

This transcript was developed using an AI-based speech to text generator. We apologize for any typos or other errors.

"You Can't Handle The Truth (But God Can)" The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (04/14/2024, The Third Sunday of Easter)

Samuel Irvin Beam was a professor of cinematography and film at the University of Miami.

He wrote some songs, recorded them at home, and a few years later became iron and wine.

This artist who you see in front of you, Sam Beam wrote a song called Call it Dreaming.

You just heard a snippet of it, and I want to come back to it at the end.

First, I want to talk about one of my favorite movie genres, which is the courtroom drama.

Whether you are a few good men, fan from 92, the more recent streaming on Amazon, Tommy

Lee Jones, Jamie Foxx Vehicle, the burial, which I actually recommend, it was quite good.

Henry Fonda in 12 Angry Men, amazing classic movie from a long time ago, they couldn't

make it now because back then it was 12 Angry Men, they'd have to, 12 angry people is

what the movie would be now.

In these movies, there is always a climactic scene when they get the bad guy on the witness

stand, and they turn up the pressure and ask these very aggressive questions, and they

call the witness to sort of fall apart and confess to the thing or acknowledge whatever

has been hidden very much, you know, a few good men, you can't handle the truth, that

sort of situation, did you order the code red, you're darn tutin' right, I did, said

Jack Nicholson, and cleaned up for church a little bit.

I don't know if you ever tried this tactic with people in your life.

The screenshot of the location app shows that you weren't picking up a few things at target

that night, isn't that right, Steve?

And could you look at this receipt I found in your pocket?

What does it say?

Does it not show that you were actually at Applebee's for some chicken wonton tacos?

Those actually exist, by the way.

I feel like it's an abomination of all kinds of cultural

appropriation, I don't even know where to begin with the chicken wonton tacos. That might be unbecoming conduct for a clergyman, even to say those things. You were supposed to pick up the dry cleaning on Thursday night, isn't that right? And yet you didn't, and said you had to work late, and by the time you got to the dry cleaners, it was closed. But how do you explain the crumpled up lottery tickets and three cans of Mountain Dew? I found under the driver's seat of your car still warm. Isn't it true you stopped by the Valero? Anyways, I don't know, try it out, see how it goes, see if this works for you, although I can tell you, while you may get the truth, it might strain your relationship with that person. But this, to me, is the approach that St. Peter takes in the Acts 3 passage you heard today. Acts is the book of the Bible that comes right after the four biographies of Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts of the Apostles, which then tells the story, sort of post Jesus' resurrection, what to this early Christian community that will soon become called the church, they'll invent the word Christian, didn't exist before. All that happens in the book of Acts, and these people start worshipping together, and they start becoming this completely transformed community from these terrified, doubting, faithless apostles to the story that you heard today. And I want to give you the context what's going on, and as we walk through it, say how this might be some important revelation of who God is for us. So this story takes place in Jerusalem, Acts chapter 3, post resurrection of Jesus, post pentacost, these disciples, which is the coming of the Holy Spirit, and these disciples are gathered in Jerusalem, and they're going to the temple, and they're going out and around and talking about Jesus. And as they're walking into the temple, right before this passage you heard today, Peter and John are walking into the temple, and they find a man who is a paralytic, and he's carried there every day by one of the gates, and he is always there asking for alms, asking for help, you know, holding up a sign.

And he asks Peter for something, and this is an actual photograph of the event.

You can see Peter there on the left, and the man lying there on the steps of the gate, and he's saying to him, can you help a brother out? And Peter famously says, I have no silver or gold, but what I have, I give you, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk. And he does.

He actually jumps up and praises God, and starts telling everybody, it's his very public healing, and there's a crowd that rushes to see the commotion, see what's going on, it's really exciting.

And Peter starts preaching, and he preaches what we heard today. And this is kind of an awkward moment, because all these people had been in Jerusalem a few weeks prior, when Jesus had been crucified in the week before that, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, and they'd said, yeah, we love Jesus, Hosanna, Hosanna, Palm Sunday, and then crucify, crucify, give us Barabbas, remember that whole thing, Pilate said, this Jesus has done nothing wrong, he is now imprisoned with us, but there's this loophole, it's great, because it's Passover, I can let him go, just kind of dismiss the charges, because it's custom that I release a prisoner for you on this Passover celebration. So wouldn't you like me to release this really nice guy who's done nothing wrong?

And the crowd says, no, kill him, instead release the murderer, Barabbas, Barabbas, Barabbas. So Pilates says, okay, fine, you can have the murderer, and I'll kill the innocent man.

So that's what had happened just a few weeks prior, and all these people are rushing to see this healing, and asking how this guy has been healed, and the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and this is where Peter has his Tom Cruise, Lieutenant Kaffee, a few good men, and didn't it, and didn't you, and he says, I mean, he gives us blow by blow, blow, you handed over Jesus and rejected him in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him.

He rejected the Holy and righteous one, and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead.

Awkward moment.

Peter really pushes in on this, just throws it in their faces, you did this.

Now normally, whether it's Tom Cruise, or in a few good men, or pick your favorite courtroom drama, whenever people do this, when they kind of give a laundry list of offenses and accuse folks of something, and it's usually done to shame and to crush whoever you're accusing, but that's not why Saint Peter does this. He says, I know that you didn't realize what you were doing, and you acted in ignorance, and he says in verse 19, after he says that you killed the author of life, he says, repent therefore, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, so that your sins may be wiped out, usually you want people who have killed the author of life to acknowledge that and then get what's coming to them. I mean, what a statement. You kill the author of life, and therefore you should be banished out of darkness, but he says, repent, so that your sins can be wiped out, and it should be clear here that repent doesn't mean stop sinning in this case, in the sense that we normally think about it. Really, repent means you've been watching too much of bravo. Thank you, and you need to repent, stop doing that. So you have sin in your life, you need to stop doing it, that's what repentance is. They cannot stop killing the author of life, they've already done it. So repent here is not some legalistic, starting a good boy or girl, it's turn and receive grace, repent, so that your sins may be wiped out. Peter is not confronting them and challenging them so that he can shame them, humiliate them, punish them further, get them canceled, get the crowd riled up to hurt these people or something. He says all this to offer them grace. But it shines the light of truth in our lives, not to shame us or humiliate us, not to catch us in the act because he's some sort of divine killjoy that wants to say, ah! God is one who wants people to be free of the illusions they have about themselves so that then they might be open to grace. This is the picture of a 17th century painter Gerard Seagars, the denial of Saint Peter, definitely borrowing a little bit from Caravaggio in this one, but he shows Peter there on the left and the servant girl, as we read from the gospel accounts, the servant girl saying, don't

you know Jesus, the guy that's in handcuffs over there, maybe you should stick up for him or something.

I think he were with him and there he's saying, you can literally see him, who me?

That's actually what he's saying there, I've talked to the artist, who me?

And the guy, to the next, the guy in the helmet's looking at Peter like incredulous, no way.

We know you know him and the guy next to him with the feather in his cap is like, look, he's over there, you know him, he's from Galilee, just like you are. And Peter denies him and he does it three times, and of course at that moment Jesus looks at him and Peter is essentially caught in the act. But he's now free of any illusion about his own holiness or righteousness or goodness as a person or his own willpower and ability to make good choices when the chips are down. He is now free of that illusion because the chips are down three times and each time he completely dropped the ball. Each time he said I'd get better and he didn't. And Peter is now free of the illusion that he's some sort of capable person that can make good choices in life. He was in the right place and a few days later he would meet Jesus on the shores of the sea of Galilee where he'd spent so many time listening to Jesus, watching Jesus heal, watching Jesus teach and there they meet on that rocky shore of that lake in northern Israel.

This is a painting by the Reverend Ali Barrett, a priest in the Church of England who's a chaplain at Cambridge in the UK and she writes hymns and poems and she does these paintings and this is a simple but powerful image of Jesus meeting Peter there and this is one of those famous stories where just as Peter had denied Christ three times here on the beach Jesus asks and three times he loved me and Peter says yes and at this moment of forgiveness and restoration, pardon and then turning Peter back loose into ministry after his most abject failure he's now put on the Jesus team and sent out to be a minister of this gospel of forgiveness and now he's ready to do it because he is free of the illusion that he might be someone who doesn't need forgiveness.

He now knows it's the most precious thing in the universe and he wants to share it with everyone and it transforms him and this is what God always does and we saw it in our gospel reading today, Luke chapter 24 where Jesus gives a seminary class on the Old Testament and how it's all about him, I wish I could have been there should have been amazing but the thing that I think is fabulous about this passage is that Jesus tells the disciples that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name in Jesus' name to all nations everybody beginning from Jerusalem and that beginning from Jerusalem that really gets me because what that means is start in the place where the people are the worst. Start in the place where the people yelled, Hosanna and then crucify. Start in the place where everybody said no, keep Jesus and kill him, we want Barabbas. Start with all those people. Take forgiveness to the place where it is most needed. When you start handing out the forgiveness cards begin with the ones who need them the most. In the song you heard by Iron and Wine call it dreaming at the beginning, he has a line there. It's a beautiful song and the thing that gets me is he says we can hear when we are hollow. We can hear when we are hollow. This is a way of saying once you are free of the illusions you can begin to hear the grace of God. When you think you don't need it, God is some abstract, interesting theological principle, something which you might choose to believe in or not believe. But when you have seen your actual need for grace, for healing, for life where there is death in you, when you get to that place, when you are hollow, then you begin to hear that repentance and forgiveness of sins, not to do lists, not challenges to discipleship, not a four week sermon series on a book of the Bible to tell you how to get your life together. That's not what Jesus says to proclaim. He says repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning in Waco. Amen.

