

Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015  
*It All Begins, Acts 1-2*  
Pastor Judy Bangsund

Today we are starting something new: a sermon series that moves through our whole summer. We'll be looking at the book of Acts, which is entitled, *The Acts of the Apostles*. It could just as well be called the Acts of Holy Spirit, or the Acts of the Church. It becomes the Acts of you and me as followers of Jesus, because we are the Church. We are people on mission : and it all begins in the book of Acts.

As we go through this book, we will take 1-3 chapters each week. That means can't go verse by verse (at least, not from the pulpit); we cannot mine the full depth of the riches laid out for us here. We'll pick up on a few nuggets as we go along. So it's up to you to read it through at home, filling in the gaps; we think you'll find it to be powerful stuff.

And so we begin at the beginning, in Acts 1. (You heard the first 8 verses read just a few minutes ago.) You hear about Theophilus and about "my former book," so you may wonder, "Who wrote this, and who is Theophilus?" It's written by Luke, the physician who traveled with Paul on some of his missionary journeys; the same guy who wrote the gospel of Luke. Like the other gospels, it's about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. So now Luke begins Volume 2, the beginning of the church; the implementation of all Jesus had commanded. And Theophilus? Very likely a friend of Luke's. But the name is interesting: it means "friend" or "lover of God." (Theos, God, philos, love of a friend.) So it is also written for you and me and for all who are lovers or friends of God, seekers after God.

Like any good author, Luke lays it all out at the beginning. Jesus is ready to leave this earth and he has some last words to give to his disciples. And these words are important: stay and wait for the promise from on high. Because – you are going to be my witnesses. And you will do so in expanding circles: starting here (in Jerusalem), and then moving out into the surrounding area (Judea and Samaria) and then into the world. That's good strategy for you and me as well.

We are the church; we are different from those around us. As followers of Jesus we believe IN, not just THAT. There are a lot of people who believe THAT Jesus lived, walked this earth, and taught some amazing things and even performed miracles. There are those who believe even THAT Jesus was crucified and rose again. But believing THAT doesn't change their lives. There's no skin in the game.

As followers, however, believing IN Jesus, we put more skin in the game. It begins with the realization that we are sinners. That there is an in-built barrier between us and God, which we cannot tear down on our own. We are dependent on Jesus for forgiveness, for new life. As believers IN Jesus, we know we are sinners, but we are saved sinners. What Jesus did for us on the cross tears down those barriers and we are made right with God. We stake our lives on this truth: it shapes who we are and what we do. We are saved sinners sent out on a mission in obedience to Jesus' commands.

I want to hit the pause button on the word, “obedience.” This word doesn’t always sit well with us, as 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christians. We’d rather make our own decisions, be independent, pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. It also is a word not used much in good Lutheran circles, because we are so strong on grace. And that’s important. We are saved completely by what God has done for us in Christ; not by what we do. We cannot be obedient enough to please God or to gain favor with him. But, having been saved by his grace, having been forgiven, the question now is, “How will you live your life?” We live in obedience and trust in him. There is a place for obedience in our lives. Jesus actually talked a lot about obedience.

As disciples, we are called to obey. I think of the Great Commandment. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, (first) baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” That’s grace. God makes us his children through baptism, saving us by his grace. Not by what we do. And then Jesus goes on, “...teaching them to...” What? “...to obey all that I have commanded.” And then comes the promise: “And lo, I am with you to the end of the age.” You know, I never saw that word “obey” until (I think) last year. For more than 50 years, I missed that word! But Jesus says, “Don’t just hear my words; obey them.”

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus tells a parable: the one about the wise man and the foolish man. The wise man built his house on the rock; the foolish man built his house on the sand. (You remember this.) And what was the difference? They both heard Jesus’ words, but only the wise man put them into practice. We are called to be obedient to our Lord.

So we move into Acts chapter 2. Here we find the disciples gathered together and praying – obedient to what Jesus told them: to stay and wait. They were praying, seeking God’s promise from on high. And that’s when the Holy Spirit came. He came with the sound of strong wind, a violent wind. (Think tornado.) It was the SOUND of the wind, INSIDE the place where they were sitting – an audible sound of the Spirit’s presence. This was no natural phenomenon. It filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Now many of you know that in the original biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, the same word for *Spirit* is the word for *breath* and *wind* as well. (In Hebrew, the word is “ruach;” in Greek, “pneuma.”) When you read these words, those meanings are (to some degree) interchangeable. The Holy Spirit blows the breath of life into you; he makes you alive.

Think of creation. When God formed Adam out of the dust, he still didn’t move or speak. But then God breathed into his nostrils, and Adam became a living being. Or think of Ezekiel 37, when God takes the prophet to the Valley of Dry Bones. God shows the prophet all these dry bones and asks, “Can they live?” Ezekiel says, “I don’t know, Lord; you know.” And God begins to join the thigh bone to the hip bone. He tells the prophet that these bones are the house of Israel – all dead and dessicated. But still they can’t move, can’t speak. Then God calls on the wind from the four corners of the earth, and the Holy Spirit blows life into them and they live. It’s a message of hope – and the power of the Spirit. In the same way, the disciples were filled with the wind on that day of Pentecost. They were breathed into by the Spirit – and became alive.

The sound of the wind was an audible sign of the Spirit's presence. There was another sign, a visible sign: tongues of fire, separate flames that rested on the head each one. Fire was on their heads, but it didn't burn them. It reminds me of Moses and the burning bush. You remember that story. Moses saw a bush that was on fire, but didn't burn up. So he went closer to investigate, and found that God was present in this fire. God spoke to him from the burning bush. On that day, God was present in the fire and as each was given a tongue of fire, they were also given a tongue of language (kind of a play on words). The fire was a visible sign of the Spirit's work, and also a reminder that Jesus said, "I will give you words to speak. When I send you out as witnesses, I will give you the words to speak. You don't need to worry about what to say."

So, filled with the Spirit, believers who were once staying inside, were now propelled outside. No longer afraid, they boldly proclaimed the good news of Jesus.

And then Peter preaches his first sermon. He starts with prophecy of Joel, who had described the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. (And by the way, you will often see this pattern in acts, of prophecies fulfilled. It points to the truth of what was happening; it points to the presence and activity of God.) The prophet Joel had foretold this: that "the Holy Spirit will fill you, be poured out on you." It's like the baptism Jesus spoke of; baptism means "immersion;" you will be drenched inside and out. And Peter pulls no punches in this sermon; he tells them that Jesus is the Messiah. These were devout Jews from all nations that he was speaking to; they had been waiting and praying for the Messiah to come. And Peter tells them, the Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth – and YOU crucified him. Peter accuses them of killing their Messiah. The challenge level is pretty high.

It was a gutsy sermon. Peter was filled with courage and power that day. You have to remember that this was the same guy who, some 53 days earlier, couldn't admit to a slave girl that he knew Jesus. Peter went from being frightened to fearless; from being cowardly to courageous; from denying to defending Jesus. He quotes David to show that Jesus' death and resurrection happened by God's plan/purpose. And the people they see and hear, telling them the mighty acts of God, were witnesses to his resurrection. They saw him after he rose, walked and talked with him, ate with him. And now they were witnessing the fulfillment of Joel's prophesy, as they are filled with the Holy Spirit, recipients of the Spirit's power and boldness.

Notice the response of the crowd. They've been accused. Are they angry? Defensive? No – just the opposite. They are "cut to the quick," asking "What shall we do?" They did not take offense, but believed what Peter had said; they absorbed that message, owned it. "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter did not give them a word of law but a command of grace. He said, "Repent and be baptized; and you too, shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." God's grace, pure and simple. "And this promise is not only for you but also for coming generations. It's for you and me as well."

The response of the crowd was not Peter's doing; it was the work of the Spirit. Only God can change hearts. Only the Spirit can convict of sin; only the Spirit can convince people of the truth about Jesus. Only the Holy Spirit can transform lives. And as a result, over 3000 added to the church that day. Think of it! The original 12 increased to 120 on Pentecost morning, and then

multiplied to 3000 in just a few hours. Daily, more were coming to faith. As brothers and sisters in Christ, worshiped together daily, ate together in homes, were devoted to the apostles' teaching and to Scripture. This was a big deal! It hanged their lives. With glad and generous hearts, they shared what they had and proclaimed the good news to anyone who would listen.

What's the take-away? Well, you and I are part of the Church that was born that day. We carry the same DNA. What is the DNA of the church?

First, it is to stay and wait until the power of the Holy Spirit fills you. Spurgeon, that great preacher, said:

We might as well preach to stone walls as preach to humanity -- unless the Holy Spirit be with the word, to give it power to convert the soul.

We are the church, born only when the Holy Spirit is poured out on us, blown into us, setting us on fire; sending us out with the message of Jesus and repentance, the forgiveness of sins. You see, there are things we can do: we can speak the messages, show grace, acts of kindness. But there are things we cannot do: we cannot prove or persuade, convict or change. That's the work of the Spirit.

So we stay and wait until we receive the Holy Spirit. We pray, individually and together, at home and here in worship, seeing God's will – always ready to obey, to do what he asks. As we pray we also listen for his voice. Now, you can't hear God's word unless you put yourself in a place where you can to hear it. You can't hear God's voice unless you are in the Word regularly. So (f you haven't done so), start today with a plan – something simple do-able. Use a devotional; read a chapter a day. Pastor Jim advises this plan: 2 pages of Old Testament over every 1 page of New Testament and a Psalm. Do this daily and you will read through the Bible in a year (not that this is a necessary goal in itself, but not bad one). And when you finish, do it again! Every time you read it the Holy Spirit will speak new things to you.

And as you read, listen and pray. What has God done for you? Rejoice in his gifts of grace. What is God telling you? Reflect on that. What are you going to do about it? Make a plan and act on it, asking for the Spirit's guidance and power. And then, go out and tell what you know; that's what a witness does.

The Acts of the Apostles; the Acts of the Spirit; the Acts of you and me  
It all begins, here and now. Next week: chapters 3-4. (Prayer)