

“ACTS REBOOT.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3; 2:36

Introduction.

Those of you who are following our Bible reading plan will have noticed this past week we started reading through the book of Acts. Lord willing we will take up and finish our sermon series on Acts.

Since it has been just over three years since I started preaching the book of Acts, and about six months since I last preached from Acts it seemed good to me to do a reboot, to back up and be reminded why it is spiritually fruitful and profitable to preach through the book of Acts. It is easy to forget when we are preaching through history and events that happened so long ago and seem so far removed from us.

I read the two introductions or prefaces from Luke and Acts so we would remember Acts is Luke II. Luke's first volume covered all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach until the day when He was taken up to heaven, volume two (Acts) covers what Jesus *continued* to do and to teach through the Holy Spirit *after* He was taken up to heaven.

Both of Luke's books are important in the NT to show our faith is built on the solid foundations of historical fact. This is not a myth, some made up fairy tale. The times, places, people and events are all real and verifiable.

Around the turn of the last century a skeptic and atheist scholar, Sir William M. Ramsay, took on the truth of Luke's writing but was so impressed with the historical accuracy of Luke that he renounced atheism and became a believer. Ramsay writes, "Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect to its trustworthiness...Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

The Apostles, a transformed community.

There is something significant that happens in these two books we need to notice. Consider what happened to the apostles Jesus had chosen. He started with twelve uneducated, simple, ordinary blue-collar kind of guys, with nothing to commend them, no big names, no degrees, no letters after their names, no money, nobodies.

How in the world did such a small group of unimportant people shake up the whole Roman Empire? How did this ragtag, motley gang of people light such a fire that is still burning today all over the world?

And how in the world despite all the efforts of the world, the flesh and the devil, and all the persecution of evil men, is Christianity and the church still such a huge part of world history and still flourishing all over the globe? Where did they get their power and wisdom, when only fifty days before they had been a frightened, cowardly group? The Book of Acts answers the question.

I have used before the experience of Chuck Colson who offers an interesting perspective on this unique phenomenon.

Chuck Colson, who was special counsel to President Nixon, tells the story of his conversion to Christianity while in prison for the Watergate scandal. He tells about how all the men who were closest to and most fiercely loyal to President Nixon, John Ehrlichman, Bob Haldeman, John Mitchell, John Dean, himself and the rest, believed passionately in the President.

Yet when facing the threat of embarrassment, perhaps jail, the instinct for self-preservation was so powerful each deserted their leader to save their own skin. This convinced Colson of the truth of the Gospel. Eleven ordinary men endured 40 years of persecution, beatings, prison, and death, without ever once renouncing that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead.

All but one of the apostles died a martyr's death joyfully proclaimed their monstrously offensive statement that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Only an encounter with the living God could have kept those men steadfast. Otherwise, the apostle Peter would have saved his own skin. He had already done it three times before the resurrection when he denied Jesus.

Jesus presented himself alive to the apostles after his suffering and resurrection by many proofs established His authority, it validates His claim to be God.

Acts 2:36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Luke 1:4 *that you may have certainty concerning* the things you have been taught.

Acts recounts the journeys of a group of joy-filled, Gospel-proclaiming, Jesus-loving suffering followers of Christ who turned the world upside down. They feared God more than people. They went out in the Spirit's power and under the Spirit's guiding. They sang in prison, they prayed for boldness not safety and comfort. They were confident in the purposes of God.

“Acts describes the amazing transformation of the disciples from doubters who denied Christ, to world changers filled with the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts does not finish the story of God's amazing work through His church. It continues today” (Kevin Halloran).

The uniqueness of the Book of Acts.

The Book of Acts is completely unique among all the books of the Bible. There is nothing else like it. Its content is without parallel. What is found in Acts is found nowhere else in the Bible.

Without Acts there would be no account of fire and wind at Pentecost, no mention of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, no description of Paul's conversion or Peter's encounter with Cornelius and the Gentile Pentecost, no narrative of the rise of the multi-ethnic church in Antioch, no story of Paul's visit to Philippi, Corinth, or Ephesus, and no account of Paul's trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea.

“The scope of what happens in Acts is nothing short of remarkable. Within the space of thirty years, the gospel is preached in the most splendid, formidable, and corrupt cities. It reaches the Holy City (Jerusalem), the City of Philosophers (Athens), the City of Magic (Ephesus), and the Empire (Rome). Its message and work were not done in a corner. Its victories and opposition were not minor blips in history” (Patrick Schreiner).

Acts gives us the account of the beginning of the church, the church age that we are a part of. This is the account of life on earth after Jesus' ascension.

Remember when Jesus makes that rather strange sounding statement, “You will do greater things than me” (John 14:12).

John 14:12 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.

How is that possible, what does Jesus mean? I don't see greater miracles being done. But that isn't what Jesus is referring to. Miracles were only signs to authenticate His message. The greater work is preaching the Gospel all over the world and sinners believing and being saved.

What we have in the Gospels is only what Jesus began to do and teach and only in Israel. Acts gives us the explosion, the spreading wildfire fanned into flames by the Holy Spirit. After He sends His Holy Spirit on His followers, they multiple the work of Jesus all over the earth.

Note that word began, it is only the beginning. The Gospels are what Jesus began to do, Acts is what He's continuing to do, and Jesus isn't done now. He is still alive and active. The story doesn't end with the ascension.

The greater work we all can do is testifying to the truth concerning Jesus and His resurrection. The same Spirit is still active. The same Christ still rules. The same God still sustains his church.

Acts has a unique place in Scripture in encouraging us who are the continuing church, to continue to press on. We have the same challenges they faced and overcame.

Luke wants us to know that the bumpy start, the rejections, the persecutions, the trials and troubles, are all part of God's purpose and plan. Everything is right on track. Every attack of Satan only serves to further the advance of the Gospel.

The Gospel spreads overcoming every obstacle thrown in its way, ethnic, gender, racial, socio-economic, geographical, cultural, political, religious, supernatural.

The Book of Acts strengthens our confidence in God's sovereignty and this has application to our personal trials and troubles, any troubles in the church or in the world. God rules and reigns.

The Book of Acts prepares us for persecution. In this increasingly post-Christian world we need to be prepared for how to suffer as a religious minority.

Acts shows us that demonic forces, worldly powers and authorities, governmental opposition, intense suffering and bloody persecution, unjust imprisonment, unbelief, internal disunity, and even shipwrecks and snakes all threaten to slow down the gospel's advance, but only end up fueling it. The gates of hell cannot and will not stop it. (Justin Holcomb).

Luke writes to encourage us and embolden us. Don't think the challenges facing the church today are greater or harder than the ones they faced. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the world's only hope and help. Don't grow weary in believing it, defending it or sharing it.

Romans 15:4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

All Scripture is God breathed, this is His Word to us, it is profitable for training us in righteousness when we apply ourselves to it, when we open our hearts to His Spirit's voice.

Acts reminds us we are part of something so much bigger than us here. Acts is our history; here are the apostolic "roots" of the church today.

Ephesians 2:19-20 You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.

They were an infectious community of grace, and that is our roots, our history, our heritage. We are called to be just that, a community of grace filled people.

Acts reminds us that we are not a part of some fringe sect. Christianity is not just another religion added on to all the others. Christianity is the culmination of God's great plan of redemption for the whole world. God planned this from before the foundations of the earth.

God laid the ground work for it all through the OT. You see the shadows of the coming Messiah and the Gospel all through the OT. This is God's doing, the fruit of all His labor since the fall, when He announced the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent.

Implications and application.

Acts is the story of a wildfire that erupted in about 33 AD and is still burning and spreading. It is the spreading flame of the Holy Spirit.

I pray we will capture their confidence, enthusiasm, vision and Spirit-filled power. They were imperfect sinners like us, but they were filled with the power of God and the wisdom of God and it made a life-changing difference and was cause for much joy and fruitfulness. This same Gospel and same Spirit dwells in us giving us power to change our lives, our homes and our world.

This is the continuing story of what Jesus came into our world to do. This is the foundation on which we are called to build. God never wastes a moment of time. God is always up to something.

May we be willing instruments of God's wisdom and power in a way that actually turns our little corner of the world upside down, because we have seen by faith and believed Jesus is risen from dead.

I want to conclude by reading one man's experience as he encountered the book of Acts. A pastor by the name of J.B. Phillips set out to translate the NT into a modern paraphrase. Here is what he wrote after he finished translating Acts.

The Young Church in Action, Translator's Preface, by JB Phillips

"It is impossible to spend several months in close study of the remarkable short book, known as the Acts of the Apostles, without being profoundly *stirred* and, to be honest, *disturbed*. The reader is *stirred* because he is seeing Christianity, the real thing, in action for the first time in human history. The newborn Church, as vulnerable as any human child, having neither money, influence nor power in the ordinary sense, is setting forth joyfully and courageously to win the pagan world for God through Christ. The young Church, like all young creatures, is appealing in its simplicity and singleheartedness. Here we are seeing the Church in its first youth, valiant and unspoiled – a body of ordinary men and women joined in an unconquerable fellowship never before seen on this earth.

"Yet we cannot help feeling *disturbed* as well as moved, for this surely is the Church as it was meant to be. It is vigorous and flexible, for these are the days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle-bound by over-organization. These men did not make "acts of faith," they believed; they did not "say their prayers," they really prayed. They did not hold conferences on psychosomatic medicine, they simply healed the sick. But if they

were uncomplicated and naïve by modern standards, we have ruefully to admit that they were open on the God-ward side in a way that is almost unknown today.

“No one can read this book without being convinced that there is Someone here at work besides mere human beings. Perhaps because of their very simplicity, perhaps because of their readiness to believe, to obey, to give, to suffer, and if need be to die, the Spirit of God found what surely He must always be seeking – a fellowship of men and women so united in love and faith that He can work in them and through them with the minimum of hindrance.

Consequently it is a matter of sober historical fact that never before has any small body of ordinary people so moved the world that their enemies could say, with tears of rage in their eyes, that *these men “have turned the world upside down!”*

And the reason they did was because they had been with Jesus.

Prayer: Holy Father, as we return to this wonderful, inspired book in your Holy Word I pray that you would fill us with you Holy Spirit’s power and wisdom that we might hear and understand and believe and obey, and that this would transform us and our lives the way it did the apostles and bear good fruit in our hearts and homes and church, for your glory. Do this by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and is now at work in us. In His strong name we pray, Amen.