

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

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*Acts 17:22-31*

*Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said,*

*"For we too are his offspring."*

*Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'*

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For the next three weeks, we are going to take a little break from the normal rhythm of the revised common lectionary to take a "stroll" through the Book of Acts. Together, you and I are going to have a "crash course" in this great book of the Bible that details the initial flourishing of Christianity, known then as "the Way." Our journey through the Book of Acts will, truth be told, be more of a "power walk" than a leisurely stroll because there is much ground to cover. But hopefully, it will spark some interest in you to perhaps go and read the book for yourself for a more in-depth journey. Our "power walk" will end on Sunday, June 4<sup>th</sup> when we will celebrate three things simultaneously: first of all, as it will be the first Sunday of the month, we will celebrate communion together. Secondly, we will observe the confirmation of five of our youth (Kal Lewis, Abby Kotula, Luke Gilpin, Emma Gallagher, and Henry Binder). Finally, we will observe the day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church.

So, please keep your hands and feet in the vehicle at all times. Let's get right to it. The first thing to notice about the Book of Acts is that it is the second of a two-part volume, the first part of which is known to us as the Gospel according to Luke. Because of this, it is often suggested that the reading of the Book of Acts be preceded by a reading of the Book of Luke to more fully appreciate the tone and texture of the document as a whole. In fact, in academic circles, the document is often simply referred to as "Luke-Acts."

The first chapter of the Book of Acts begins with an account of the Ascension of Jesus. The Resurrected Christ appears with his disciples and gives them a very important statement that will set the tone for the rest of the book and it is this: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon

you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In this statement, Jesus does two things: first of all, he promises them the presence of the Holy Spirit which will happen no later than the very next chapter. Secondly, Jesus is foretelling the “acts” that will come once the Holy Spirit baptizes the followers of Jesus with fire. Simply put, the Book of Acts is about the Gospel spreading in ever-widening circles, growing exponentially much to the chagrin of the Romans and the religious establishment of the day.

Once Jesus ascends to the Father, describing a line we recite most Sundays in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, chapter two tells us of the day of Pentecost. To many of us, I would bet, this is a familiar text. All of the followers of Jesus are gathered in a room when the Holy Spirit suddenly rushes into the room like a great wind and places tongues of fire above the head of each person present. People of all races and creeds were present, and the Holy Spirit allowed them to hear each other in their native tongues. It was a rather crazy scene to say the least.

The people outside witness the craziness and assume what many of us would assume upon seeing a group of people caught up in such bizarre actions; they assume that they are drunk. The Apostle Peter (yes, the very one who had denied Jesus three times and then been reinstated by the Risen Christ) takes this opportunity to preach one of the first Christian sermons. Peter assures the crowd that they are not drunk for, in fact, it is only 9 o’clock in the morning! Instead, Peter uses the words of the prophet Joel to tell them that the Spirit is on the move and that God is doing a new thing with men *and* women, old *and* young. Simply put, Peter says, the Holy Spirit is being poured out so it is time to expect the unexpected for the Risen Christ, though ascended to the Father, is not through working in and through us.

We see the continuing work of Jesus Christ being done in chapter three when Peter and John encounter a man lame from birth being carried (as he was every day) to a pool by the temple to beg. He begs mercy of Peter and John. Upon hearing this crippled man, Peter turns and says these words to him: “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, just like that, he took Peter by the hand and his feet and ankles were made strong and he jumped up and started walking.

Many people noticed this miraculous act and Peter took this opportunity to preach yet another sermon (he seems to be getting the hang of it by now). The word begins to spread. Some greet these miraculous with welcome. Others, however, are threatened by them.

Chapter four chronicles the first time that a number of followers of Jesus are persecuted for their beliefs and actions done in Christ’s name. Peter and John were seized and thrown into jail because, according to the text, the religious leaders were “much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.”

After Peter and John are finally released, the rest of chapter four chronicles the believers of the growing movement of Christianity getting organized and sharing things among one another in a spirit of community and neighborliness. Verse 32 of chapter four tells us this radical statement: “the community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, “This is mine!” about any of their possessions, but held everything in common. The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.” Without going into detail, I would encourage you to read the story at the beginning of chapter five to learn of how very, very, very seriously the community took these prophetic

strategies. The remainder of chapter five chronicles the second time the apostles are imprisoned, with a somewhat comical description of being saved by an angel of God from their jail cells, much to the astonishment and frustration of their guards.

With the conclusion of the fifth chapter of the Book of Acts brings us an introduction to my name sake, Stephen. Stephen's time in the biblical narrative is short (only two chapters), mostly because he preached the Gospel, it rubbed people the wrong way, and they dragged him into the streets and violently stoned him to death. Saint Stephen, as he has become known, is the first Christian martyr.

To make a long story short, the sixth chapter of the book of Acts tells us that the Christian movement had grown so much that it was becoming hard for the just the apostles to distribute the food to the widows and other peoples being cared for by the followers of the Way. Therefore, the twelve apostles appointed seven people (led by Stephen) to be, simply put, the first ever group of deacons. These seven people were charged with overseeing the distribution of food and clothes to people in need, specifically, in this case, the widows of the community who, without their husbands, had to depend on the mercy of others to survive.

Stephen, as the leader of this group, was very public in his work and was falsely accused of blasphemy and brought before the court of the Sanhedrin. During his trial, Stephen gives us, by far, the longest sermon in the book of Acts and it was not received very well to say the very least. Let's just say, people don't tend to like it when a preacher tells them that they aren't doing what God calls them to do. That much was true then as it certainly is now. Therefore, the people drag Stephen into the streets and have him stoned.

Now, and I can't emphasize this point enough, this story (that is, the Stoning of Stephen) is one of the most crucial parts in the Book of Acts because of the chain of events it ignites. Imagine this story as the finger that tips over the first of an immeasurably long line of dominos, each branching out into infinity. You see, the Romans and the religious leaders were hoping that the stoning of Stephen would serve as a violent example that would quell the Christian movement. But, in a beautiful irony, it backfired and did the *exact* opposite of what they intended!

Imagine a dandelion in your hands. Its top is covered in those little white seed spores that are carried by the wind. You pick the pesky thing up from your garden and you (\*puff\*) blow on it and what happens? The seed spores scatter into the wind and a few days later, your garden is *covered* in countless other dandelions.

Well, that's what happened following the stoning of Stephen. The Christians panicked. This was, after all, the first time someone had been violently executed because of being a Christian. And, as history has taught us, where do persecuted people tend to go? Away! Therefore, many of the early Christians fled Jerusalem as a result of Stephen's stoning. For a brief moment, the Romans and the religious authorities breathed a sigh of relief. They had thought that they had quelled this silly religious movement. However, their plan backfired. When the Christians fled Jerusalem, you know what went with them? The Christian message. Like seed spores scattered into the wind, the Christian message took root on the road. Hence, the stoning of Stephen set off a series of events that began to fulfill exactly what Jesus had promised during the Ascension in the first chapter of the Book of Acts: that the disciples would be witnesses in Jerusalem and then Judea and then Samaria and the ends of the Earth.

Now, eventually, the Romans understood that the stoning of Stephen had only caused the Christian movement to spread more rapidly. Therefore, they employed a man by the name of Saul, a man who is

first mentioned looking on approvingly at Stephen's stoning. Saul was a cruel man who traveled across the Roman Empire (which was quite a stretch!) to persecute Christians.

One day, in chapter nine of the Book of Acts, Saul is traveling on a road to Damascus when a big booming voice from the sky bellows the following condemning phrase: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" A stunned Paul says, "who are you, Lord?" The voice replies: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." Saul, who would then go by the Roman version of his name, Paul, was struck blind and guided to a city.

Meanwhile, the Lord appeared to a disciple named Ananias and implored him to go minister to the blind Paul. Ananias is stunned. Confused, Ananias says to Jesus: "ummmm....are you sure we're talking about the same man? You want me to minister to *him*? You've heard about all the horrible things he's done to your people, right?!" But God doesn't care. Ananias reluctantly searches out for Paul and lays his hands on him and brings back his sight.

Paul is seeing the world with new eyes. Gone are the days of persecuting Jesus Christ. Now, he works for the guy. As soon as Paul opens up his eyes, he is baptized in the name of Christ and begins working as one of Christianity's most notable saints.

Already, in the Book of Acts, we have seen so many marvelous, unpredictable things. Christ has ascended divinely into heaven, sending his Spirit to appear as tongues of fire above the heads of people from all around the world who can then hear one another speak in their native languages. Peter, in a beautiful example of "saving the cat," is invited from his treason to Christ into a deeper relationship, one that fosters the adolescent stages of the early Christian movement. The disciples are now doing the work of Christ in his name, healing people, feeding widows, clothing children and women, and preaching the gospel to an ever-widening circle of people of varied backgrounds. The movement spreads and they begin to get organized. Imprisonment happens and, along with it, the first of several miraculous escapes. And, as if all of wasn't bizarre enough, Christianity's greatest enemy becomes its greatest champion.

Friends, hopefully by now, we can appreciate that the common title for this book (that is, the Acts *of the Apostles*) is really a misnomer. A more appropriate title for this book would be the Acts *of the Holy Spirit*. In each and every one of these miraculous events, we see the hands of the Holy Spirit working to spread the Gospel message.

Stay tuned next week, and the week after, as we continue this incredible journey through the Book of Acts.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.