

The Story Goes On

Acts 28:23-31

John Breon

Do you remember the children's song, "This Is the Song that Never Ends"?

This is the song that never ends
No, it goes on and on my friends
Some people started singing it, not knowing what it was
And they'll continue singing it forever just because
This is the song that never ends...

The first major league baseball game I really remember going to lasted seventeen innings. I was about seven, and it seemed like that was the ballgame that would never end.

A video that our kids watched when they were young was called *The Neverending Story*. It's a fantasy about a young boy who's running away from bullies, hides in an old store, and discovers a book called *The Neverending Story*. As he reads it, he discovers that *he* is part of the story. He enters into the story's world. At the end, some of the book's characters come into his world.

That's a little bit like the Bible. We get into the Scriptures and we realize that we're part of what's going on. This is *our* story. And, we find the God of the Bible is here and now where we are.

The Chronicles of Narnia, after seven books of adventure and all kinds of experiences, ends by saying that all that had gone before was just the cover and title page of the real story that would now begin, the Great Story that would never end (C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* 184).

We've reached the last verses of the book of Acts. But Acts doesn't really end. It doesn't really conclude. The apostle Paul is in Rome—finally! He's come there after years of imprisonment, hearings, trials, ocean voyages, shipwrecks and other adventures. Now he's finally arrived in the heart of Roman culture and government. The Holy-Spirit empowered

witness that started in Jerusalem has reached the gates of “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Paul is still in Roman custody. But he’s under a kind of house arrest, able to live in his own rented place and receive visitors. He meets with some of the Jewish leaders in Rome and spends a day witnessing to them about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them about Jesus. Then Luke says, “For two whole years Paul stayed in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” (28:30).

Then what happened? Luke doesn’t tell us. We can speculate based on some other New Testament writings and later church tradition. But Acts stops in this open-ended way to show us that the story keeps going on. Acts began by referring to “all that Jesus began to do and to teach.” Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus continued his ministry in and through the church. Acts stops with Paul welcoming people, proclaiming God’s kingdom, and teaching about Jesus. That’s an example for the ongoing life of the church. The story goes on and we’re part of it. How do we live this story in our place and time? What does it look like for us to welcome people, to proclaim God’s kingdom, to teach about the Lord Jesus Christ? What does the picture of the church in Acts tell us?

Paul welcomed all who came to see him. That primarily meant both Jews and Gentiles. Earlier, Paul invited Jewish leaders in Rome to meet with him. He told them why he was in Rome and why he’d been arrested in Jerusalem. They hadn’t heard anything about him. Apparently, the leaders in Jerusalem figured that once Paul was out of their hair, they didn’t need to be concerned about him anymore, so they didn’t send word to Rome about him. So Paul schedules a meeting with these Jewish leaders. At that meeting, he spends a whole day discussing with them the kingdom of God and what the Scriptures say about Jesus.

The basic presentation of the gospel is here: witnessing and explaining the kingdom of God and trying to persuade people about Jesus. The typical human response to the gospel is also here: “Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe” (23, 24). So they

disagreed and then they left. Paul's parting word to them was a quotation from Isaiah about hard hearts, stopped up ears, and closed eyes. If they would open their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn to God, God would heal and restore them.

After that encounter with the leaders, Paul welcomes all who would come and he continues the same gospel ministry of preaching and teaching.

Do we welcome all who come to see us, to worship with us? The church's witness has to be about more than just sitting back and waiting for people to come to us. We need to be out in the community, serving and sharing the good news in appropriate ways. But we do need to be ready to welcome people when they do show up. We're working at being more welcoming and making a good first impression when people visit us. If you're excited about that kind of ministry, talk to Tim or me. Ron Shepherd has all kinds of studies and data that show how important welcoming and following up with people is. Let's follow the Holy Spirit-inspired example of Paul and others and welcome everyone to hear the good news and to experience Jesus for themselves.

With all boldness and without hindrance, *Paul proclaimed the kingdom of God*. The kingdom of God has been the theme of what Luke wrote since the early part of his Gospel to the beginning of Acts and all the way through. The kingdom of God is what Jesus proclaimed, taught, and demonstrated. The kingdom of God continues to be the church's message and goal.

Early on, Jesus said that his mission was to proclaim the gospel, the good news, of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43). We are gospel people, good news people. The Bible is a book of good news. There is bad news as well, but the focus is on God's good news.

Good news appeared at the beginning of Luke's Gospel. The angel who announced Jesus' birth said, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" (2:10). The term for good news was used in the Roman Empire to declare military victories or to announce the birth of a new emperor, who was sometimes called "savior" and "lord." But Luke says there is a Savior, a Lord, a Ruler in the world—and it's not Caesar. Instead,

the true Lord is Jesus, born of a virgin, born in a stable, and whose birth is good news.

When Jesus was in the Nazareth synagogue, he read a passage from Isaiah that mentions good news to the poor. He also announced that he was fulfilling that scripture and that it applied not just to the folks in Nazareth, not just to the Jews, but to all kinds of people.

Jesus tells the people of Capernaum that the good news is not just for them, but for people in many cities as well. Jesus is anointed with God's Spirit to bring the gospel, the good news to everyone. As his people, we're also anointed by God's Spirit to bring the good news to everyone.

This good news is the gospel of the kingdom of God. Mark tells us that Jesus began his ministry "proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (1:14-15).

What did Jesus mean when he talked about the kingdom of God? He was calling to mind a storyline and a hope that runs all through the Old Testament. The prophets and others looked forward to the coming of God's kingdom as the time when God's promises and purposes would be fulfilled, Israel would be rescued from oppression, evil would be judged, and God would establish a new reign of justice and peace. In that kingdom, God would vindicate his people and set everything straight. The world would be turned right side up. When Jesus spoke of God's kingdom arriving in the present, he was reminding people of that whole story and announcing that it was finally happening. "God's future was breaking in to the present. Heaven was arriving on earth" (N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* 100).

The kingdom of God is God's action. "It is the range of God's effective will" (Dallas Willard). It's wherever God's will is done. Now, in an ultimate sense, God rules everything everywhere. And yet, often God waits for us to seek God's rule, surrender to it, and cooperate with it before God exercises his rule. When we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we're asking that God's rule be realized in and through our lives, in and through the church, and in all the world. We commit ourselves to doing God's will as well as surrender to God's will. The adventure of the kingdom of God

“means the reign of the Lord in our hearts, in our relationships, and in our society” (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Drumbeat of Love* 288).

If we’re gospel people, good news people, we’re also kingdom people. We belong to the kingdom of God. We’re the people who seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness. We live in the kingdom that is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). We are keepers of the kingdom.

Albert Haase tells about a couple who are friends of his. After forty-four years of marriage, Ronald is sinking into Alzheimer’s disease. He’s losing memories, hopes, and dreams. But Alice remains faithful and she “continues to guard the memories, honor the dreams and keep both of them alive in her own life as his wife.”

In a very similar way, we are called to be “keepers of the kingdom.” We go through life praying “Thy kingdom come,” all the while planting [the kingdom’s] seeds of peace, love and justice in our own small way. Like Alice, we guard and honor God’s intention—we keep it alive—by what we say and how we live. (*Living the Lord’s Prayer* 96-97)

One example of how we can do that is in the story of a woman who spent a year in the desert of Sudan, feeding starving children during a famine in the mid-1980s. Within a week of arriving there, she was overcome by the magnitude of human misery and the thousands of children who needed to be fed at the refugee camp. A medical doctor who was also volunteering there noticed her depression and discouragement. He said to her, “Remember: we just focus on the single child in front of us. We feed the particular boy or girl and leave the others in the hands of God and the other volunteers. One-on-one is how it’s done” (Haase 95).

Paul proclaimed the kingdom of God. Also, with all boldness and without hindrance, he “*taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.*” Again, remember how Acts starts by talking about “all that Jesus began to do and to teach.” Who’s the real hero of Acts? Jesus, of course. He is the Lord Jesus the Messiah. Jesus is God with us. He’s Israel’s Messiah, King. He’s the ruler of

God's kingdom. He's the Lord of the church. He's the Savior who returns us to God and restores us. He's the one we trust. We put our faith in him.

We can't tell the church's story without telling Jesus' story. His story is so rich and deep and full that we can spend our entire life and never reach all its depths. And yet, the story of Jesus can be told in a sentence or two. We need both the riches and the simplicity in our witness.

Bob Kaylor is a United Methodist pastor in Colorado. He tells about teaching a Lenten/Passover combined study with a rabbi friend of his. During a question and answer session, a member of Bob's church asked Rabbi Josh, "How would you sum up the message of Judaism?" Josh didn't hesitate with his answer. "That's simple," he said. "Jews always remember three things: They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!"

Kaylor says he once heard about a survey that asked a sample of people, "What three words do you most want to hear?" The top three answers were very telling: *I love you; I forgive you; Dinner is ready*. Then he says,

Seems to me that the words that people most want to hear correspond to the words that Jesus used most often. The Gospels certainly say more than this, but everything else is a variation on the theme:

1. *God loves you*. In Christ, God expresses God's sacrificial and unconditional love for us.
2. *God forgives you*. In Christ, God forgives sinners of every kind.
3. *Dinner is ready*. In Christ, God welcomes us all to a feast where everyone who wants to come has a place at the table. It's Christ's table and he sets the guest list!

(http://www.seedbed.com/untitled-34/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=untitled-34, accessed 9/16/16)

I think Luke left Acts open-ended so we would realize we're part of the story. This is our story. We're invited and challenged to pick up the

story and carry on. God still has a purpose and a plan that he's working to fulfill. Jesus is still Lord of the church. The Holy Spirit is still present and active, leading us and empowering us to be witnesses, to welcome everyone God sends our way, to proclaim the rule and reign of God, to tell about Jesus. That's a story that truly never ends.