

Acts of the Apostles

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Acts of the Apostles

Introduction to Acts and Chapter 1

April 19, 2023

Acts of the Apostles?

- Peter is the only one of the twelve apostles whose “acts” are recorded
- Paul refers to himself as an apostle in his letters, but Luke never calls Paul and apostle
- Acts of the Risen Christ
- Acts of the Holy Spirit

Source of Acts

- The author is understood to be the same as that of the third gospel. Modern interpreters see Luke-Acts as a unified literary work in two parts, although the two works never appear in sequence in any ancient manuscript. Its place in the canon, between the gospels and the epistles, is fitting as Acts is a transition between accounts of Jesus and the writings of the apostles.
- Acts was written after the Gospel of Luke, probably between 85-95 CE.
- Speeches take up almost 1/3 of the total text. This is a literary device also seen in Greek histories. They have a dual role of informing and pleasing the reader and establishing a precedent of preaching.

Purpose of Acts

- “The account was intended to give Christians of his day an unshakeable confidence in their future through an instructive survey of their past...Acts addresses social and theological problems brought about by the church’s relationship to its Jewish heritage and its Greco-Roman culture and political environment. Luke sought to clarify both how the church was faithful to the God of the Jewish scriptures and how Christianity was not incompatible with civic order and morality in the cities of the Roman Empire.” (Christopher R. Matthews)

Apostles vs. Disciples

- A disciple is a student. (Someone who requires discipline.)
- Apo = from; stello = sent forth. An apostle is one sent forth from another; a delegate, representative, or ambassador carrying a message.
- We see the word “disciple” used in the gospels and “apostle” used in Acts and the epistles.
- The only of the 12 disciples to not be an apostle was Judas Iscariot.
- Matthias, who became one of the 12 apostles, was not one of the 12 disciples, although he was among the other disciples of Jesus.
- We can consider ourselves both disciples (students) and apostles (ambassadors) of Christ today.

Chapter 1

- This is a sequel
- Jesus is the king of the world, enthroned as the Son of Man
 - Daniel 7:13-14
As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.
- Jesus fulfills what the prophets spoke
 - Isaiah 32:1
See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice.
 - Ezekiel 36:23-28
I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.
 - Joel 2:27-29
You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

1:1 Theophilus, “dear to God,” could be a patron or could be representative of any ideal reader

1:1-11 Review and summary of the end of Luke.

1:8 Instructions to the disciples: be witnesses to the ends of the earth

1:12-14 The apostles were collectively “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” The first and most important response to what the disciples have experienced is worship.

1:15 Peter assumes leadership of the 120 believers

1:26 Matthias is added to the eleven apostles

Acts of the Apostles

The Gospel Spreads in Jerusalem: Chapter 2-7

Pentecost: Chapter 2

April 26, 2023

Opening Prayer:

O God, who taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in the Spirit's comfort; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Acts 2:1-13

Behind the text

- Pentecost
 - Jewish festival marking 50 days after Passover (penta = 5)
 - Agricultural festival; farmers brought in the first harvest and offered it to God
 - 50 days after the first Passover, the Israelites reached Mount Sinai and Moses received the law
 - Pentecost is about both "first fruits" and receiving God's purpose and mission
- Wind and Fire
 - Wild, untameable forces
 - Represent the glory of God (Exodus 40, 2nd Chronicles 7, Ezekiel 43, Haggai 2)
- The Spirit, the breath of God, brings order out of chaos (Genesis 1:2)
- Tower of Babel (Genesis 11)

Discussion

- How does the Spirit show up today?
- How do we invite the Spirit to show up?
- How do we communicate God's love to all people?

Acts 2:14-36

Behind the text

- Joel 2:28-32. "pour out my spirit" implies enabling various forms of prophetic revelation; depicts a tradition that the Lord will judge the nations at the end times.
- Psalm 16:8-11. David was a messiah – an anointed, good shepherd king.

Discussion

- Is the description of the spirit being poured out comforting or alarming?
- What does it mean to you personally that God made Jesus both Lord and Messiah?

Acts 2:37-47

Behind the text

- Jewish principles:
 - John the Baptist (Jewish, not a Christian) – repent and be baptized
 - Live in perfect fellowship with others, share, pray, etc.

Discussion

- Peter was addressing a Jewish crowd. What feels new or different in what Peter was asking of people?

Acts of the Apostles

The Gospel Spreads in Jerusalem: Chapter 2-7

Activity at the Temple: Chapters 3-5

May 3, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*
(Collect for Proper 6; BCP 230)

Acts 3:1-10

Behind the text

- Acts 2:43 – “many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles”
- Happening in the context of the Temple; the man came to beg at a specific time to coincide with people coming to pray
- Shows that Peter and John were faithful, practicing Jews

Discussion

- How comfortable are you with the idea of miraculous healing?
- What lessons can we learn from this passage?

Acts 4:1-12, 16-18

Behind the text

- The priests and the captain of the Temple are representatives of the Temple; they protect the Temple’s interests, particularly Temple purity
- Sadducees did not have any direct control over the Temple, “probably devout laity from wealthy (mainly priestly) Jerusalem families who were close to the political and financial institutions of Judean culture (Robert W. Wall, *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*).

Discussion

- Can you think of a time you got into trouble for doing something good?
- How might God be calling you into “good trouble”?

Acts 4:23-26, 31-35

Behind the text

- Psalm 146:5 (verse 6 in NRSV)

- Psalm 2:1-2
- Supporting the poor is a practice described in the Torah that is supposed to be managed by the Temple (Deuteronomy 14-15)

Discussion

- What might empowerment by the Holy Spirit look like today?
- What about speaking the word with boldness?

Acts 5:12-26

Behind the text

- The council and body of elders of Israel was the Sanhedrin. They had religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction.

Discussion

- What might have motivated the high priest to take action?
- What was motivating the apostles?

Acts 5:33-40

Behind the text

- “Not only were the apostles insubordinate by refusing to obey the Sanhedrin’s ban against their public teacher, but Peter’s speech effectively exposed the illegitimacy of their claim to lead God’s people. The Temple and all that it symbolizes – including the religious authority of the Sadducees – has been given over to the apostles for their teaching ministry (see 5:20). This excludes the Council not only from political power but also from participation in the restored Israel and its blessings!” (Robert W. Wall, *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*)

Discussion

- How can we practice the kind of wisdom that Gamaliel offered?
- How do we discern whether an action is simply defiance of authority or an act of courageous obedience in response to the call of the Spirit?

Acts of the Apostles

The Gospel Spreads in Jerusalem: Chapter 2-7

First Persecution: Chapters 6-7

May 10, 2023

Opening Prayer:

We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of the first martyr Stephen, who looked up to heaven and prayer for his persecutors to your Son Jesus Christ, who stands at your right hand; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*
(Collect for Saint Stephen; BCP 230)

Acts 6:1-7

Behind the text

- Hellenists and Hebrews: Remember that at this point in Acts, all the Christians are Jewish. We aren't talking about a division between Greeks and Jews, which will show up later. Likely, the distinction was one of language: Jewish people who spoke predominantly Greek and Jewish people who spoke predominantly Hebrew.
- There was no question that provision needed to be made for the widows – the community was committed to providing for all in need (3:45; 4:34).
- Seven isn't an arbitrary number. Seven is completion – it is a full group; all that is needed.
- Stephen, Philip, and the others are Greek names.
- A proselyte is someone who converted. (In this case, converted to Judaism. This means that the others were born Jewish. When Paul discusses Christian converts in his letters, a different Greek word is used.)
- "Priests" here are Jewish Temple priests

Discussion

- The early followers of Jesus defined themselves by being a group that took care of one another. When this ability was challenged, they created a new solution. What behaviors define us as a group? How have we responded to challenges?
- How might we be intentional about maintaining a balance between administrative tasks and the ministry of the word, especially in a growing church?

Acts 6:8-15

Behind the text

- “Wonders and signs” are what the apostles do (2:43, 4:30, 5:12)
- Stephen is brought before the same council who just had the apostles flogged at the end of chapter 5.
- “the face of an angel” is not necessarily a tranquil, gentle face. It is meant to remind us of the way Moses’ face shone after speaking with God. (Others were frightened by it.)

Discussion

- Stephen clearly elicited a powerful response in others, enough that he was singled out and brought before the council. Acts doesn’t give us any specifics – why might Stephen have been singled out?
- Stephen was appointed as a deacon (someone who would help care for the widows), but he immediately started acting like an apostle (performing wonders and signs). Sometimes God has more in mind than what we imagine for ourselves. Can you think of a time that you expected something small and something big happened instead?

(Summary of 7:1-50 – Stephen has nothing against Moses or God; he is a fan.)

Acts 7:51-60

Behind the text

- “Stiff-necked people” Exodus 33:3,5
- “uncircumcised heart” Leviticus 26:41; Jeremiah 9:26
- Stephen is taken out of the city in the presence of witnesses, making this an execution according to the law (but there was not a formal sentence, so it is a lynching)

In the text

- Stephen rejects their accusations of him and makes stronger accusations of his own “betrayers and murderers”
- When Stephen says “you” he is talking to his own people; he is talking about his own ancestors.
- What causes the crowd to rush Stephen is not his accusations of them, but his experience of the divine.
- Stephen’s death echoes that of Jesus (in Luke’s gospel)

Discussion

- At the time of his death, Stephen prays for the salvation of others. How might our own prayers be influenced by the way Stephen prayed?

Acts of the Apostles

Judea and Samaria; How a mostly Jewish, Jerusalem-based community of Jesus became a multi-ethnic international movement: Chapter 8-12

Philip in Samaria: Chapter 8

May 17, 2023

Opening Prayer:

We give you thanks, O Lord of glory, for the example of the first martyr Stephen, who looked up to heaven and prayer for his persecutors to your Son Jesus Christ, who stands at your right hand; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*
(Collect for Saint Stephen; BCP 230)

Acts 8:4-17

Behind the text

- Samaria was a less-than-desirable place for a Jew. “Samaritans were widely viewed by traditional Jews as racially impure, religiously heterodox, and politically treacherous” (Robert B. Wall).
- Jesus avoided Samaria in the synoptic gospels, skirting “between” Samaria and Galilee in Luke 17:11. Jesus healed a Samaritan (Luke 17:16).
- In the gospel of John, Jesus offered “living water” to the Samaritan woman at the well.
- Philip wasn’t going to speak with Jewish people living in Samaria – there weren’t Jewish people living in Samaria.
- Samaritans weren’t Jews, but they weren’t Gentiles either. They worshipped the same God and followed a similar version of the Torah.

In the text

- The Philip mentioned here is likely the Philip recently appointed as one of the seven “deacons,” not Philip the Apostle. (If it was Philip the Apostle, it seems less necessary for the apostles in Jerusalem to have sent Peter and John.)
- Philip introduces the three “big ideas” of Christian evangelism: 1) the kingdom of God, 2) the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and 3) the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Discussion

- What do you notice? What makes you curious?
- Persecution in Jerusalem, what looked like death and destruction to the church in Jerusalem, led to new life in Samaria. Can you think of a time when the ending of one thing led to a new beginning?
- Are you sympathetic to Simon the Magician? Compare the story of Simon to that of Ananias and his wife (Acts 5:1-11). Why was Simon given the opportunity to repent?

Acts 8:26-40

Behind the text

- While the Samaritans had some relationship and history with Judaism, the Ethiopian is decidedly “other.”
- The Ethiopian reads aloud Isaiah 53:7-8. Isaiah 54 offers the promise of a new covenant, Isaiah 55 a new creation, and Isaiah 56 a blessing for outsiders and foreigners. (The Ethiopian is about to get to some good news.)

In the text

- Because he was a eunuch, it was physically impossible for the Ethiopian to convert to Judaism. Yet, he had still made the journey to Jerusalem and was studying Jewish scripture.
- “Candace” is a title, not a name. (That’s why it says “court of **the** Candace...”)

Discussion

- What do you notice? What makes you curious?
- Compare the conversion of the Ethiopian to that of Simon the Samaritan. How does each interpret what God offers? What can we learn from both of them?
- The Ethiopian asks, “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” What prevents us from full engagement in a life in Christ? How might we accept it for ourselves and offer it to others?

Acts of the Apostles

Judea and Samaria; How a mostly Jewish, Jerusalem-based community of Jesus became a multi-ethnic international movement: Chapter 8-12

Paul's Conversion – Chapter 9:1-31

May 31, 2023

Opening Prayer:

O God, by the preaching of your apostle Paul you have caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world: Grant, we pray, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may show ourselves thankful to you by following his holy teaching; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*
(Collect for the Conversion of Saint Paul; BCP 238)

Acts 9:1-9

Behind the text

- Theophany – a manifestation of God, audible or visible or both. In this case, there is a bright light and the voice of God – a double theophany.
- Paul is called the way prophets in the Old Testament were called
- “Saul, Saul” is similar to “Samuel, Samuel” (1 Samuel 3)

In the text

- 9:2 is the first mention of “the Way,” one of the earliest names for the Jesus movement.
- Jesus makes it clear that by persecuting the disciples, Saul is persecuting Jesus himself. This is a theological statement.
- Damascus is in Syria, far from Jerusalem. The message about Jesus is spreading, and spreading quickly, for Saul to be concerned enough to travel that far.
- Paul’s three-day fast prior to the restoration of his sight and baptism is a connection to Jesus’ three days prior to resurrection.

Discussion

- Paul faced a defining moment where his ideas about God were challenged, and he changed his life as a result. Have you experienced God presenting you with a new way to live?
- What has God helped you see more clearly?

Acts 9:10-22

Behind the text

- Robert Wall suggests that Ananais’ concern about the evil Saul had done wasn’t a concern for himself but concern that Ananais wouldn’t be able to heal him. (Healing symbolizes salvation in Acts.)

In the text

- The Ananais in Chapter 5 was a different Ananais (living in Jerusalem.) This Ananais questions God, but ultimately follows through with what God asks of him.
- Paul regained his sight and then was baptized, not the other way around.
- Paul is an instrument to bring Jesus' name before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel. This is a very wide net.

Discussion

- What do you notice? What makes you curious?
- The Lord makes it clear that Paul will suffer for the sake of the gospel. In our modern context, how might we suffer for the gospel?

Acts 9:23-31

In the text

- "his disciples" implies that Paul has been in Damascus long enough to have people learning from him.
- Barnabas (4:36) makes an appearance as a mediator

Discussion

- Paul had Ananias and Barnabas to smooth his entry into the Christian communities in Damascus and Jerusalem. Have you ever needed a friend to vouch for you in a new situation? Have you ever been that friend to someone else? What is the risk? What is the reward?

Acts of the Apostles

Judea and Samaria; How a mostly Jewish, Jerusalem-based community of Jesus became a multi-ethnic international movement: Chapter 8-12

Peter's Vision – Chapter 10

June 14, 2023

Opening Prayer:

O God, by your Spirit you called Cornelius the Centurion to be the first Christian among the Gentiles: Grant to your Church such a ready will to go where you send and to do what you command, that, under your guidance, it may welcome all who turn to you in love and faith, and proclaim the Gospel to all nations; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. *Amen.*

(Collect for Cornelius the Centurion; *A Great Cloud of Witnesses*, February 7)

Acts 10:1-16

Behind the text

- Cornelius is a “God-fearer,” someone who practiced Jewish piety but had not fully converted (been circumcised).
- Caesarea was a major Roman outpost. Cornelius would have been a powerful guy. “The Italian Cohort” means Cornelius was from Rome, not a Roman citizen born anywhere in the empire.
- Jewish dietary laws were an obvious indication of Jewish practice (as opposed to circumcision), and they provided a clear distinction between who was Jewish and who was not.
- Leviticus 11 lists all the animals that cannot be eaten (there are lots)
- In Mark 7:14-19, Jesus declared all foods clean. This does not appear in Luke’s gospel.

Discussion

- Compare Cornelius’ response to the angel to Peter’s response to the dream.
- N.T. Wright’s stoplight analogy
- What are some practices today that differentiate Christians from non-Christians?
- Does our church have “insider” practices that might make others feel like outsiders?

Acts 10:17-33

In the text

- The Spirit continues to guide Peter, even after his vision has ended.
- Peter offers hospitality to Cornelius’ people.
- Cornelius has gathered a crowd together to meet Peter.

Discussion

- Peter and Cornelius both listen and then actively respond to the spirit of the Lord. What prevents you from listening and responding?
- What might Cornelius have been expecting? What might he have told his family and friends?

Acts 10:34-48

In the text

- Peter summarizes the gospel. Is there anything he could have left out? Is anything important missing?
- As on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit is poured out before baptism.

Discussion

- What do you notice? What makes you curious?
- What was the last time you shared what God has done in your life?

Acts of the Apostles

Judea and Samaria; How a mostly Jewish, Jerusalem-based community of Jesus became a multi-ethnic international movement: Chapter 8-12

The Church in Antioch is Formed – Chapter 11

Persecutions continue in Jerusalem – Chapter 12

June 21, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Grant, O God, that we may follow the example of your faithful servant Barnabas, who, seeking not his own renown but the well-being of your Church, gave generously of his life and substance for the relief of the poor and the spread of the Gospel; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*
(Collect for St. Barnabas, BCP 241, June 11)

Acts 11:1-4, 18

Behind the text

- Peter's own experience of having his mind changed
- The Jewish people are blessed, favored by God, so they can be a blessing to others; they consider themselves set apart by heritage and by culture.

In the text

- "even to the Gentiles"

Discussion

- What does it mean to be inclusive? What are some intentionally inclusive practices?

Acts 11:19-30

Behind the text

- Barnabas has a connection to Cyprus (4:36 tells us he is from there) and Paul (9:27 tells us he introduced Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem.)
- Antioch was the capital of Syria and was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria). It was about 300 miles from Jerusalem to Antioch, another 150 to Tarsus.

In the text

- "down from Jerusalem" isn't indicative of direction; more about coming down from a holy place
- The first use of "Christian" in the Bible
- The first time we see Christians in one church giving to another

Discussion

- Do you know people who are "connectors" like Barnabas? What are they like?

- What do you think when you hear the word “Christian?” Does the word have positive or negative connotations?

Acts 12:1-19, 24-25

In the text

- James’ death (12:2) is the first and only recorded death of an apostle in the Bible. (Judas is the only other disciple whose death is recorded.)
- Tradition credits John Mark (12:12) as the author of the second gospel as Peter’s interpreter. According to Colossians 4:10, John Mark was also Barnabas’s cousin. Mark is the oldest of the gospels.
- James the brother of Jesus is growing in authority in Jerusalem; Peter basically hands off to him (12:17).

Discussion

- What do you notice? What makes you curious?
- Have you ever felt like Rhoda, faced with good news but neglecting to open the gate?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Paul & Barnabas go to Asia Minor – Chapter 13 & 14

August 2, 2023

Opening Prayer:

O God, you have made of one blood all the people of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near; Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you, bring the nations into your fold, pour out your Spirit upon all flesh, and hasten the coming of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

(Collect for the Mission of the Church, BCP 257)

Recap: Christianity, or The Way, became multi-ethnic and multi-national. The largest, most successful church was in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas have replaced Peter and John as the principal evangelists.

Missionary Pattern:

1. Paul proclaims the word of God
2. Paul performs prophetic “signs and wonders” in synagogues
3. Some people are persuaded; others are angry
4. Paul experiences violence or threat of violence

Acts 13:1-3

In the text

- Spiritual discernment is not a private matter. Paul and Barnabas are “sent off” by “the hands” of the particular congregation that knows and cares for them. (Wall, 157).

Discussion

- How does this practice show up in the Church today? Where have you seen collaborative discernment at work?

Acts 13:4-5; 16, 38-39

Acts 4:1, 3, 7

In the text

- Step 1 in the missionary pattern
- Paul tends to start in synagogues; Jewish people are his primary audience
- “God-fearers” were non-jews who prayed to God and followed many Jewish practices but had not made full conversion to Judaism (circumcision)

Discussion

- Do you have a personal experience sharing the gospel?
- How can you be an empowering and encouraging relator of good news?

Acts 13:9-12

Acts 14:8-10

In the text

- Step 2 in the missionary pattern
- Shift in the use of “Saul” to “Paul.” Paul, a Roman name is more inclusive of the multi-ethnic, multi-national church.
- The Holy Spirit acts through Paul as the Holy Spirit acted through Peter

Discussion

- Where have you seen people exercise the power and authority of the Holy Spirit? Have you experienced it in your own life?
- Do we give God credit for the miracles that happen in our lives?

Acts 13:42-45

Acts 14:1-4

In the text

- Step 3 in the missionary pattern
- “almost the whole city gathered”
- Both Jews and Greeks gathered in the synagogues

Discussion

- Why were some people convinced by Paul’s message and others weren’t?
- What makes any of us open to learning new things and/or changing our minds?

Acts 13:49-52

Acts 14:5-7, 19-20

In the text

- Step 4 in the missionary pattern
- “the devout women and the leading men” stirred up persecution
- Paul avoids stoning in Iconium, but not in Lystra

Discussion

- How do we respond to people with whom we disagree?
- What does it look like to “shake the dust off your feet” in 2023?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28
Jerusalem Council – Chapter 15
August 9, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Almighty and everlasting Father, you have given the Holy Spirit to abide with us for ever: Bless, we pray, with the Spirit's grace and presence, our bishops and other clergy and laity, that your Church, being preserved in true faith and godly discipline, may fulfill all the mind of him who loved it and gave himself for it, your Son Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*
(Collect for a Church Convention, BCP 255)

Acts 15:1-5

Behind the text

- Circumcision is fundamental to Judaism. Two centuries before, Syria attempted to suppress circumcision and Israel revolted. (Maccabean Revolt)

In the text

- "Down from Judea" (not a direction)
- Paul and Barnabas "were appointed." Decisions about the early church are being made in community.
- Desire for counsel, collaboration. This is the first church conference.
- "open disagreement between earnest believers is formative of Christian theological understanding" (Wall, 165).

Discussion

- Have you ever attended diocesan council?

Acts 15:6-11

In the text

- Peter is back in Jerusalem. (Acts 12:17, Peter fled Jerusalem after persecution by Herod.)
- Peter reminds the group that they've already addressed this issue; this is a decision the Holy Spirit has made and communicated
- Compare to Romans 3:24

Discussion

- Are there rules we can let go of so we can practice welcome? What are the non-negotiables?

Acts 15:12-21

In the text

- James uses theological reflection to reach a decision. Having heard testimony from Peter and Paul & Barnabas, James then turns to scripture. (James retained leadership and authority of the group even after Peter returned.)
- The behaviors the gentiles must avoid all have to do with pagan worship. (Fornication probably refers to temple prostitution.) The bit about food preparation (all foods are clean, but they should still be prepared the right way) has to do with pagan sacrifice / pagan feast days.
- “James offers guidelines to ensure that Christian fellowship in the mixed congregations of Paul’s urban mission will nurture faith rather than contaminate it” (Wall, 173).

Discussion

- What is your experience with theological reflection?

Acts 15:22-35

In the text

- James reached a decision, but “the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church” cause that decision to move forward.
- The letter includes the things James said not to do but puts them in a different order.

Discussion

- Pagan religious practices are no longer the norm. What forms of idolatry do we need to work to avoid today?

Acts 15:36-41

Behind the text

- John Mark had been sent with Paul and Barnabas “to assist them” (Acts 13:5). Acts 13:13 records John Mark’s return to Jerusalem (fairly early in Paul & Barnabas’s missionary journey).

In the text

- Barnabas is replaced by Silas. Work continues in pairs.
- “sharp” disagreement implies a passionate and embittered exchange
- Luke seems to take Paul’s side, since Paul’s next steps are narrated and Barnabas’s are not.

Discussion

- Paul and Barnabas had an irreconcilable disagreement, but they each continued in their ministry. Can you think of an example of that in your own life or the life of the church?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Paul meets Timothy & Lydia – Chapter 16

August 16, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Eternal God, who gives good gifts to all people, and who teaches us to have the same spirit of generosity: Give us, we pray you, hearts that are always open to hear your word, that following the example of your servant Lydia, we may show hospitality to all who are in any need or trouble, through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

(Collect for St. Lydia of Thyatira, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, May 21)

Acts 16:1-10

Behind the text

- This is the first mention of Timothy, but we'll see more of him in Acts.
- Timothy is also mentioned in Paul's letters to the Romans, Corinthians (1 & 2), Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians (1 & 2), Philemon, Hebrews (probably not written by Paul) and the letters directed to Timothy himself (1 & 2).

In the text

- "Timothy is the personification of the diversity found in the Christian synagogues of the diaspora and embodies Paul's solution to the theological crisis James addresses at the Jerusalem council" (Wall, 178).
- Timothy doesn't need to be circumcised for his salvation, but it does make PR a little easier. Circumcision in Timothy's case is about reclamation of his Jewish roots.
- The Holy Spirit is at work. Paul responds "immediately" to the movement of the Spirit.
- Shift from the story being told in 3rd person to 1st person ("We" in verse 10.)

Discussion

- Timothy represents the multi-racial, multi-national culture of the growing church. Why is representation important in the church? Where do you see it? Where would you like to see more of it?
- The Holy Spirit forbids them to go to Asia. Have you ever gotten a "no" from the Holy Spirit?

Acts 16:11-15

In the text

- Philippi is in Macedonia.

- They went not to a synagogue within the city (maybe there wasn't one), but to a "place of prayer" outside the city.
- Lydia, a professional woman with a Greek name who owns her own home and her own business, is the first convert and becomes the leader of the church in Philippi.

Discussion

- Lydia immediately invited Paul and the others to stay with her. What experiences do you have with radical hospitality?

Acts 16:16-24

Behind the text

- Paul's encounter with the slave girl is similar to Jesus' encounter with "a man with an unclean spirit" outside the synagogue in Mark 1:21.
- "Most High God" was also used in worship of Zeus

In the text

- Paul revokes the unclean spirit out of annoyance.
- Paul confirms the slave girl's prophecy – offering her a way of salvation.
- Paul and Silas are accused of disturbing the peace and punished, but without indication of a court verdict.

Discussion

- Do you think the slave girl wanted to be healed? How does money (or other priorities) get in the way of our own healing?

Acts 16:25-40

In the text

- The jailer plays a complementary role to Lydia. He recognizes the need for salvation and then invites Paul and his companions back to his home to care for them where the whole household is baptized.
- Now safe, Paul is indignant about his treatment as a Roman citizen. "Imprisoning and flogging a Roman citizen without benefit of a trial is illegal; to do so publicly is a criminal act worthy of execution. No wonder the magistrates were afraid" (Wall, 185).
- Lydia's home, in the city limits, is now the church in Philippi.

Discussion

- When you are faced with tough situations how do you use your spiritual disciplines to access God's grace, love, and presence?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens – Chapter 17

August 23, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Almighty God, who called Timothy and Titus to be evangelists and teachers, and made them strong to endure hardship: Strengthen us to stand fast in adversity, and to live godly and righteous lives in this present time, that with sure confidence we may look for our blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

(Collect for Timothy and Titus, Companions of St. Paul, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, January 26)

Recall Paul's Missionary Pattern:

1. Paul proclaims the word of God
2. Paul performs prophetic "signs and wonders" in synagogues
3. Some people are persuaded; others are angry
4. Paul experiences violence or threat of violence

Acts 17:1-9 (Thessalonica)

In the text

- "as was his custom" Paul has been at this long enough that his pattern is predictable; he will go to the synagogue first.
- Paul "argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer" – he is making his case.
- Who is Jason? (Shows up again in Romans 16:21)

Discussion

- Paul demonstrates that a sound knowledge of the Bible is necessary for Christian preaching and teaching. What has been your experience of Bible study in your life?

Acts 17:10-15 (Beroea)

In the text

- The Jews of Beroea were more receptive to Paul's message than those from Thessalonica.

Discussion

- Is everyone who hears the gospel on equal footing to respond to its truth in faith? What keeps people from being able to receive the gospel?

Acts 17:16-34 (Athens)

Behind the text

- “Athens was a great university town and symbolized ‘high culture’ where important ideas have value and are carefully considered by the intellectually curious” (Wall, 191).
- The Areopagus is the chief Roman court in Athens (Paul is in front of the civil authorities)

In the text

- Paul offers Christianity as an intellectual alternative to idol worship; he appeals to the Athenians’ reason.
- Paul doesn’t quote scripture to the Athenians; he quotes their own philosophers

Discussion

- How does context influence how we share the gospel?
- In a sense, Paul was bilingual – he knew the scriptures and he knew Greek philosophy and was able to communicate effectively about both. In what ways are you bilingual? What “languages” do you speak?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Corinth, Ephesus and in between – Chapter 18

August 30, 2023

Opening Prayer:

God of grace and might, we praise you for your servants Aquila and Priscilla, to whom you gave gifts to make the good news known. Raise up, we pray, in every country, heralds and evangelists of your kingdom, so that the world may know the immeasurable riches of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

(Collect for Priscilla and Aquila, Coworkers of St. Paul, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, July 8)

Recall Paul's Missionary Pattern:

1. Paul proclaims the word of God
2. Paul performs prophetic "signs and wonders" in synagogues
3. Some people are persuaded; others are angry
4. Paul experiences violence or threat of violence

Acts 18:1-4 (Corinth)

In the text

- Roman historian Suetonius wrote that Claudius expelled Jews from Rome in 49 CE "because of their constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (Christ)." (Wall, 200).
- Aquila and Priscilla
 - Treated as equals
 - The fact that they hosted Paul and church in their home suggests that they were wealthy
 - Mentioned again in Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Timothy (Prisca = Priscilla)
- We see Paul following his pattern, preaching in the synagogue

Discussion

- Priscilla and Aquila moved from Rome to Corinth. What is your experience of moving to a new city? How did you experience God during that transition?

Acts 18:5-17 (Corinth)

In the text

- Paul is opposed and reviled, following the pattern.
- The Jewish opposition follows a pattern of seeking out Roman authority to get rid of Paul, but this time, the Roman authority isn't interested in getting involved
- Poor Sosthenes (maybe the same as 1 Corinthians 1:1)

Discussion

- Paul was bivocational for a time in Corinth (working as a tentmaker during the week and arguing in the synagogue on the sabbath). That pattern changed with Silas and Timothy showed up, freeing Paul to be “occupied with proclaiming the word.” Who in your life (past or present) has supported you in your work?

Acts 18:18-28 (Paul from Corinth to Antioch; Apollos in Ephesus)

In the text

- Syria = Antioch
- Priscilla and Aquila traveled with Paul from Corinth to Ephesus
- After Paul left Aquila and Priscilla, they met Apollos
- Apollos “knew only the baptism of John.” That means he did NOT have a baptism of the Holy Spirit. Apollos is a learned man and a good teacher, but it is not the Holy Spirit acting through him. Apollos needs guidance from Aquila and Priscilla.
 - *both* Aquila *and* Priscilla are Apollos’s teachers
 - Apollos gets more press in 1 Corinthians

Discussion

- Aquila and Priscilla saw someone with talent and worked to build him up so he would be successful on his own. When have you been on either side of that type of relationship?

No Bible Study September 13

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Paul in Ephesus – Chapter 19

September 6, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Almighty God, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, you turn us from the old life of sin: Grant that we, being reborn to new life in him, may live in righteousness and holiness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.* (Collect to be used at Baptism, BCP 254)

Recall Paul's Missionary Pattern:

1. Paul proclaims the word of God
2. Paul performs prophetic "signs and wonders" in synagogues
3. Some people are persuaded; others are angry
4. Paul experiences violence or threat of violence

Acts 19:1-7

In the text

- Seems to be a desire on Luke's part to distance Paul and Apollos. Paul is clearly not responsible for instructing Apollos – they aren't in the same place.
- Growth of the Christian community (disciples/ followers of the Way) is outpacing education
- "disciple" is the same word as "student"

Discussion

- Paul offered "correction" to the 12 disciples. They seemed to be easily convinced and were baptized in the name of Jesus. Do you have an experience of being "corrected" about something having to do with your faith or spiritual practice? How did you receive that correction?

Acts 19:8-20

Behind the text

- Ephesus was known as a center of magic; a place to find texts and practitioners of magic

In the text

- Paul works miracles (God does miracles through Paul), and it is proven that the name of Jesus is not a magic word.
- Those who practiced magic collected their books and destroyed them – at great expense. The books were offered, not collected; this wasn't a raid.

Discussion

- Is there a practice that you have given up (or are working to give up) that is related to your faith?

Acts 19:21-41

Behind the text

- The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World (100 BC)

In the text

- The first time Paul mentions going to Rome
- Paul plans to leave Ephesus under calm conditions (he isn't being run out of town)
- Silas is out, Erastus is in (2 Timothy 4:20)
- Paul has created an economic problem – merchants complain that Paul is bad for business because pagan statue sales have declined
- Alexander seems to be a spokesperson for the Jewish community (ie, not with Paul)
- Worshippers of Artemis try to start a legal battle, but the official says they don't have a case (repeats the pattern of what happened in Corinth)

Discussion

- Paul and the Christians of Ephesus did nothing to disturb the worship of Artemis. However, in later centuries, Christians would do lots of damage to rid the world of false gods. Is there a right time to destroy and/or eliminate pagan idols or practices?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Paul begins his journey toward Jerusalem – Chapter 20 (Saying Goodbye)

September 20, 2023

Opening Prayer:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.* (Collect for the Ordination of a Bishop, BCP 515)

Acts 20:1-6

In the text

- Focus on encouragement
- Paul and Timothy celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover) in Philippi; example of “a Jewish Paul who religiously integrates the practices of his ancestral faith with the belief that the living Jesus is God’s Messiah” (Wall, 219).

Discussion

- Who encourages you in your faith? How do you encourage others?

Acts 20:7-12

In the text

- First reference in the New Testament of observing a Christian sabbath; “breaking bread” probably refers to a common meal, not Holy Communion as we practice it, symbolic of social and spiritual solidarity.
- Even Paul could be very boring to some people. Meanwhile, Paul was so caught up he barely paused to bring Eutychus back to life and then resumed teaching

Discussion

- The death of Eutychus was a blip within the worship service. Would you be able to return to worship? What kinds of things distract us from worship?

Acts 20:13-16

In the text

- Luke uses the first person, “I,” “we,” etc.
- Paul is motivated by his own religious practice; desire to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost

Discussion

- Is there a certain place you like to observe certain holy days? Is there somewhere you would like to celebrate a holy day someday?

Acts 20:17-24

Behind the text

- Jesus' journey to Jerusalem

In the text

- Paul reminds the Ephesians what he has been up to
- "captive to the Spirit"
- Paul expects to suffer in Jerusalem just as he has suffered every other place he has gone for the gospel

Discussion

- How do you testify to the good news of God's grace? Do you have a story to tell about God's grace in your life?

Acts 20:25-38

In the text

- "overseers," (20:28) *episkopos* also translated as bishop, guardian (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:7, 1 Peter 2:25)
 - Authority from the Holy Spirit to care for the flock
- A good Christian leader must be mindful of purity, possessions, and power

In front of the text

- Theological implications of the church being obtained by the blood of Jesus (The Church's One Foundation, Hymn 525)

Discussion

- Paul had done what he could for the Ephesians, but it was time to leave. However, clearly, his teaching stayed with them after he was gone. What legacies have other people given you? What do you hope to leave others?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Paul reaches Jerusalem and is arrested – Chapter 21 September 27, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Grant, O God, that, following the example of your servant James the Just, brother of our Lord, your Church may give itself continually to prayer and to the reconciliation of all who are at variance and enmity; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.* (Collect for St. James of Jerusalem, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, October 23)

Acts 21:1-16

In the text

- Paul is on a “farewell tour” of the churches in bordering the Mediterranean, including churches he did not start. (Caesarea to Jerusalem is about 60 miles)
- Luke is with Paul.
- Emphasis on corporate prayer.
- Philip resurfaces in the story; it was Paul who drove Philip from Jerusalem and caused him to plant the church in Caesarea
- Paul’s friends urge him not to go to Jerusalem, but they support Paul in his decision to go

Discussion

- Paul and his friends seem to have contradictory information from the Holy Spirit. Have you ever had a similar experience?

Acts 21:17-26

In the text

- Paul is well received, but the Jerusalem elders bring up a controversial issue
- Paul neither confirms nor denies the rumor that he teaches Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses. Paul doesn’t have a speaking part in this section. We don’t get his words; we get his actions. He follows through with the proposed plan (at his own expense).

Discussion

- What can we learn from Paul’s willingness to go through with the purification ritual? How might we apply that to our own context?
- Paul seemed willing to be a Jew for the Jews and a Gentile for the Gentiles. What is the line between being accommodating and being disingenuous?

Acts 21:27-39

In the text

- The “Jews from Asia,” likely haven’t followed Paul to Jerusalem to call him out; they were also there for Pentecost and recognized him
- They claim that Paul has been speaking against Jews; something that never happened
- The Roman soldiers work to quiet the riot – they take Paul prisoner as much for his own protection as anything else
- The Jewish outcry, “away with him” continues the connection of Paul’s time to Jerusalem to that of Jesus’ time in Jerusalem (Luke 23:18; John 19:15).
- Paul identifies himself as an educated Jewish citizen of an important city. (implies that Paul isn’t rabble – he comes from means.)

Discussion

- Paul incites riots wherever he goes, but he seems unfazed and undeterred. Who do you know who is calm and composed in the face of turmoil?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Paul's defense in Jerusalem – Chapters 22 & 23

October 4, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Come Holy Spirit, come. Fill our minds with your wisdom, fill our hearts with your courage, fill our mouths with your praise. Then inspire us to do your will. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (*A Journey Through Acts*, 167.)

Acts 21:40-23:35 – In Front of the Text

- Paul is the first Christian Apologist.
- Christian Apology: Theology that defends Christianity.
- As a Christian apologist, Paul is not concerned with converting others. He does not suggest they repent. He does not offer salvation. His purpose is to defend his own experience of God.

Acts 21:40-22:5

In the text

- Paul spoke Greek to get the attention of the Roman official; now he speaks Hebrew to get the attention of the Jewish establishment
- Paul presents his bona fides. He is a Diaspora Jew, as are those who are criticizing him, but also connects himself directly with Jerusalem, having been taught by Gamaliel (a little namedropping).
- Paul provides examples of the work he did out of zeal for the law (persecuting the Way).

Discussion

- What are your Christian bona fides? Why might people listen to what you have to say about your relationship with Jesus?

(Acts 22:6-21 – Paul recounts his conversion experience)

Acts 22:22-30

Behind the text

- Roman citizenship is the most powerful social capital available. It means that you matter. Citizens were due certain rights and privileges and others could be punished for violating those rights.

In the text

- "... to the Gentiles" is a bridge too far. Now those opposed to Paul have heard enough.
- The Jewish opposition has been irrational at every other encounter. The pattern continues here, and the Jews prepare for a physical fight.

- Paul's citizenship claim forces the Roman authorities to step in. Paul is not only a citizen of Tarsus. Now he reveals his hidden ace – he is a born citizen of Rome.

Discussion

- How aware are you of your rights as an American? Have you ever been in a position when your rights were threatened?

Acts 23:1-11

Behind the text

- Lev. 19:15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.
- Ex. 22:28 You shall not revile God, or curse a leader of your people.
- By the time Luke was writing Acts, only the Pharisees remained. The Sadducees didn't survive Rome's destruction of Jerusalem.

In the text

- Paul starts by addressing the crowd as brothers.
- The crowd respond with violence, and Paul offers a curse
- Paul knows who Ananias is. He implies that Ananias' conduct made him unrecognizable.
- Paul links the death and resurrection of Jesus to Pharisaic theology. Pharisaic Judaism and Christianity are compatible.
- To some extent, Paul takes the spotlight off himself and turns it toward issues between Pharisees and Sadducees, who begin to argue. There is dissension in Israel that has nothing to do with Paul's Christian missionary work.
- We should notice that it seems like at least some of the Pharisees have been persuaded by Paul.
- Rome must step in to stop the free-for-all that commences.
- Jesus appears to Paul and speaks a second time.

Discussion

- Imagine you are Paul. Do the words of Christ sound like good news or bad news? Have you ever received "good news" that you didn't want to hear?

Acts 23:12-35

In the text

- Paul's murder is planned, but the plan is discovered, and Paul is offered protection. (motif of killing prisoners enroute continues in heist movies)
- Rome's interest in Paul is not theological. Various Roman leaders don't want his death on their hands.
- This is an opportunity for Rome to document that the Jews are a little out of hand; Rome is required to keep them in line

Discussion

- As in Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, and in Ephesus, a Roman official finds nothing wrong with what Paul is doing. Rome becomes a means to further the gospel. Have you ever received help from an unexpected source?

Acts of the Apostles

Missionary Journeys: Chapters 13-28

Paul's Roman Trial in Caesarea – Chapter 24 & 25

October 11, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Grant, O Lord, that the course of this world may be peaceably governed by your providence; and that your Church may joyfully serve you in confidence and serenity; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen* (Collect for Proper 3, BCP 229).

Acts 24:1-9

In the text

- Tertullus is the lawyer for the prosecution. He may or may not be Jewish.
- The prosecution offers “utmost gratitude” and names Felix as someone with “foresight” and “graciousness” while Paul is named a “pestilent fellow” and “agitator.”
- The charge of agitator is the charge most likely to appeal to Rome. Rome would want to get rid of someone who threatened the Pax Romana.

Discussion

- Is it disingenuous to begin a conversation the way Tertullus did? What's the difference between manipulation and influence?

Acts 24:10-21

In the text

- Paul “cheerfully” makes his defense.
- Paul points out that the “Jews from Asia” aren't there – they are the ones who caused the disturbance; the disturbance didn't originate with Paul; there is no evidence against him
- Paul confesses his faith

Discussion

- Can you think of a time when you were cheerful in a difficult circumstance?

Acts 24:22-27

In the text

- Felix is married to a Jewish woman and knows something about “the Way.”
- Felix continues to hold Paul, hoping to get money out of him; two years pass, and a new governor is appointed

Discussion

- Paul choice to subject himself to authority opened the pathway for Paul to talk to Felix about the Way. What choices can we make to allow the powerful to hear and learn God's truth?

Acts 25:1-12

In the text

- The Jews from Jerusalem make a new plan to kill Paul; Paul appeals to the emperor
- Festus is curious, speaks to Paul directly, and confers with his council before making a decision
- Paul's appeal triggers a chain of events that takes him to Rome (Acts 19:21, 23:11)

Discussion

- "Our story becomes like Paul's when our personal decisions are weighted with divine importance – when actions we choose to take or the words we decide to speak allow us to participate effectively in accomplishing God's plans" (Wall, 259). Can you think of a time when you consciously chose to act or speak in a way that would further God's plan?