

The apostles are still a dubious lot at the beginning of Acts. If you remember, in the gospels often they say the wrong things, and sometimes betray their selfishness and pettiness, there are times at the end of the gospels when they don't even recognize Jesus- and then, those intriguing statements the writers give us about how some of them still "doubted" as they beheld the risen Lord. Here, though, in this first story in the book of Acts, it seems all the apostles are at last convinced that Jesus is resurrected- Jesus showed himself to them with "many proofs," verse 3 tells us. And then they ask if now Jesus will "restore the Kingdom." His response is at the least interesting, a reprimand, "It is not for you to know the times," he says. And the point is this: God is in charge of all that happens in heaven and on the earth; their only job is to wait in Jerusalem for God's Spirit to come. And then Jesus was lifted up, out of sight, and two men in white came and stood beside them- and another reprimand, "Why are you looking up? Jesus has been taken from you; but he will come again in the same way."

The apostles are not the leaders of a great movement yet. They stand looking up. As if confused and already wishing for Jesus to return. Can we read the rebuke of the apostles as a word of caution and command to us as well? "What

are you waiting for? Don't keep your eyes in the heavens waiting for the Lord's return, waiting for pie in the sky." That is not the way of the God's kingdom; there is too much to be done right now: homeless people to be fed and sheltered; justice to be fought for and administered; good news to be preached. We've heard it before- like in Luke's chapter 4, where he quotes old Isaiah,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent me to bring sight to the blind; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; and to proclaim the time of the Lord's favor.

And this is the point at which the apostles begin to grow up, they become men of God, adults of God, as they obey the command of Jesus and return to Jerusalem. We could say they have been given their marching orders, because throughout Acts we see them marching out into the world, but really, Jesus gave them their *waiting* orders, "Don't leave Jerusalem. Wait for the promise." And here is what you do, in the religious sense, when you wait: you pray. And so, in the next verses, the apostles went back, and waited, and, *devoted themselves to prayer*. Praying and waiting before God, they were getting ready for what was coming.

In the second half of chapter 1, the apostles decide another man needs to be added as apostle, to take the place of the betrayer, Judas. Now, they are taking their job and their position seriously. They are getting ready, and they select the new apostle by prayer, asking to be shown which person God had chosen.

It is important to the author that we see the apostles doing their job, first, to wait in Jerusalem for the promise and the power of God; and second, to be the witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That is why the writer takes eleven verses to describe the selection of Matthias, the new 12th apostle, and why he goes to all the trouble of naming the others, why he makes special note of the upper room where they were staying: the place perhaps where they ate the Last Supper with the Lord, the place perhaps where Jesus appeared to them after the resurrection, and the place where now they devote themselves to prayer and obedient waiting for the word and power of God. These are the men Jesus entrusted with his message of hope and salvation, and we will see soon, they are the ones anointed with the tongues of fire, and filled with the Holy Spirit. These are the men who have the authority and the courage, the spiritual insight and knowledge to witness to the world, and to convert Jew and Gentile. They are all named, and this is the book of their actions and words, and

the church follows them. The church in its first years followed these men, and still today we follow them. Our confession is that we are disciples of Jesus- his followers, that he is Savior and Lord- but what we know about Jesus, we have learned from the writings and teachings that have come down to us from the apostles, in this book called the New Testament, written by the apostles themselves or their students; including that later apostle, Paul. It is important to note that Paul was taken to the apostles in Jerusalem after his conversion, so that they might hear his story, and give their blessing to his ministry. Paul himself, followed the other apostles.

These are the men who started churches and laid hands on elders and converts to bestow God's blessing and to pass along their authority to others, generation after generation. And even today, leaders of churches stand in a direct line with the apostles of old. The elders of today, by the laying on of hands and receiving the call of Jesus Christ, by devotion in prayer, and obedience to the command of Jesus, and by the filling of the Holy Spirit are in direct fellowship with Jesus the Messiah: by way of the apostles who walked beside the Lord in Galilee, and later beheld him on glorious Easter; who watched him depart into the

clouds, and who would soon receive God's power and begin their journey as his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And that is what we are about here. In our singing and praying, in the teachings of scripture, and even in the preaching, it is God's Spirit forming and reforming our hearts and minds; in communion it is Jesus joining with us affirming our commitment to each other; and it is our hugs and handshakes that perhaps become a kind of laying on of hands as we offer ourselves to one another, and as we share the work of caring and ministry, and the hope we have been given as God's children. Such openness and humility are our witness to brothers and sisters, and to the world.

The first verses of Acts prepare us for the themes that continue throughout the book: 1) the apostles, 2) their mission, 3) the Holy Spirit, 4) and prayer. I hope you will take the opportunity to read through Acts, two or three chapters at a time, or more. And in your individual study, note how often the young church was "devoted to prayer"; how often God's Spirit leads someone, or calls someone, or fills up and changes someone. And see how the apostles travel out from Jerusalem, spreading the gospel, healing, teaching, preaching, appointing elders,

and loving people. Their selfless work may inspire us to remain devoted to one another here at First Christian, and to carry on the loving work of our Lord Jesus; and that we might come to believe that his word to the apostles to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, was not only a command for them, but remains the heart of the work of the church today, and a command to each of us. I hope that we will not stand by looking up, vainly waiting for the return of the Lord- for he will come sometime, but at a time we do not know- but that we will look down, and look around at the condition of the world, at the condition of the earth, at the situations about us, at the hurt all around us, and help and speak and give and love and sacrifice, and pray. For we believe he has been raised up, and we believe that God's power has already raised us into a new life that is holy and everlasting- life given to us, and given to all men and women and children, so that we might it share it. In this way we will prove to ourselves and to them that we're looking out for one another, so that all creatures may know God's goodness.