

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus' Faithful Witnesses... **...Bearing Witness to Jesus' Life-Changing Message** (Studies in the book of Acts)

First Steps Into the Continuing Works of Jesus Study #1 (Intro; Acts 1:1-14)

Introduction: Delays...

It is not unusual for my best laid plans to meet with delays. I don't much like delays. Maybe you're as fond of delays as I am.

I'll be eager to get started on some new thing that I've been thinking about and planning for - a few years ago, it might have been a big camping trip, or these days, a vacation with Kathy, or some new initiative here at church - and some weed pops up that delays me.

Over the years, these delays have been tools God has used to teach me the grace of patience. As you know, I am still very much "a work in progress." Jesus has used delays to shape my character.

Along the lines of eagerness and planning, I've been so eager to be back with you. It is really good to be back with you today.

But, as you may also know, a trip to the doctor in May and a diagnosis of prostate cancer in June led to a surgery in July which led to some delay.

That delay led to you hearing wonderful messages from Alex Mandes (from Genesis), John Showman (from Philippians 2) and Todd Havekost (from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9).

I am truly grateful to God for these brothers' availability and ability to bring great sermons while my character was being shaped. And I am grateful beyond words to you for your prayers for me and for Kathy in this season.

Among all these things for which I am so very grateful, I am grateful to be past the delays of recent weeks and am eager to jump into a study of the book of Acts with you this morning.

We haven't walked through Acts together on a Sunday morning for about ten years - and I think that it's about time. I'll tell you why I think it's time in a minute.

Prior to opening the book of Acts, let's take a minute to remember the story that precedes Acts 1:1.

The disciples' great expectations

On Jesus' final Sunday before Friday's cross, He triumphantly entered the city of Jerusalem. Given that entrance, His disciples had high hopes that He would soon sit on a throne as king.

These disciples had followed Jesus for three years. They had come to believe that He was "***the Christ, the Son of God.***" And believing this about Jesus, they had LIFE - eternal life - in His Name. (John 20:31)

On that Palm Sunday, the Twelve just knew that the King had arrived and that the kingdom was now.

Broken dreams!

But by Thursday evening of that week, Judas Iscariot had betrayed Jesus. Roman soldiers and Jewish priests had arrested Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Simon Peter would soon deny Him.

The Jewish Sanhedrin eventually condemned Jesus, and the Roman governor sentenced Him to die by crucifixion. He died on Friday.

The disciples, having followed a Man who was put to death for blasphemy and treason, lived in fear from Thursday night through Saturday night...and then came Sunday.

Out of the ashes...

Sunday morning brought reports of an empty tomb and “Jesus sightings.” It was too good to be true - and it was all true.

The death of Jesus was not at all the end of the story. All four Gospels end with a focus on a living Jesus. In particular, Luke’s Gospel ends with exuberant, rejoicing disciples.

It’s important that we notice that because the book of Acts is Luke’s Volume 2 to his Gospel, which is Volume 1.¹

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

[1:1] The first account I composed, Theophilus,² about all that Jesus began to do and teach... - and that implies that Acts (Volume 2) is all about what Jesus continued to do and teach.

Now, given that we are going to spend the next bunch of Sunday mornings looking into the book of Acts, you might wonder, “Why?” Well, here are some of my “Whys.”

The BIBLICAL Importance of Acts

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

If we aren’t familiar with the book of Acts, it’ll be hard for us to make much sense of what follows in the rest of the New Testament.

In Acts, Luke gives us the crucial historical framework for understanding issues that are addressed in so many of the letters.³

Then, I want us to walk through Acts together because we learn so much about what and why we believe what we believe in Acts.

The THEOLOGICAL and CULTURAL Importance of Acts

In Acts, we are introduced to some of the core beliefs of our faith.

For instance...

...because of Acts, we know much more about the power and the workings of the Holy Spirit as we watch Him in action.

...Acts gives us a bird’s eye view of the establishment, development, growth and organization of the Church (the body of Christ) along with snapshots of churches, glimpses of what church should do and be.

Plus, Acts takes us through a transitional period where the old wineskins of Judaism were being replaced by the new wineskins of The Jesus Way.

So, we’ll see how practices changed over the course of the book to reflect Jesus’ new Way.

Acts shows us the power of the Gospel to overcome racial, social, ethnic, and political diversity. Acts shows us how the early church worked through the thorny issues that this diversity surfaced.

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

And then, there is the strategic leadership purpose for Acts.

Theophilus, a well-ordered account of what Jesus continued to do through His followers. Thus, at its most basic level, Acts is a discipleship book for believers.

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

¹ Luke was an eyewitness to many of the events he recorded in the later chapters of Acts. Scholars believe that he wrote Acts sometime in the ‘70’s of the first century.

² Luke wrote both his Gospel and Acts to his friend, Theophilus. So, we owe a debt to Theophilus for sharing his mail.) Luke’s stated purpose for writing was to give

The STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP importance of Acts

Luke doesn't even attempt to give us a complete history of the early church. He gives us a *selective* history. He leaves out lots of things we'd love to know and includes those things that help us understand God's grand plan.

He primarily does this by focusing on the impact made by bold, courageous, obedient Christians.

In Acts, we read about dozens of key Christians who made a difference for Jesus. These include Matthias, Barnabas, Stephen, Philip, Lydia, Dorcas, Priscilla and Aquila.

Luke highlights the roles that all believers in Jesus can play in the progress of the Gospel.

But, in looking at the way Luke put Acts together, it's clear that he highlights two figures - Peter and Paul - as the two primary leaders God used to spread the gospel message to both Jews and to Gentiles.

Looking at the lives and ministries of Peter and Paul, it's clear that Luke wants his audience and you and me to see the parallels between them, as they both...

- ...received direct commissions from God.
- ...performed miraculous healings.
- ...raised people from the dead.
- ...confronted false magicians.
- ...were miraculously delivered from imprisonment.
- ...ministered to both Jews and Gentiles.

Given what a major player Peter was throughout Jesus' ministry, we expect to see a lot of him in the book of Acts. And we do.

But Luke's huge focus on Paul tells us that he wanted us to see that just as Peter had been central to the establishment and growth of the church, so, in much the same ways, was Paul.

Both were empowered by the same Holy Spirit, preached the same message, and fulfilled the same mission.

There is one more reason for spending time with you in Acts. But I'll save that to the end.

Now, and with no more delays, let's turn to Acts.

Get Ready - Power Is Coming! (Acts 1:1-8)

Forty Amazing Days (1:1-3)

[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 given orders by the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen. [3] To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing truths, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of things regarding the kingdom of God

The disciples enjoyed forty days of on-again off-again visits with their alive-again Savior.

We know that Jesus appeared to a few of His disciples in the upstairs room of a house in Jerusalem - both men and women - on Easter Sunday, and then, again, eight days later.

He also appeared to a few of them at the Sea of Galilee,⁴ then to a crowd of over five hundred people in Galilee,⁵ and, again to the apostles on a mountain in Galilee to give them the Great Commission.⁶

In all of these various settings where Jesus appeared and spoke, Luke tells us (v. 3) that He was talking about ***"the kingdom of God."*** Let's remember that.

When those forty days ended, the disciples went back to Jerusalem, about a week ahead of the Jewish festival of Pentecost.⁷

⁴ Here, Peter was singled out for special challenge and restoration. (John 21)

⁵ So, 1 Corinthians 15.

⁶ Matthew 28.

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

As our book opens, they were about a half mile out of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, with Jesus, where He was speaking to them.

We know, but they didn't know, that they were listening to His final words.

Promise of the Spirit's Arrival (1:4-5)

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

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

When we hear "**Jerusalem**" we think of all that they had just experienced there. The city was the site of tragedy and victory, dashed hopes and then hope fulfilled beyond their wildest dreams.

Jesus told them to stick around Jerusalem for a while, and for a reason.

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

They were to ***[1:4b]...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

At this point, they had not been "**baptized**" with the Holy Spirit.

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 had yet to receive the Spirit in fullness and in power.

That was soon to come. They would soon be *immersed* (that's what *baptism* means!) in the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

And until THAT happened, they were to sit tight. Don't "**Go!**" anywhere. Don't yet "**make disciples of all the nations.**" Just wait.

Think about that. These men had received personal training from Jesus for three solid years. He taught them, mentored them, admonished and encouraged them. They had been discipled by Jesus.

And all of that face-to-face training was not enough for the task ahead. They still needed more.

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. Did Philip wonder, "*We're to stay in Jerusalem, the ROYAL city. Something big is coming. Peter, James, John - y'all don't think that NOW is the time...?*"

A Kingdom Question (v. 6) (vv. 6-8)

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

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

Jesus responded to their question. And in that response, you'll notice that He didn't say, "*Bad question!*" In no way did He rebuke the disciples for their question.

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.

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

But He sure didn't answer as they expected Him to answer.

The King's Response (1:7-8)

Jesus: "Not for you to know" (v. 7)

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

They wanted to know the future. What's next? And who among us wouldn't like to have a preview to the future? Please, tell me next week's weather or about weightier things. I'd like to know.

But, to the disciples' very understandable desire to know if NOW was the time when the kingdom would be restored to Israel, Jesus said, *"That's 'need to know.' And you don't need to know."*

But notice. Jesus could have said, and He didn't say, *"The kingdom is NOT going to be restored to Israel."*

He didn't say that because the Old Testament says repeatedly and Jesus said repeatedly during His ministry, and Jesus said after His resurrection that the kingdom WILL BE restored to Israel.¹²

God was not and still is not at all finished with Israel.¹³

So, to their explicit question, Jesus gave a non-answer. But He did give a three-part answer to the question they didn't ask.

Jesus' Spirit-empowered global witness force (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 as far as the remotest part of the earth."

The arrival of the Holy Spirit

FIRST, they can expect the soon arrival of the Holy Spirit. This was something predicted in the Old Testament¹⁴ as an essential element of life in the coming kingdom. Jesus also predicted it.¹⁵

Next Sunday, when we walk through the events of the Day of Pentecost, we'll see the impact of the Spirit as He burst into their lives.

"Witnesses"

SECOND, the disciples will receive power from the Holy Spirit to be Jesus' global witness force.

When we read this promise about being Jesus' **"witnesses"** we may reasonably think about the joy of witnessing and sharing the gospel message with friends and family. That would not have been what Jesus' disciples thought.

Those words, **"you will be My witnesses"** appear three times in the span of a few short verses in Isaiah. The prophet said that the Jews (acting as God's **"Servant"**) would be His **"witnesses"** to the nations at the time when the kingdom was restored to Israel.¹⁶

¹² We will see this shortly in our study of Acts as the Apostle Peter makes an explicit invitation to the Jewish people to **[Acts 3:19] "repent and return"** (that is, *"turn to Jesus"*) so that times of refreshing from the Lord (a reference to the Kingdom) will come to them.

¹³ When, post-resurrection, Jesus **"opened their minds to understand the Scriptures"** (Luke 24:45) I believe that it was to teach them truth about the kingdom which Israel would receive from God.

¹⁴ See Joel 2:28-29; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Isaiah 44:3.

¹⁵ See John 14 and 16 where He prepared these disciples for life after He was physically gone with the promise of the presence of another Helper, the Spirit.

¹⁶ See the Servant passages in Isaiah 43:10; 43:12; 44:8.

The disciples would have heard Jesus' words about being "**witnesses**" as a reference to the coming kingdom.

A geographical / cultural progression

THIRD, by listing Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria and the remotest part of the earth, Jesus was describing the geographical and cultural progress His message would make as the disciples spread it.

The message of the kingdom would spread from the center to the circumference, from here to there, from "us" to "them" until the whole world had heard.

So, Jesus finished His earthly mission with these words about the kingdom. Then, just like that, He returned to His Father in glory.

Get Ready - Jesus Is Coming Back! (Acts 1:9-11)

The Reality of a Great Departure (1:9)

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

I can only imagine the disciples, standing there, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, gazing into the sky as He was enveloped by a cloud and lifted up.

It was a dramatic departure. And the drama and the finality of it all was to tell them, "*I won't be popping in and out anymore.*"

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 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, then behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them, [11] and they 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 the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."¹⁷

Jesus' 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.

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.

When the disciples heard that message, they knew that they had work to do in the interim.

This morning's final scene 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 - PRAY! (Acts 1:12-14)

If Walls Could Talk (1:12-13a)

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

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.

¹⁷ 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,

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

Most scholars think that it was the same room where they had observed the Passover with Jesus, weeks earlier.

It was probably the same room to which they had retreated on Saturday after the crucifixion and was likely the same room where Jesus appeared to them, post-resurrection, on that first Easter evening.

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

The Gang's All Here and United in [THE] Prayer (1:13-14)

[1:13b]...that is Peter, John, 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.¹⁹ [14b]...along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

They were all together. And what was the work to which they had given themselves? Prayer.

None of us are surprised that Jesus' disciples would meet for prayer. But Luke tells us, not just that they were praying, but that they ***[14a] all with one mind²⁰ were continually devoting themselves to prayer.***

This was fervent prayer. And it was even more than committed, devoted, united prayer. It was ***“THE prayer.”*** (Yes, the definite article is present in the original.)

I believe that ***“THE prayer”*** was ***“THE prayer”*** for the arrival of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit's arrival would be the trip wire that would lead to the turning of the nation of Israel to Jesus (their *“repentance”*) which would pave the way for the disciples to be Jesus' ***“witnesses”*** indicating the coming of the kingdom.

They prayed with desperate eagerness for God to do for them what they needed (send the Spirit) so that they could do for God what He commanded (be His witnesses).²¹

Conclusion: *The CONGREGATIONAL Importance of Acts*

As I said at the beginning this morning, I am eager for us to explore Acts...

...to better know the storyline of the early church.

...to learn the theology and culture of Jesus' New WAY.

...to see how God used leaders like Peter and Paul and lot of others to spread Jesus' message.

But I am also eager for us to walk through Acts together for a congregational reason.

This year, I am (somewhat famously) seventy 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, Jesus has done wonderful things. I could tell stories of lots of people coming to faith in Jesus and of being established in their faith.

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

¹⁹ We also know this apostle (“Judas the son of James”) as Thaddeus, or Jude.

²⁰ Greek “*homothumodon*.” The word is used a few times in Acts to describe a group that is fully united in a certain purpose, often one that is righteous and holy, but even one that is in opposition to Jesus. (See Acts 7:57; 19:29)

²¹ For how many days did they pray? The time between Passover (Jesus' death) and Pentecost is fifty days, and the time of Jesus' ascension was at least forty days after His resurrection. (Acts 1:3). So, the group of one hundred and twenty disciples (Acts 1:5) were praying for roughly a week before the Spirit's arrival at Pentecost.

We've seen God has put broken lives back together. He has brought broken families back together. People with addictions have been set free. Those who have suffered have been loved.

Children and youth have been served here, and parents have been equipped.

We support missionaries, we've sent out missionaries. Thanks be to God, some of the missionaries we now support, we've sent out.

The story of our church is not at all one roaring success story after another. There have been struggles and challenges and failures.

But through it all, God has used us. It's been so rich to have seen what He has done in and through us, together...and I'm hungry for more.

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.

That would be OK, even now. But 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.

After all these years, 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 you, the church, into service in Jesus' Name.

...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. You're hungry, too.

You're hungry to serve the least, the last, and the lost for Jesus' sake. You're hungry to see us serve and connect with people from all walks of life, ethnic groups, for Jesus' sake.

You're hungry 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 - and more - 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.