

Background for Week 17

The book of Acts is the sequel to the gospel of Luke, telling the story of the church's birth and expansion through mission, beginning in Jerusalem and spreading out across the region. It starts with Jesus ascending and ends with Paul's arrival in Rome. It has long been held that the same author wrote both.

Though its full title is *The Acts of the Apostles*, it focuses primarily on Peter and later, Paul. Others also make an appearance, but more as secondary characters. Both Peter and Paul each go through a conversion of sorts.

Relaying the events of the apostles as Jesus' witnesses, it addresses social and theological problems that the faith community, which lived in a pluralistic world, faced. Luke sought to help the early Christians understand that they didn't need to seclude themselves in order to remain faithful followers under Roman governance. He also wanted to connect God's promises made to the people of Israel in the past and the Christian church of his day, which included Gentiles.

Tension can often be felt, within the church and even between apostles themselves, but the Holy Spirit remains the principal driving force that is shaping both the individuals and the community.

Text for this week: Acts 1:1-11

1. Read Acts 1:1-11. What jumps out at you in the text? What thoughts are inspired by it? What questions arise?
2. Next, we'll break it down by verses.
 - 1-4: Addressing the letter to the same person as we find in Luke 1:3, the author recaps in short order what he covered in the first book (the gospel), particularly referencing many of the events of chapter 24. Numbers are often symbolically important in scripture; forty signals a sacred time. Where else does that number come up? What would you say you've been taught about the kingdom of God?
 - 4: "...wait...for the promise of the Father." Is it hard to do this, to wait for the promise? Do you ever feel as if it'll never be completed? In a world of instantaneous gratification, what benefits does waiting offer? What have you waited for that was worth it? That wasn't worth the wait?
 - 5: What is Jesus alluding to or what do his words foreshadow? With more people waiting to baptize, or not getting their children baptized at all, how do you think it'll impact the church?

- Vs. 6-7: The disciples' question seems to indicate that they still have a different idea of what Jesus and his kingdom were about. Jesus definitely answers though that it will be according to *the Father's* authority (note in Mark 13:32 Jesus says that not even he, the Son of Man knows the hour). Have you ever asked a similar question, "Lord, when will you return?" Where do you stand on the efforts by some groups to predict Judgement Day or on theology that claims to know who and when? What do you make of society's fixation on the end of the world with all of the movies that are out there?
- 8: The Spirit is often the least talked about expression of the Triune God in the Lutheran tradition. Why do you think that is? Though baptism is the point when the Holy Spirit is poured upon us, it is not the only time we receive the Advocate. When have you felt imbued with power from the Sustainer? What is your Jerusalem? What does it mean to be a witness? How were you a witness this past week?
- Vs 9-11: "Two men in white" is typically understood as two angels, as is the case throughout scripture. With the influence of Greek culture in our Western world, many speak of and believe that loved ones become angels in heaven when they die. Other assertions though argue that angels are the heavenly fearsome beings that were there when God spoke creation into being (see Gen 1:26). What do you believe about angels? What is your take on the tone of their question, "why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

3. General questions:

- a) What promise(s) do you hear in this text?
- b) The last few years, it's been said that the current church is more similar to the first century community than to what it was in the 1950's, particularly because fewer people are growing up with such a background. What are your thoughts? How do you think the church should respond to the changing context? What should evangelism look like?

For your prayers:

Dear Jesus, in baptism, you have marked us with your cross and sealed us with the Holy Spirit, making us children who inherit eternal life and your mission. Continue to mold us into the witnesses you envision. Help us to evangelize, to share our faith. Amen.

Next week: Acts 2:1-47