm with mercy and goodness, Peter is proclaiming resurrection and healing as a philosophy of life, a way of understanding life.

There is an alternative way of understanding life. One that denies the whole concept of eternity and the reality of a higher power, much less a benevolent one. It dismisses the idea of anything beautiful or good except as a matter of taste. It says that life is meaningless except for whatever meaning we can make, and *that* is only fleeting, misting away as time marches on.

With all that is going on in the world, one is easily tempted by this alternative philosophy of life. Just consider a few *obvious facts of history*, as Reinhold Niebuhr used to call them:

A little over 100 years ago the world fought a devastating war they called, "The War to End All Wars," only to turn around 20 or so years later to fight an even more devastating one. Nobody believes the 2nd World War ended war, instead it left us with the ability to imagine a war even more devastating, one that could lead to annihilation.

Or industrialization, I am going to have to think up another word for it, but the more I learn about it, the more significant I think it is. Advancements in knowledge and technology have served to make human life better in seemingly countless ways. That is indisputable.

Yet its advance has been violent and convulsive, and has created new problems that threaten us; like the looming environmental catastrophe, or the increasing de-personalization of relationships that distances people when they need to come together. Who can blame anyone for being a little cynical, skeptical of the possibility that problems can be solved?

But such is the Christian hope! Our hope. And it is offered to the world. And it does not depend upon people agreeing about things any more than Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas could agree about things with each other, and certainly not with Jesus, or with Peter and John. I am willing to bet that Peter and John had reason to doubt the understanding of life taught in the 23rd Psalm. But they *did* believe it.

It is Grace. It is resurrection. It is healing, mercy and goodness all the days our lives, and eternity in God's presence. It was a beautiful thing that happened at the gate they named Beautiful, all that walking and jumping and praising God. It was a wonderful thing that happened earlier outside the city gates on the hill they called, "Skull," where they had executions, and in the cave a few days later, where life came forth from death.

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