

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, On the GO!

(Studies of the book of Acts)

Plan “Be”

(Acts 1:1-14)

Study #1

Introduction: The best laid plans...

In a poem that he dedicated to a mouse (☺), the 18th century Scottish poet, Robert Burns, wrote, *“The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.”*

To which we say, “Yep.” Life happens. Plan A gets disrupted. Plan B follows.

The Spurs had to develop a Plan B when Tim Duncan retired. Now, they need to develop another Plan B to navigate the NBA playoffs without Tony Parker.

Some of my best laid ministry plans have had to be adjusted, sometimes due to finances, sometimes due to personnel, and sometimes because my plan wasn’t really all that well laid out. Great backpacking routes have been altered due to injuries and weather.

Think hard and you can probably recall a time when you planned and dreamed something - only to have that plan fall apart. You resorted to Plan B.

We applaud the planner - and then we sadly smile - because we know that life will throw roadblocks that derail the best laid Plan A.

Jesus’ first disciples learned all of this, firsthand, and would have agreed with Robert Burns’ poetic line. Their Plan A had Jesus reigning over an earthly kingdom, and that plan went way “awry.” A Roman cross crushed Plan A.

But, they discovered that God had a Plan B. Actually, it was a Plan “BE”. And this Plan BE unfolds in the book of Acts, to which we’ll be turning our attention for the summer months.

I’m really eager to jump into this book with you, because God’s Plan BE to the first disciples is as relevant to us as it was to them.

But, since context is everything, before we turn to Acts, I’m going to take a couple of minutes to review the story that brings us to Acts 1:1.

In brief, following Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, His disciples faced a month and a half of turmoil, disruption, and change.

The disciples’ great expectations

We know these disciples from the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They lived in the land of Galilee, the northern part of Palestine.

They had followed Jesus for three years. After watching Him and living with Him, they came to believe that His claims were true. He was the SAVIOR and He was the long-expected MESSIAH.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the cheers of adoring crowds, these disciples knew that the KING had arrived.

They were brimming with confidence, certain that, at Passover, Jesus would present Himself to the nation as its king and would overthrow Roman rule.

Then, things turned out very differently than they had imagined...

Broken dreams!

By Thursday evening, Judas Iscariot had already betrayed Jesus. That night, Roman soldiers and Jewish priests arrested Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Fear won the night and the disciples all fled.

Simon Peter would deny Him three times. Jesus was taken from trials before the Jewish Sanhedrin to the Roman governor where He was sentenced to die by crucifixion.

After the crucifixion, the disciples knew that they - followers of a Man executed for treason and blasphemy - were in grave danger, and they lived with fear and despair from Thursday night through Saturday night.

And then came Sunday.

Out of the ashes...

Sunday morning brought reports of an empty tomb and various "Jesus sightings." By late on that first Sunday evening, if there was any confusion, it was of the, "*Too good to be true!*" variety.

They had discovered that the death of Jesus was not at all the end of the story. The Gospels all end with a focus on a living Jesus.

In particular, Luke's Gospel ends with exuberant, rejoicing disciples. And that's important to note as we get ready to look at Acts, because the book of Acts is Volume 2 to Luke's Volume 1, which is his Gospel.¹

Intro to Acts: Dear Theophilus... (v. 1)

[1:1] The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach...

¹ Luke, an eyewitness to many of the events he records in the later chapters of Acts, probably wrote this book sometime in the 70's of the first century.

Those words, "***the first account,***" are a reference to Luke's Gospel. Luke wrote both his Gospel and Acts to his friend, Theophilus. So, you and I are deeply indebted to Theophilus for sharing his mail.²

Now, given that we are going to spend the next bunch of Sunday mornings together looking into the book of Acts, you might wonder, "*Why?*" Well, here's my "*Why.*"

The BIBLICAL Importance of Acts

For one thing, the Bible is story. The whole Bible is either story or it's teaching or poetry or prophecy given in the context of story.

Without a working knowledge of Acts (the story of the early church), it's hard to make much sense of what follows in the rest of the New Testament. Acts gives us an invaluable historical framework for understanding issues that are addressed in so many of the letters.³

Another reason for wanting to move through Acts with you has to do with theology.

The THEOLOGICAL Importance of Acts

In Acts, we are introduced to some of the critical themes of the Christian faith. Luke clarifies who Jesus is and how someone is saved. He describes what the church is to be all about. He tells us who the Holy Spirit is and what He does.

Acts shows us the power of the Gospel to overcome racial, social, ethnic, and political differences. We see in Acts how the early church thought through the thorny issues they had to confront.

Some of it is messy - just like today, some of the issues we deal with are messy. But Luke tells us how it was all worked out through story. In Acts, we see *theology* worked out in *biography*.

² "Theophilus" means "dear to God" or "friend of God." Sadly, we don't have any idea who Theophilus was.

³ Archaeology and literary evidence assures us that Luke was an excellent historian. We know that he accompanied the apostle Paul on some of his travels and had access to primary sources as he compiled the rest of the record.

But there is another reason - one that is more personal - for choosing to study Acts with you at this time.

The CONGREGATIONAL Importance of Acts

The purpose for which Luke wrote his gospel was clearly set out in the introduction. He wanted to give his friend, Theophilus, a well-ordered account of what Jesus did during His lifetime.⁴

As he begins this second work, he tells us that in the first book he gave an account of all that Jesus *began* to do. The clear implication is that this second volume is all about what Jesus *continues* to do.

The only difference is that now what Jesus is doing He is doing through His followers.

In the first century, Jesus' hands and feet were Peter and Paul and Barnabas and Priscilla and Dorcas and Lydia and Philip.

Today, those hands and feet are yours. Ours. You and I are here to carry out the on-going work of Jesus.

So, this year, I am sixty-one years old. I've been a Christian for decades. It has been my great honor to have served as pastor here for decades. And I'm hungry.

Through the years that our church has been here, the Lord has done wonderful things.

I could tell stories of lots of people coming to know Jesus and of being established in their faith.

We've watched as God has put broken lives back together and He has brought broken families back together. Children and youth have been served here, and parents have been equipped.

We support missionaries and we've sent out missionaries. We have the honor of serving the poor here in all kinds of ways. People with addictions have been set free. I'm hungry for more of all of this.

Back in the early years, I was hungry to be invited to speak at the chapel service of my alma mater (Dallas Theological Seminary). Distinguished alumni are often invited to speak there.

I'm not really hungry for that, anymore. I'm not hungry to serve a church that's famous for being a well-oiled machine.

I'm not angry or frustrated or dissatisfied. But after four and a half decades of following Jesus, I'm hungry to see more and more of what we've seen over the years. More...

...passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with our world.

...unleashing of Christ-followers into disciple-making service.

...impact for God that is way out of proportion to our size, making a difference that is only explainable by God.

...lives transformed by the grace, power, and love of God.

And I believe with all my heart that I'm not the only one here who's hungry. I'm confident that you're hungry, too.

You're hungry to serve the least, the last, and the lost in Jesus' Name. You're hungry to see us serve and connect with people from all ethnic groups, for Jesus' sake. You want to see souls saved, lives changed, addictions broken, families made healthy, bodies and minds restored - God doing the kinds of things that only He can do.

And it is this hunger, coupled with the increasingly desperate need for God's touch that is all around us, that drives me to the book of Acts. All of this is what Acts is all about. Acts leads each one of us and Acts leads us, as a church, into our next steps with Jesus.

So, without further delay, let's turn to Acts now.

After the disciples had absorbed the shock of Jesus' resurrection, they enjoyed forty days with their alive-again Savior.

⁴ He says that he wanted Theophilus (and us) to know the exact truth about the things which he had been taught.

Get Ready - Power Is Coming! (vv. 1-8)

Forty Amazing Days (vv. 1-3)

[1:1] The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, [2] until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. [3] To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

We know some things about what happened during those forty post-resurrection days. We know that Jesus:

- appeared to a few of His disciples - both men and women - on Easter Sunday, and then, again, eight days later;
- appeared to several of the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee;⁵
- appeared to a crowd of over five hundred people in Galilee;⁶

We also know that after those forty days, the disciples traveled back to Jerusalem, probably a little more than a week ahead of the week-long Jewish festival of Pentecost.⁷

As we open to Acts, the disciples are about a half mile outside the city of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, with Jesus.

He was preparing for His home going. And we know, but the disciples didn't know, that they were listening to His final words.

Anticipating a Baptism (vv. 4-5)

Don't leave Jerusalem! (v. 4a)

[1:4a] Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem...

⁵ Peter was here singled out for special attention, challenge and restoration.

⁶ So, 1 Corinthians 15.

⁷ Pentecost was (and is) a celebration of the beginning of the harvest.

What do you think would have gone through their minds when they heard, "Don't leave Jerusalem."?

I'm not sure if they would have focused on the darker memories of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, the terror of Saturday, or the wonder and joy of Easter Sunday.

Jerusalem might have evoked all of those memories. They probably would have been way more comfortable returning to Galilee. Regardless, Jesus told them to stay put. Stay in Jerusalem.

The Father's promise (vv. 4b-5)

[1:4] Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; [5] for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."⁸

So, note this.

As of Jesus' last meeting with His disciples, the Holy Spirit had not made His entrance into their lives.

Yes, they got a taste of the Spirit when Jesus breathed on them in the Upper Room after the resurrection.⁹ And they had seen the Holy Spirit's power during the three years they walked with Jesus.

But they, personally, had yet to receive the Spirit in fullness and in power. But, that's coming. These disciples were to be *immersed* (that's what *baptism* means!) in the Holy Spirit - and soon.¹⁰

And until THAT happens, they were to sit tight. Don't "Go". Don't "make disciples". Wait. They weren't ready. Fascinating.

⁸ See Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16.

⁹ John 20:22.

¹⁰ Jesus had previously spoken to them about this promised gift from the Father. In fact, He had discussed the Spirit's ministry in detail on the night before His death (especially John 14 and 16).

These guys had received personal training from Jesus. He gave them constant supervision over three years' time. He taught them, mentored them, admonished and encouraged them. He disciplined them.

All of that was not enough for the task ahead. Given the enormity of their assignment, three years of face-to-face training under Jesus was not enough.

They needed what only the abiding presence of God could provide. They needed the Holy Spirit's power.¹¹ So, they were to wait.

And we can almost see the wheels turning in their minds - *"We're to stay in Jerusalem - the royal city. Something big is coming. Peter, John, Andrew, y'all don't think..."*

Not a Kingdom, but Power (vv. 6-8)

The disciples: "Is NOW the time, Lord?" (v. 6)

[1:6] So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"

"Jesus, we know we were wrong when we thought that You were going to restore the kingdom at Passover. But, now that You are raised from the dead, is the kingdom coming? Is this what you mean by the baptism of the Holy Spirit?"

The Lord responded to their question in two parts.

Jesus: "None of your business" (v. 7)

[1:7] He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority..."

Jesus not only didn't tell them when the kingdom was going to come. He told them that they weren't to know the future, generally.

¹¹ The term *baptism* is significant here. When John the Baptist was baptizing in the Jordan River, those he baptized got **completely** wet. The gift Jesus pictures here will be a full dunking, an immersion, into life in the Holy Spirit.

Now who among us wouldn't love to know the future?! It would be great to know what the future holds.

Tell me next week's weather, the Spurs playoff future (or maybe not), or even weightier things. I'd like to know.

But, to the disciples' very understandable desire to know when the kingdom would be restored to Israel, Jesus says, *"Sorry. That's 'need to know.' You don't need to know."*

To their explicit question, Jesus gave a non-answer. He then went on to answer the question they didn't ask.

Jesus: "You shall be My witnesses!" (v. 8)

[1:8] but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

The disciples may not be a part of an earthly kingdom Jesus will soon set up. They will, though, receive power from God the Holy Spirit.

When we look carefully at Acts 1:8, we discover that it is BOTH a prophecy and something else.

A geographical / cultural progression

As a prophecy, Jesus describes a movement from a center to a circumference, from here to there, from "us" to "them."

- The disciples will be Jesus' witnesses beginning in **Jerusalem**, the city over which He wept. Note God's grace here. The place where Jesus was killed will be the launch pad for the spread of the Good News that Jesus saves. (Acts 2-7)
- Then, the disciples will move out from Jerusalem to the whole region of **Judea**. Judea was the land of the full-blooded Jew. It was the land through which Jesus traveled - teaching, preaching, healing. Judea was the land in which He was rejected. And Judea will receive the Good News of the Gospel. (Acts 8)

- Next, the disciples' ministry will branch out to **Samaria**, the home of the enemies of the Jews. Jesus passed through Samaria a couple of times.¹² Jesus' followers will go back there with the Gospel. (Acts 8:2-25)
- Finally, Jesus' disciples will be His witnesses beyond Samaria to **the remotest part of the earth**.¹³ And, the last half of the book of Acts tells of how the disciples did take the Gospel as far as Rome and beyond. Jesus' vision was to reach the world, NOT just Israel. (Acts 13-28) We, today, are still fulfilling that last phrase of Acts 1:8, and we'll continue until people in the remotest part of the earth hear.

So, Acts 1:8 summarizes the book and the course the Gospel will actually take in the world. But Acts 1:8 does something else, too.

A promise, not a challenge

What I'm about to mention is easily missed. But I think this little observation is critical to understanding the verse, the book of Acts, and the Christian life.

The observation has to do with a grammatical subtlety in the phrase that contains the word "**witness**." You will notice that Jesus did NOT say, "*you shall do My witnessing*" or "*I command you to witness*."

I have read a lot of English versions of the Bible, and I haven't found one of them that translates the Lord's thought in this way.

No. What Jesus says is, "***You shall BE My witnesses.***" By those words, Jesus is making a promise. He is not issuing marching orders.

Matthew 28:18-20 is a Great Commission. It's a call to action: "***make disciples.***" Acts 1:8 is a Great Promise. Rather than give us something to do, Jesus describes what His followers are going to BE - "***You shall BE My witnesses.***"

¹² See Luke 17 and John 4.

¹³ Literally "***to the end*** (singular) ***of the earth.***" The thought is that the disciples were to take the Gospel, as Jesus' witnesses, to the most remote place on the planet. Leave no stone unturned.

Their Plan A had been, "*We'll serve as Cabinet-level executives in Jesus' kingdom.*" Jesus gives them a Plan B. More properly, a Plan "BE" - "***You will BE My witnesses.***"

When the Holy Spirit is poured out on these disciples, He will change them into something different from what they have been. He will make them to **BE** witnesses.

In our study of Acts, we will see that the power of the Holy Spirit can be resisted. He can be quenched and grieved.¹⁴ At times, we'll see disciples quench the Spirit by rebellion or by spiritual insensitivity. At those times, they were witnesses, but lousy ones.

But, when they made themselves available for the Spirit to work, they were powerful, life-giving witnesses.

That's Jesus' Plan BE - and there was no Plan C. In the first century and in the 21st, Jesus' disciples will **BE** His witnesses - and we are the only witnesses He will have in the world. If the word about Him is going to get out, and if the word that gets out about Him is worthy of Him, it'll be because disciples like us **ARE** the credible, loving, witnesses He saved us to **BE**.

Jesus finished His earthly mission with the words of verse eight. And then, just like that, He left, returning to God in glory.

Ready? Jesus Is Coming Back! (vv. 9-11)

The Reality of a Great Departure (v. 9)

[1:9] And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

I imagine the disciples, standing open-mouthed on the Mount of Olives, gazing into the sky as He was enveloped by a cloud.

¹⁴ See 1 Thessalonians 5:19 (quenching); Ephesians 4:30 (grieving).

It was a dramatic departure. And I think that the reason for this very public and visible ascension was to say, *“This is My PERMANENT departure.”*

During the previous forty days He had appeared, disappeared, and then reappeared later several times.

But, now, this period of His physical presence is over. He’s really gone. They won’t see Him again until they die and go to Heaven or until He returns.

At least, that’s what the angels said.

The Promise of a Great Return (vv. 10-11)

[1:10] And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. [11] They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”¹⁵

These two angels gave voice to the hope that we who follow Jesus have been holding on to for the last two thousand years. He’s coming back.

His story wasn’t over at the cross and it wasn’t over at the empty tomb. It wasn’t even over when He ascended into heaven. There is another glorious chapter that involves His return to set up that earthly kingdom the disciples were so eager to see.

It hasn’t happened yet. We’re still waiting. But the day is coming.

¹⁵ In the Gospel of Luke, we read that Jesus led them out to Bethany, having told them not to leave the city (Jerusalem) until they were clothed with power from on high, and that from there He was lifted from them and went to Heaven. After this, the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy. That passage (Luke 24:44-53) is a parallel to Acts 1. Luke picks up in Acts 1 where he left off in Luke 24.

In the interim, Jesus’ disciples have work to do. And the final scene we’ll see today gives us a glimpse of them, at work, after Jesus’ ascension, after the angels’ message, and before the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Get Ready - Get Set, PRAY! (vv. 12-14)

If Walls Could Talk (vv. 12-13a)

[1:12] Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away.¹⁶ ***[13] When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying...***

That wording - ***“THE upper room”*** - suggests a well-known place. If it is the room I think it is, what tales those walls could tell.

I suspect that it was the same upper room where they had celebrated the Passover with Jesus, weeks earlier. It was probably the same room to which they had retreated on Saturday after the crucifixion. It was likely the room where Jesus appeared to them, post-resurrection, on the first Easter evening.

Now, with the disciples all together there, again, in addition to tales of high anxiety and fear, those walls could tell of excitement and hope.

With the exception of Judas,¹⁷ the apostolic band was all present and accounted for, along with a few others.

¹⁶ According to the rabbis, the distance a Jew was allowed to travel on a Sabbath was two thousand cubits, or about 3/5 of a mile. (Edersheim, [The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah](#)) The point is not that this happened on a Sabbath.

¹⁷ His story is told in Acts 1:15-26.

The Gang's All Here and United in [the] Prayer (vv. 13-14)

[1:13b]...Peter and John and James and Andrew,¹⁸ Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. [14b]...along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

And what were they doing? They were praying.

None of us are surprised that Jesus' disciples would meet for prayer. But Luke says, not just that they were praying, but that they **[14a] all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to [the] prayer.**

This was a prayer meeting with a purpose.

I am confident that **"the prayer"** to which they were devoting themselves was **"the prayer"** for the arrival of the Spirit.

They knew Jesus' Great Commission: Make disciples of all the nations. They knew that God's Plan "BE" for them was to be Jesus' witnesses to the remotest part of the earth.

But they also had heard Jesus say, *"Stay put."*

They needed power that would only be theirs when the Holy Spirit fell on them. So, they prayed over the course of about a week.

They prayed with a desperate eagerness for God to do for them what they needed so that they could do for God what He commanded.¹⁹

¹⁸ The brothers "Simon and Andrew" and "James and John" are now separated and listed in order of their prominence in Acts.

¹⁹ For how many days did they pray? It is impossible to know with precision. But, the time between Passover (Jesus' death) and Pentecost is roughly fifty days, and the time of Jesus' ascension was at least forty days after His resurrection. (Acts 1:3). It is reasonable to suppose, then, that the group of one hundred and twenty disciples (Acts 1:15) were at prayer for roughly a week before the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Conclusion:

So, let's end with two thoughts from what we've seen from Acts this morning.

First, imitate the first disciples, and wait. No sharing your faith this week. Don't obey the Great Commission. Don't **"Go!"** Don't **"make disciples of all the nations."** Don't help anyone take a next step with Jesus. Just like He told the disciples, stay put.

And, no. I'm not serious.

"Stay put" applied to the first disciples on the Mount of Olives, but it doesn't apply to us because we are living post-Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit has arrived. Now, post-Pentecost, when anyone places faith in Jesus, in addition to receiving forgiveness of sin and eternal life with God, they receive the indwelling Holy Spirit and are baptized, immersed, in the Spirit of God.²⁰

You, a child of God, have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. He is the realized presence of God in your life. So, the word to each of us today is not, *"Stay put. Wait."* It is, **"Go!" "Make disciples!"**

Second, imitate the disciples and pray. And, yes. I'm serious.

While it is true that we who believe in Jesus have all of the Holy Spirit we need and will ever receive, it may not be the case that the Holy Spirit has all of us we have to give Him.

Would you be willing to go to God each and every day between today and next Sunday, and pray? He has immersed you into the life of His Spirit. He wants you to give Him all of you.

As a church, today through next Sunday, let's join in praying, *"Father, I am Yours. All of me. I want to BE the powerful witness You saved me to BE. I consecrate myself to You."*

²⁰ See 1 Corinthians 12:13, among many verses that promise the Spirit's presence and power to all who believe.