

Called to be Church – Acts 1

The Book of Acts is part history, part exploration of the Holy spirit's work, and part odyssey. It is a sequel to Luke's gospel. Luke wrote them both, so that's what that first line is about.

Because it's written in the first century, it can't be a total blueprint for how to be church in the 21st Century. But there are enough similarities between that time and ours that it is a helpful framework for the church in any age.

Like our own time, the early church had to function in a society with multiple ethnic backgrounds, multiple languages, and multiple religions. Even sexuality and gender were a little more fluid in some of the surrounding Greek culture.

Life was lived in the trappings and structures of a world superpower, and the wealth gap was enormous.

And it was a time of great transition for the little band of Jesus followers...the ones who would come to be called the Way.

They had to make the transition from accompanying Jesus in his ministry to become the church that would carry on that ministry.

The church has had other times of great transition – Reformation is one example. Now, many scholars believe the church is in another time of huge transition. That transition began long before the pandemic and the political unrest of the last year.

But in some ways the events of this last year have pushed that transition to a crisis point. That might sound bad...and it is painful. People worry that the church is dying. I don't believe God wants the church to die, but there are some aspects of it that will have to if we're going to be what God calls us to be.

But while we worry about the death of the church, remember that the first century crisis was the death of Jesus. And look what happened there. Resurrection.

Now, there on Mt. Olivet, a second crisis hits when Jesus departs. Now what?

They wait...and pray and study and eat together and share the Lord's supper together.

The early church ultimately became wildly successful and grew by leaps and bounds. That success can be a guide for us now, but first we need to be aware of a couple of big things that led the church to get off track in its vocation as Jesus envisioned it.

The first was when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and declared Rome officially Christian. You'd think that would be a good thing. But the result was that the church became aligned with the power of the empire instead of being the good news to the poor Jesus promised.

Christianity aligned with the earthly powers that be has resulted in atrocities like the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the alignment of certain branches of the modern church with politicians and policies that aren't very Jesus-y.

It also resulted in a church whose hierarchy is hard to distinguish from empire.

In fact, when the Roman Empire itself fell, it was replaced by the Holy Roman Empire. That's a whole other history lesson and is the soil from which the Reformation sprung.

The second big thing was the Church's response to the enlightenment. Science made new discoveries that seemed to leave no need for God. Centuries of religious wars created ground fertile for the birth of new principles for governing.

The first nation established on those new principles was our own. As religion was edged out of government and even our understanding of the universe, the church responded in two ways. One was to dig their heels in and simply say science was wrong and cling to a very literal interpretation of scripture. Fundamentalism was born.

The other was to move religion to a very private sphere that had nothing to do with the world outside. Religion became all about individual salvation and a personal relationship. Left in the dust was God's plan to fashion a people who would live out God's reign...who would be Jesus people...people who would follow the Way of Jesus instead of the way of the world around. Ultimately, even what living the Jesus way should look like got twisted.

I don't know if that church will survive – that will be up to God. But the church that is willing to learn what our mission in the 21st Century should look like I think will. That will be hard. We'll have to be willing to let go of that which doesn't help us do that.

We're going to use the book of Acts and the template of the early church to think together about what the church should be now. In a world battered, grieving, and torn apart, how can the church help with the healing that is needed? How can we model life in God's kingdom as a way different from the anger and divisions around us? How are we called to act in the face of injustice...injustice that hurts the "least of these" that Jesus spoke of?

Like the Apostles, right now we are kind of in a place of waiting. We are still in transition. What we will be has not yet been revealed completely. But that doesn't mean we're without a guide.

This first passage in Acts gives us a starting foundation for this work.

First, we remember that everything we do is grounded in Jesus and his death and resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is vindication of who he is. To all those who doubted, Jesus' defeat of death and evil meant that Jesus was in fact God's anointed Messiah, not a failed revolutionary.

Second, Jesus' ascension means a shift in leadership for the church on earth. But it does not mean that we are abandoned. Jesus' ascension puts him at the right hand of God, which is really everywhere.

And the gift of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus will authorize and energize the ministry of the Church to carry on the mission Jesus started – to proclaim and enact the Kingdom of God.

We are called to witness. That witness will look different in the 21st Century than it did in the first. So much has changed it has to. But that call is still in force.

Third, Jesus will return to complete the work. We are assured that our future and the future of the world is headed somewhere. It's headed to a fulfillment that only the Risen Christ can bring.

But in the meantime, the book of Acts, and in different ways really all the rest of the New Testament can help us with the now...what are we to do in the meantime? The church in every age needs to wrestle with that question.

Jesus spent 40 days with the disciples before his ascension. He opened scripture to them and taught them more about God's reign, now that its establishment was begun. I'm guessing that with the benefit of the resurrection, things they'd heard over and over before now made more sense.

Then, after Jesus' ascension, they ate together and prayed together constantly.

That's a pretty good model for us...learning about the kingdom of God, reading scripture, praying, and gathering for worship and the Lord's supper. As we take this trip through Acts I'd invite you to read through it on your own as well. Read a chapter 2 or 3 times a week. Write down questions you have and get them to me. Write them down in the silence following the sermon and put them in the offering plate. Or put them in the chat if you're on Zoom.

And, pray. Pray for God's guidance as we move into whatever is next for our church. Pray for the health of our church and pray for each other. Pray through the directory. Pray for me as I pray for you.

Pray for all our kids as they navigate a tough world.

Pray for an awakening to the work of the Holy Spirit among us. Pray for us to have the courage we need to model the Way of Jesus...a way that should make obvious who we follow. And pray for your own formation in Christ.

We live in the hope that exploded into the world with Christ's resurrection. The world needs our witness to that hope, now more than ever. Let's get to work.