

## Intro to Book of Acts

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Listen to Jesus' words in John 14:26

*The Companion, [or Advocate], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you. (or in KJV "bring all things to your remembrance.")*

This is one of my favourite Bible verses and one of my preferred strategies for preaching. Just trusting that the right things will be said and come to mind. It was also a tactic for going into exams, though I'm not sure that was a valid application! I rely on this promise that there is a Holy Spirit reminding us and teaching us, keeping us on track, just as Jesus promised. I count on the Holy Spirit holding us together and guiding us as a church, even as we have many conversations about exactly how that happens and how it is understood.

As a Preaching Team, we've decided to do some bible study in the next little while looking at the book of Acts. And whose acts are being described is up for debate, is it Acts of the apostles or as one author suggests "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" or the "Spirit-Directed Witness from Jerusalem to Rome."<sup>1</sup>

Acts picks up the story of Jesus where the Gospel of Luke left off and chronicles the experiences of the apostles in the days that followed Jesus' resurrection.

Biblical scholars can make really good arguments for why and when the book was written. One theory is that it might have been a defense written on behalf of Paul for his trial in Rome – spoiler alert, Paul gets sent to Rome and put on trial. The book of Acts does not mention the fall of Jerusalem which happened in the year 70 A.D. so it may have been written in the later 60's A.D.

This all matters for a lot of reasons we can't get into during a sermon and while it is historically based (there are place names and names of different Herods), it is not a book of history as we commonly understand history, it carries a theological perspective that we are asked to pay attention to. It is essentially about how the Good News about Jesus was spread from a small group of Judean Jews, all the way to Rome. It's about the birth of the church, about how the life and teachings of Jesus eventually ended up reaching us.

Scholars note that the author's Greek is among the best in the New Testament." That he has excellent writing skills and that the writing reflects the "moods and language of the changing scenes." "Divine direction is shown in angel visitations, visions, answers to prayer, Spirit guidance, as well as by scriptural citations and allusions."

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<sup>1</sup> *Believers Church Bible Commentary on Acts*, Chalmer E. Faw

The characters in this book cover all major classes and conditions of human kind: officials, artisans, military people, women, Samaritans (who were much not liked at the time), Gentiles (that is to say people who were not born Jewish), demon-possessed and sick, servants. They are all there.

What I do know, having done so very recently, is that it's a good read that is helped by a grasp of geography or a look at some maps (as our décor suggests).

So the Preaching Team is inviting all of us to read the whole book. Each week has a focus, but I would strongly recommend that you sit down and read it all the way through and see what comes to you. I'd also recommend that you use a translation of the Bible that is not familiar to you. That way you won't get triggered by certain phrases and words that we can think we know that they mean when they come up. (Bible Gateway has different translations <https://www.biblegateway.com/>)

To help you out I'd like to show you a "Coles notes" of the book of Acts: Acts in three minutes video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJIHgMR7LP0>

That is not the whole story. ☺

We read it as part of scripture assuming that it may still have something to say to us, even today. That it might still bring God's Word to us. That the Spirit will teach us as that first verse I read suggests. This is the journey you are invited on, to try to hear from God by entering this book again.

The period that Acts covers is often referred to as "the Early Church" and our Anabaptist ancestors in the faith loved to think of it as a golden age of sorts in the life of disciples of Jesus. They wished to be like that church instead of like the enormous institutional behemoth that "church" had become by the 1500's.

The Anabaptists longed for lives of witness, lives that were transformed by the Holy Spirit, just as those in the Early Church. They also recognized that doing church work empowered by the Spirit is different than just doing it on our own. This is a key point to hold on to. It is very possible to do good work inspired by many good causes, it is also better to do the work empowered by the Holy Spirit.

**As we turn out attention towards what God is calling us to next at TUMC, it seems helpful to notice how God moved through the Early Church's witness.**

I invite you as you read it to pay attention to what questions come up for you or for us as a church.

I hope you will find some things you weren't familiar with before. There is a lot to be inspired. And there are a few head-scratchers in there, including of a guy who falls out of a window because of a long sermon. And you think our sermons are long!

There are stories of powerful healings, escapes from prison, miracles, sermons, travel, shipwrecks, nominations and election processes, church discernment and church disagreement. There are “aha” moments and heated arguments about what the Spirit is or isn’t directing the apostles to do. And there are at least 3 versions of Paul’s conversion story, it’s interesting to note how it gets told differently each time. There’s a lot of storytelling going on in the book of Acts.,

A reader soon notices that one of the main characters in this narrative is the so-called Holy Spirit. The guidance and empowerment provided by the Holy Spirit runs all through the book. Apparently “this is so central that there are more words for power in the book than there are for love.” (Paul makes up for it later in his letters.)

In Christian doctrine we know this Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, one aspect of the wholeness of who God is (Creator, Redeemer Sustainer or Father, Son Holy Spirit). We know that the word for Spirit in Hebrew (*Ruach*) means breath, we know that Jesus talked about Spirit as wind blowing where it will and as a power that is somewhat mysterious and uncontrollable. So when we talk about Holy Spirit we are talking about something that is hard to pin down. But like the wind, you see the effect of the Spirit, you sometimes feel the Spirit and at other times we are not aware of it at all. <sup>2</sup>

In the portion we are referring to this morning (Acts 1-8:1), we have one of the most familiar passages about the Holy Spirit, Pentecost. Where a band of frightened Jesus followers have an amazing experience of power coming over them like a rushing wind, giving them language and healing skills that they did not possess before. They are empowered to bear witness to what has happened to them, to open up the doors and draw other people in, people they didn’t think God would be interested in.

They know they are experiencing something new, but their instinct is to see how it all fits in with how God has worked with God’s people up to that point. There are a few sermons in this section, including one by the disciple Peter right at the beginning. When you read it you notice that he’s trying to connect what he knows about God’s story with what’s happening now; a great skill to develop, to understand that it is a continuous narrative. Notice how Peter’s understanding of God’s love and mercy changes throughout the book. We are getting an account of things as they happen (that’s how it’s set up), and Peter has a lot of new insights. And the church has new insights and then some people don’t have any insight and throw them in prison all the time. The bi “aha” moment for Peter is: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism.” It is a key point that we might do well to remember.

And the, of course, we have the weird and disturbing account of how Ananias and Sapphira who keel over dead for supposedly having lied the Holy Spirit. And we have the of Stephen, a man of wisdom and of Spirit, ending up being stoned to death.

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<sup>2</sup> John 20:21-22 – “Jesus breathed on them.”

He dies with Jesus' words on his lips, asking God to forgive his enemies. How could he do that except by the Holy Spirit's empowering him to pray such a prayer?

Now by 2019 I know that talking about the work of the Holy Spirit can get tricky. By now we have a theological discipline called pneumatology (studies about the Holy Spirit), we have Pentecostals who function by trying to recapture the Early Church's miraculous experiences, we've had the Reformation, the so-called Enlightenment, we've had Colonialism, Evangelism (capital E), the so-called Charismatic movement and many movements of spiritual renewal in the church. We've got baggage.

God and humans continue to weave their stories together. I think it is safe to say that it is bit of a mixed bag when it comes to our understanding of who Holy Spirit is and how it moves in the life of the church.

*In On the Way Café we shared a bit about our formative experiences of the Holy Spirit and this may be a good topic of conversation over coffee. How have you experienced the Holy Spirit?*

*I'll tell you about one for me. When I was a teenager it was a rekindling of what was called the Charismatic movement. A missionary called Nelson Litwiller came down to visit the other missionaries and told them essentially (as I remember it) that after 30 odd years of being a missionary he realized that he had done, he had done it all under his own power and not empowered by the Holy Spirit. It was shocking and engaging and the missionaries went with him on this journey of trying to rekindle an experience of the Holy Spirit among them. And then eventually I ended up in a youth group that was very keen on speaking in tongues, seeing dreams and visions and interpreting them. They were having great experiences and I couldn't for the life of me dream dreams, have visions or speak in tongues. I thought that God was cheating me out of a wonderful experience. I kept asking God and praying to God to please, please give me the baptism of the Holy Spirit and it wouldn't happen. Then one evening I remember lying in bed and God saying (or me understanding): "Can you just be quiet about it already? I said I would send the Holy Spirit. Sent. Done. Move on." Which was God's way of telling me, "You're good. Your experience might not be like everyone else's but don't doubt that my Spirit is with you in however you are experiencing it. I don't mean this triumphalistically, but many of those dear friends who were having these emotionally laden experiences, the flame burned out and it was hard to continue for them once it wasn't as miraculous and special, and once real life kicked in.*

*Spirit it like the wind, I am not going to tell you exactly how Spirit works and doesn't work. I'm telling you my experience.*

Bryan Moyer-Suderman has a song that I love:

How do you know when the Spirit's here? (a wind that blows, fire that comes, a voice calls out, time to make a change, there's a people formed).

At one point the apostles are questioned by the Jewish leaders from the Jerusalem Council (after they were put in prison and miraculously released by an angel). The Council is trying to decide what to do with them, with a strong bias toward punishment. One of the leaders, Gamaliel has some excellent wisdom about figuring out the movement of God's Spirit. He advocates openness, here's what he says: "Let them go. If their plan or activity is of human origin, it will end in ruin. If it originates with God, you won't be able to stop them. Instead, you would actually find yourselves fighting against God!"

That's good advice for some of us who would like to have everything figured out in advance!

Just as a body lies lifeless without breath, the church is lifeless without Spirit. And so we continue to sort out what it looks like for us, here and now. Reading Acts together is one part of that sorting.

As I read Acts, I made a list of all the ways I observed Spirit working in the book of Acts. You can make your own list, and try to see if you can see some of that happening in our midst as well.

TUMC at a point of looking forward with vision and making plans about leadership and mission. As we do that let us observe the work of the Spirit, let us seek guidance of the Spirit and let us be open so that we are not fighting against God.

Amen.

PS. (Not part of spoken sermon)

Here are some things that churches do as per ACTS:

Prays together

Eats together

Bears witness to healing

Discerns together

Interacts with scripture

Shares things in common (detaches from material possessions)

Connects the narrative of God at work in the world (sees God at work)

Argues, regroup, sets out

Organizes themselves to serve the needy.