



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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On Earth as in Heaven

Acts 1

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It's been over ten years since I finished preaching through Luke's Gospel. I had planned to preach on the Acts of the Apostles after a short break, but it didn't happen and didn't happen and didn't happen, but as I was preaching through Ephesians these last few months and pondering the things St. Paul tells us about the what the church is and what that means for us, I got to thinking that I really shouldn't put off Acts any longer. So I'd planned to jump into it last Sunday. Acts begins with the Ascension of Jesus, and then the very next chapter is Pentecost. What providential timing! And then scheduling and a trip to a clericus threw me off by a week. So last Sunday, Ascension Sunday, you got Ephesians 6—which was a bit of an Ascension sermon—and now on Pentecost, you're getting the Ascension and next week, on Trinity Sunday, you'll get Pentecost!

Now, in case you're wondering what Acts has to do with Luke, it's quite a lot. Luke probably wrote his Gospel around A.D. 59 or 60. He addresses it to someone named Theophilus. Theophilus means "lover of God", so some think that Luke may have used this name symbolically and that the Gospel is for everyone who loves God. It certainly is that, but an attribution like that seems to have been unknown in Luke's world, so Theophilus probably was a real person and was probably a patron who funded Luke's writing project. Luke was not an eyewitness to Jesus or the events of the Gospels. As he says in the introduction, he sought out the eyewitnesses so that he could scrupulously record the events

surrounding Jesus' life and ministry. And now Acts. Luke wrote Acts not long later, sometime between 60 and 62. The book ends with Paul, imprisoned in Rome, awaiting his hearing before Caesar. There's a debate about exactly what happened to Paul after that time. He was martyred at Rome, probably during Nero's persecution of Christians, sometime between 64 and 67. The traditional view is that Paul's case was heard in 62, he was released, and may have travelled to Spain to preach the good news about Jesus, before returning to Rome to work with Peter to oversee the church there. The more "modern" view is that Paul was imprisoned once and was executed between 62 and 64. Whatever the case, since Luke doesn't mention such an important event, we can pretty safely assume he wrote during that time that Paul was awaiting his hearing. And in the case of Acts, Luke was an eyewitness, at least to part of it. He researched the early part of Acts just as he did his Gospel, but then he took up with Paul at the city of Troas, on Paul's second missionary journey around 50-51. Luke spent the following ten or more years travelling with Paul as a missionary and records those events as a participant.

And who was Luke other than a companion of Paul? He was a gentile. At the end of Colossians, Paul names him separately, apart from his fellow Jewish workers. In that same passage, Paul describes Luke as a physician. Beyond that we really don't know a lot about him. He writes as we would expect a Gentile would write when writing to other Gentiles. He writes in polished, educated Greek and he often describes Jewish customs for the benefit of his non-Jewish readers. And when it comes to Acts, he jumps in right where he left off in his Gospel. He ended with a condensed telling of the Ascension and he begins Acts with a more detailed account, so we'll start there. It's page 1080 in your pew Bibles if you want to follow along.

Luke writes, "Dear Theophilus, The previous book which I wrote had to do with everything Jesus began to do and to teach. I took the story as far as the day when he was taken up, once he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to his chosen apostles."

Let me pause there. Notice how Luke writes that in his Gospel he wrote about everything that Jesus *began* to do and to teach. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus isn't done. If Luke's Gospel were called "The Acts of Jesus", Acts could very easily be "The Acts of Jesus: Part II". Jesus isn't done. Remember what we learned from Paul in Ephesians: in the church, Jesus has established a people—purified by his blood from the stain of sin and filled with God's own Spirit—to be his new creation in the midst of the old, to carry his victory into the world to challenge the Caesars and the gods and the principalities and powers, to proclaim the good news until God's glory fills the whole earth. Jesus continues his "acts" through us. At the start of his ministry he told the people to pray: on earth as in heaven. Now he's empowered us to be the people who will actually live out heaven on earth until he's finally ready to finish what he started that first Easter, and bring heaven and earth and God and human beings back together as they should be.

Now, Luke goes on in verse 3: "He showed himself to them alive, after his suffering, by many proofs. He was seen by them for forty days, during which he spoke about God's kingdom. As they were having a meal together, he told them not to go away from Jerusalem, but to wait, as he put it, "for the Father's promise, which I was telling you about earlier. John baptised with water; but in a few days from now you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit. So when the apostles came together, they put this question to Jesus: "Master," they said, *'is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel.'*"

Jesus must have been pretty exasperated by their question. John Calvin wrote that there are as many errors in their question as there are words. Jesus has spent forty days teaching them what his resurrection meant for them, for the world, for everything. Think of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on Easter Day. Jesus walked with them for hours and explained what happened to them using the Old Testament scriptures. We get the impression that as it all sank in they started to understand. But clearly not fully. Not even after forty days. They're still thinking of the kingdom in terms of events like the Maccabean revolt. The Messiah will raise an army and smite the pagan gentiles and put Israel back on the top of the heap—but this time it will take, it will be forever. They're still thinking of Jesus as the king in waiting or the king in exile—like some of the Iranians wanting Reza Pahlavi to return to Iran and retake the Peacock Throne. But that's not how God's kingdom works. Think of all the parables Jesus told about the kingdom: It's like a tiny mustard seed. Yes, it will grow into a huge tree, but it takes a long time. It's like yeast. Yes, it grows, but it takes time and the right conditions. After two thousand years, I think we have a better grasp of this. But not always. There are still many, many Christians who still kind of ask the same question, as if Jesus is the heir apparent, in exile, still waiting to become king. But Brothers and Sisters, he *already is* king. The church's job is to announce his kingship—as it's carved out on our lychgate: “Jesus is Lord”—and to implement the fact that he really is king. Now. Not someday. Now.

So Jesus responds to them in verse 7: “It's not your business to know about times and dates,” he replied. “The Father has placed all that under his own direct authority. What will happen, though, is that you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. Then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all

Judaea and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth.”

The timing? How the kingdom is going play out? When everything will finally be consummated? Don't worry about that. The Father has that worked out in his goodness and wisdom. That's not your job. That's not our job. That's not even Jesus' job to know. Their job, our job is to witness Jesus—his death, his resurrection, his ascension, the fact that he is Lord—to be God's new creation, to put off the old, lie-based way of being human to put on the new—our job is witness that good news and God's new creation to the world. And Jesus reiterates it again: I will make sure you're equipped for this. He's told them already: As John baptised you with water, I will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. The significance of that didn't seem to sink in. It should have. This is what the Lord had promised through the prophets over and over. Filling his people with the Spirit was to be the great sign of the Messianic age. It would be the thing that would finally set the hearts of his people right. And so Jesus says it again: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And then you'll be my witnesses from Jerusalem and eventually out to the whole world. The mustard seed. The yeast. The king returning from the far-off land. And then, to make his point, to drive home the fact that, yes, he really is king, Jesus acts out another prophecy. He loved to do this and so it makes perfect sense that his last act before leaving them would be another acted out prophecy. Verse 9:

“As Jesus said this, he was lifted up while they were watching and a cloud took him out of their sight. They were gazing into heaven as he disappeared. Then, lo and behold, two men appeared, dressed in white, standing beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why are you standing here staring into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven,

will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.”

Jesus acts out Daniel 7—maybe not something we're intimately familiar with (although we should be), but a passage—a dramatic *image*—any Jew knew intimately. That's the dream Daniel had of the ferocious beasts representing the pagan kings and empires that threatened God's people. And in his vision, Daniel sees the Ancient of Days take his throne to sit in judgement over these beasts. Their kingdoms are taken from them and then one like a son of man comes on the clouds to heaven to take his throne. And to him is given dominion and glory and kingship so that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion, Daniel says, is everlasting, his kingship one that shall never be destroyed. This the vision of the Messiah becoming king and restoring the kingdom to Israel.

So in his ascension, Jesus is showing the fulfilment of God's promise to Daniel. Coming on the clouds to take his throne. It was an unmistakable image for the disciples. The kingdom has been restored to Israel—of course, that's Israel reconstituted around and in Jesus the Messiah—but restored it has been. The Messiah is on his throne. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus gives the disciples what we often call his “great commission” he deliberately echoes Daniel 7: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So you must go and make all the nations into disciples.” The Ascension means that the world is under new management. Maybe it helps to understand how they thought of heaven. Unfortunately, we tend to think of heaven through a Platonic lens. It's a far away and otherworldly place. The opposite of earth. The *real* world of which this is only a shadow. But that's Plato—pagan Greek philosophy—not the Bible. In the Bible heaven is earth's compliment; its other half. God created them to fit together, to mesh. Heaven is his realm, but the two were

meant to overlap, for us to share his presence. But his part, the heavenly half, was—in the Jewish view—it was like the control room or the CEO’s office. And that’s where Jesus has gone. To take the controls, to sit at the big desk, to accede to his throne—to rule and to reign: as Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:25: “He has to rule until he has put all his enemies under his feet.”

But back to Daniel 7. If the son of man has taken his throne, then that means that the kingdom has, indeed, been restored to Israel. There are implications there for the disciples. One of the twelve is missing. Judas hanged himself after betraying Jesus. The twelve are only eleven. If the apostles represent the fullness of Israel reconstituted in the Messiah, they need a replacement for Judas. Twelve tribes; twelve apostles.

Maybe they didn’t grasp this immediately. Luke says that after Jesus’ ascension, after the two angels asked if they were just going to stand around staring into heaven all day—because: he’s one day coming back in the same way—like, didn’t he give you work to do?—so they went back to Jerusalem as Jesus had told them. Verse 13: “They then entered the city (‘they’ meaning Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the zealot, and Judas the son of James) and went to the upstairs room where they were staying. They all gave themselves single-heartedly to prayer, with the women, including Mary, Jesus’ mother, and his brothers.”

Luke makes a point of naming them all. And there are eleven, not twelve. He anticipates what needs to happen. The apostles themselves apparently weren’t sure what to do, so they did the right thing: they devoted themselves to prayer. Brothers and Sisters, don’t ever let prayer be an excuse for *not* doing what needs to be done, but when you don’t know what

to do: pray. And pray some more. Luke doesn’t say that God suddenly spoke and gave them direction, but after days of prayer they began to understand what they had to do. They knew the scriptures. They’d listened to Jesus for forty days. And as they prayed, understanding came. Prayer has a way of doing that. As we see here, the scriptures began to percolate in Peter’s head. That’s often how God leads us. It’s not often that he speaks directly and we shouldn’t expect him to. But when we’re already steeped in the scriptures and when we pray, the Spirit works and things “seem” to just come together. I’m often amazed to see how this works when I’m preparing a sermon. So Peter stands up in the middle of the disciples. Luke says they’d grown to a hundred and twenty by this point. And he says—verse 16: “Brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago by the mouth of David about Judas, who became a guide to the people who arrested Jesus. He was counted among us and had his own share in this ministry.” Luke then adds that Judas went to the field bought with the money used to betray Jesus, he hanged himself there, where he burst open and his guts came out. Luke notes this bit as historical evidence. The field was still called “Blood-Place” in his day.

And Peter goes on in verse 20, quoting Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8, “For this is what it says in the book of Psalms: ‘Let his home become desolate and let no one live in it’ and again, ‘Let another receive his office.’ “So,” Peter said, “this is what has to be done. There are plenty of people who have gone about with us all the time that our master Jesus was coming and going among us, starting from John’s baptism until the day he was taken from us. Let one of them be chosen to be alongside us as a special witness of his resurrection.”

Through prayer and the scriptures and the prompting of the Spirit, Peter realised that if Jesus, the son of man,

sits on his throne, the kingdom has been restored to Israel, and that meant that the leaders...the apostles...of this renewed Israel had better number twelve, to represent the full number Israel’s tribes. The symbolism was vital if people—particularly fellow Jews—were going to see how the scriptures and the covenant and God’s promises to Israel were being fulfilled in the church. “So,” writes Luke, “they chose two: Joseph who was called Barsabbas, with the surname Justus, and Matthias. ‘Lord,’ they prayed, ‘you know the hearts of all people. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to receive this particular place of service and apostleship, from which Judas went away to go to his own place.’ So they cast lots for them. The lot fell on Matthias, and he was enrolled along with the eleven apostles.”

This may seem like a mundane detail to us, especially after the glory of Jesus’ ascension. But it was a big deal to the apostles and no less to Luke. Their knowing the need for twelve, not eleven apostles, highlights just how much they saw the work of Jesus as being about the fulfilment and the restoration of God’s people as the promises to Abraham were fulfilled and their mission was about to be launched into the nations. It was proof that this new movement wasn’t really new at all. It was rooted in God’s promises and showed their fulfilment of God. Jesus, the cross, the resurrection, Pentecost weren’t just stand-alone events. They were part of the great story that God had been telling his people for thousands of years. In these events, God was doing what he’d promised, showing his faithfulness and revealing his glory. That’s why Peter takes us back to the Psalms here. It’s why Stephen, before his martyrdom in Chapter 7 recounts the history of Israel. They wanted to make it clear that what’s happening here in Acts was what God intended all along.

I've always found it funny that for all the big deal they make choosing Matthias, he's never mentioned again. I say that, because it's a good reminder that what Luke records in Acts is selective. As St. John writes at the end of his Gospel, if someone were to write down literally everything that Jesus did, the world could not contain all the books. And just so with Acts. Just so with the whole history of the church. The world could not contain the books needed to record all the things, big and small and all amazing, that Jesus and the Spirit have done through Christians down through the ages, the famous ones and the ordinary saints like you and I. But the little bit that Luke records for us in Acts, Brothers and Sisters, is a partial (and strategic) record—inspired by the Spirit—that ought to encourage us as it reminds us how God is fulfilling his promises here and now in us and as it exhorts us to carry on with our mission, knowing that the Spirit is with us and will equip us for everything he has for us to do.

On that note, I want to conclude with two images. Jesus was acting out Daniel's prophecy of the son of man coming on the clouds to his throne when he ascended, but there are at least two other unmistakable images in that act as well. The first is Moses, ascending Mount Sinai, up into the clouds and thunder. Moses went up and came down with the law. In the same way, Jesus has gone up, but what has come down is not another law written on stone, but God's own Spirit, poured into our hearts. Contemporary Christians often think of the Spirit mainly as the agent of amazing and miraculous gifts, but the most important work of the Spirit, Brothers and Sisters, the most amazing miracle of the Spirit, is to transform our hearts and to turn our affections toward God, to fill us with his law of love. The other image here is that of the Prophet Elijah as he was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. As he went, he threw down his mantle onto Elisha, his protégé. In that act, he not only

passed on his God-given mission to Elisha, but he empowered him to do it. *That* is what the book of Acts is about. Luke's Gospel is about Jesus and his ministry—like the Prophet Elijah—and at the Ascension he's taken up in heaven and his mantle falls to the apostles, to the church, to you and to me, and the book of Acts is then like the continuing story of Elisha, carrying on the work and ministry God had given to Elijah. Elijah's last act was to strike the waters of the Jordan with his cloak so that they parted, and Elisha's first act is to do exactly the same. Brother and Sisters, that's Acts. That's the ministry of the church. To steward the good news about Jesus, to steward God's presence, to be his temple, ever expanding until it fills the earth. Yes, it's a difficult job—some even lose their lives for it—but Jesus has equipped us and he's given us hope in the faithfulness of God to do what he has said. His mantle has fallen on us in the gift of the Spirit and we know that he sits on his throne as Lord. That central gospel truth is carved on our lychgate, a reminder as we come here and as a remind when we go back out to the world. May Jesus' ascension never be for us a mere doctrine. May it be for us the great truth that gives us hope, the great truth that is transforming creation.

Let's pray: Almighty God and Father, as you have taken your son, Jesus the Messiah to reign in heaven, and as you have let his mantle fall on us in your indwelling Spirit, fill us with bold faith and certain hope that we might be faithful stewards of your gospel and for the sake of the world until the knowledge of your glory reaches the ends of the earth your son returns again on the clouds. Through him we pray. Amen.