

Creating an ACTS CHURCH in 2010

Introduction to the Acts of the Apostles

(Part one in our summer series on the Book of Acts)

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Have you noticed a difference in the way the church *looks* this morning? The Christ candle is no longer lighted.....because this past Thursday was the Festival of the Ascension. Pastor Cofer used Acts 1 as his text last Sunday to, no pun intended, lift up the story of Jesus' going back into heaven and his disciples being given orders by 2 angels on the top of the Mount of Olives.

It's not an "extra-credit" question, but do you remember the title of last week's sermon? (anyone?) The title was "Now What?" It ended with a question mark.....that little linguistic tool that symbolizes the unknown.

That's how the disciples felt. After 3 years of taking their instructions from Jesus, imagine how the recent past had affected all 12 of them. They had witnessed Judas betray Jesus, which led to his arrest, his suffering, and his crucifixion. They knew Judas had committed suicide. Peter had denied Christ. Then came the amazing but confusing events of Easter Sunday morning and all the appearances of Jesus in that 40 day period, which included a 50 mile hike to Galilee and then back again to Jerusalem.

And then Jesus was gone.....leaving the disciples on the Mount of Olives with their eyes upward, their mouths hanging open, and one question in their minds and hearts: Now what? It mattered to EACH disciple: Now what?

This book of the New Testament, which we will be studying each Sunday morning for the next 15 weeks, answers that question. It's called the ACTS of the APOSTLES, and right now I would ask that you take out your Bible, I heartily encourage you to bring YOUR Bible, and open to the Book of Acts.

In the order of the books of the New Testament, Acts follows the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The author of Acts connects himself to one of these Gospels in the very first verse when he writes, *In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day He was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen.*" (Acts 1: 1-2)

Two things pop up here: first, it's clear that the author of Acts has already written an earlier book; and second, his intended reader is someone with the very wonderful name of *Theophilus..... the man loved by God.*

Keep your finger on Acts 1 and turn back to Luke 1 for a moment so we can connect the dots on both Theophilus and the author of Acts. If you're reading from the NIV, read along with me, starting at Luke 1, verse 1: "*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who were the first eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything since the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*"

The author of the Book of Acts has been identified since the mid second century as Luke, a close friend and fellow worker of St. Paul. He was a Gentile (not a Jew), highly educated and referred to as "the physician" by Paul (Col 4). Luke stayed with Paul from his second missionary journey all the way through to his imprisonment in Rome, when others had deserted him.

Once Paul and Luke and the others reached Rome in the early AD 60s, Paul was placed under house arrest by the Roman government. Even though Paul didn't have the freedom to come and go, the others with him, Luke included, were free to come and go wherever they wanted. Somewhere along the journey, Luke had come to know a Roman official.....we can infer that by the title *most excellent* that he uses for him.....by the name of Theophilus.

Luke had most likely taught him about the basics of who Jesus was and what He did for him.....the basics of the Christian faith. We might say that Theophilus went through adult confirmation classes with Luke as his teacher!

Then, once Luke was back on the road with Paul, he wrote Theophilus TWO letters to help him grow in his faith. The first letter was what we today call the GOSPEL according to LUKE, his carefully researched account of Jesus' life drawn from all the eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and ministry that Luke had met and interviewed over the years. Can you imagine Luke sitting down with Jesus' mother, Mary, and listening to her share her memories the Christmas story? Can you imagine Luke taking notes as he sat listening to

Peter, James, John and, who knows, maybe even Lazarus? Out of all this careful research and after reading the writings of many other eyewitnesses (see Luke 1:1), Luke sat down at his desk in Rome and wrote what we call today "The Gospel (which means 'the good news') according to Luke!"

The second letter was the one we are going to study this summer: ACTS.

What is an ACT? It's something that HAPPENS, isn't it? It's what someone DOES! And while some have nick-named this book as the Acts of the Apostles.....putting the emphasis on what *they* did, I think that an even better name for the book would have been *The Acts of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit*. The reason I say that is simple: if the book is only about Peter and Paul, the story ends when their lives end, when both of them are executed in Rome.

But if the story is about the spread of Salvation through Jesus Christ from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to Galilee to Rome and to the ends of the earth, it's a story that is still going on today! It's a story that's been in the making and in the writing and in the sharing for 2000 years now and counting. It's a story that won't come to an end until Jesus returns from heaven and brings this present age to a close. It's a story that includes the *ACTS* of each one on God's people and the *ACTS* of each one of God's churches as we share Jesus' good news and continue to grow His Church!

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He gave his remaining 11 disciples their final set of orders: *make disciples of all nations*. We call this His "Great Commission." The entire weight of the eternal salvation of the future inhabitants of the world, present company included, was placed on the shoulders of those scared and confused men on the Mount of Olives that beautiful day in the year AD 33.

Turn to Acts 1:12 with me and let's examine how they went about handing that responsibility. They went back to Jerusalem.....a short "Sabbath's Day walk"..... gathered into an upstairs room of the place, most likely a hotel, where they were staying, and were joined by Mary, the other women named in the Easter story, and the brothers of Jesus, who were finally realizing who their "big brother" had been. And then they prayed.

When God's people seek direction we pray. When God's people seek safety we pray. When God's people need guidance: we pray. We are praying people.

For the next 10 days they prayed, and waited, and prayed a lot. After all, Jesus had told them to wait....and pray....until the Holy Spirit came. I think it's quite clear that they didn't know what to expect. I wouldn't have known what to expect, for the simple reason that the Holy Spirit had never COME before! What WOULD happen when the Holy Spirit came? They didn't know!

They knew one thing. They knew what Jesus had told them to do. And while they waited and while they prayed, something became clear to them. Look with me at verse 15. Peter had assumed leadership for the moment, probably something not too surprising since he was quick with words and quick with actions and had been restored to his apostleship before the ascension.

Peter led them in selecting a replacement for Judas, someone who could be the 12th official eyewitness. They knew Jesus had originally selected 12 of them, just as there had been 12 tribes in the Old Testament.....and with Judas' suicide, he had to be replaced. There were obviously a number of men who met the criteria, and of them two were proposed: Barsabbas and Matthias. They prayed, just as our congregations pray when a new pastor must be called, and God led them to add Matthias to their number.

Outlining Acts is simple: the first major division, chapters 1-12, is the story of The Spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem through Galilee and Samaria, the church in Palestine. The primary character is the apostle Peter.

The second major division, chapters 12-28, is the continuation of the spread of the Gospel "until the ends of the earth," Rome, to be specific, and the primary character here is Paul.

The third major division is still being written. It's the story of what every Christian since then has been doing to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world around. You and I and Hope Lutheran Church are PART of that story.....a story that the Holy Spirit began at Pentecost and a story that will continue to be written each and every day until Jesus comes.

Next week: Acts 2..... the waiting is over.