

ly..... **Daily Devotions**

Devotions – February 28 – March 6, 2021

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Nuggets from the Book of Acts

A few months before I retired as pastor of Emmanuel, Menominee, in 2013, I led a study in the book of Acts for the Lay School for Mission hosted by the Menominee Valley Conference of our Synod. Throughout this week I will offer some reflections, or “nuggets,” from that study.

Sunday, February 28, 2021

When the Lay School’s director asked for a volunteer to lead a study in Acts, I offered because I was a history major in college and, although I was not well-versed in Acts, I understood it to be the New Testament’s “history book,” that is, an historical account of the development of the Christian Church in the 1st century. What I came to discover is that it is far more than a history book. It is officially called the Acts of the Apostles for good reason. Its two main characters are the apostles Peter and Paul. Other apostles are supporting characters—Stephen, Philip, John Mark, and Luke (the author), to name a few. But the lead character, the real star of the book, is the Holy Spirit. Someone called the book of Acts, “A series of God’s surprises affected by the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is mentioned more in the book of Acts than anywhere else in the Bible. Acts tells how the church grew from a small, frightened, underground group in Jerusalem to a force that changed the world forever and outlasted one of the greatest empires in history. There is no rational explanation for this apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. We say that the church is both the work and the workshop of the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit both creates the church and works in and through it to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and bring the kingdom of God into this world.

It was, for me, a wonderful and enriching discovery that Acts is not just the history book of the New Testament, giving an account of the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the Christian Church; it is that Acts itself is a proclamation of the gospel and of the action of God through the Holy Spirit to witness to Jesus Christ. On this day of Sabbath worship, reflect on your own understanding of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s work in your life. I suggest that you start by reading Martin Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed in his Small Catechism.

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for the personal histories that define and direct each of our lives. As we reflect on the book of Acts this week, show us how your salvation history is also our histories as your baptized children. Open our hearts and minds to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*

Monday, March 1, 2021

Text: Acts 1:8

“But you will receive power come upon you; and you Jerusalem, in all Judea ends of the earth.”



when the Holy Spirit has will be my witnesses in and Samaria, and to the

The promise in the passage quoted above, spoken by Jesus at his ascension, was fulfilled ten days later on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit invaded the apostles, empowering them to speak in languages unknown to them but understood by the vast array of pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the festival. The Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament are replete with passages that describe how the Holy Spirit works in individuals, instilling faith, reminding them of Jesus’ teachings, giving direction, assurance and comfort. Acts has little of this. In Acts, the emphasis is on the Holy Spirit creating and building the church. The power of the Holy Spirit is seen in demonstrative ways. This power may be manifested in individuals, but in a way that affects and benefits the lives of others (healing, witnessing) for the sake of the church. No one in Acts claims the Holy Spirit for their own personal enjoyment or enrichment, but as an instrument of the Holy Spirit in moving forward God’s plan and purpose for spreading the gospel and building the church.

Consider how the Holy Spirit is using you, or could use you, to support and advance the work of the church.

Let us pray: *We are humbled, dear Lord, that you call us, with our feeble and limited abilities, to do the important and transformative work of the church. We can only do that which is empowered by your Spirit at work in and through us. Let it be done according to your will. Amen.*



Tuesday, March 2, 2021

Matthew ends his Gospel with the risen Christ saying to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Luke begins the book of Acts with Christ, at his ascension, telling them, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

We understand from these texts that the chief purpose and function of the church is mission. The church is not meant to be a local or exclusive social club. It is created for mission, the spreading

of the good news of Jesus Christ. The action in the first 7 chapters of Acts takes place in Jerusalem, then extends to Samaria and Judea in chapters 8-12, then spreads to the known world in chapters 13-28 as Paul carries the gospel throughout the Roman Empire and to the ends of the earth in his missionary journeys.

Consider how you are called to be a modern-day apostle (messenger), sharing the good news in your local setting, starting with your own family and circle of friends, then supporting the mission work of your local congregation and, through it, the mission outreach of our Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Let us pray: Thank you, Lord, for calling us to be your ambassadors and messengers. Help us to find meaningful and effective ways to translate our faith into words and actions. Amen.



Wednesday, March 3, 2021

Text: Acts 2:14

“But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.’”

What was the greatest sermon you ever heard? Chances are, it wasn't one that was the most carefully crafted or most powerfully delivered, but one that, for whatever reason, most deeply touched your heart and penetrated your soul. The sermon Peter delivered before the gathered pilgrims on the Day of Pentecost was that kind of sermon. Luke tells us, “they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’” Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:37-38). A summary of Peter's sermon in 25 words or less might go like this: The Jews had Jesus crucified (according to God's plan) because they did not accept him as the Messiah, but God raised him from the dead. He returned to heaven and reigns with the Father.

The hymn “There Is a Balm in Gilead” says, “If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, ‘He died for all.’” Peter's sermon was so effective because he simply witnessed to what he had seen and believed. It is interesting to see how Peter's first sermon in Acts 2 gives witness to what we profess in the Apostles' Creed: vs. 36 – “Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;” vs. 23 – “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;” vs. 31 – “he descended into hell;” vss. 24/32 – “he rose again from the dead;” vss. 33/34 – “he is seated at the right hand of God.” If you say the Apostles' Creed every day as Luther suggests, and hold it close to your heart, you will be ready to witness to “the love of Jesus and say, ‘He died for all’”.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as the Holy Spirit empowered Peter to give witness to his faith on the first Pentecost Day, give us the empowering presence of your Spirit that we, too, may be ready at all times to give witness to the good news of your redeeming love for all as expressed in the life, death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.



Thursday, March 4, 2021

Text: Acts 8:9-13

“Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.”

For my children’s sermon on a Sunday when the gospel reading was the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana, I related the story to the kids while holding two pitchers. One was glass with clear water; the other was metal with red food dye in the bottom of it. When telling how Jesus performed his first recorded miracle, I poured the water from the glass pitcher into the metal pitcher, then back into the glass pitcher. This time, of course, the water came out the color of red wine. Amid gasps from the kids and the congregation, one child exclaimed, “Pastor did magic!”

The people of Samaria flocked to Simon and listened intently to what he had to say because they were impressed by his feats of magic. But when Philip came to town and “proclaimed the Messiah to them, the crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did...” This story shows that the word of God and the name of Jesus has a power to attract and move people greater than any magic. Luke tells us that “there was great joy in that city” as many of the people, including Simon, responded in faith to the good news of Jesus Christ and were baptized. There is nothing magical about proclaiming the good news. We just need to share it from the heart.

Let us pray: All-powerful God, how blessed we are to have heard the good news of your amazing love for us, made known to us through the teachings and atoning sacrifice of your Son Jesus and the witnessing of the apostles. Inspire us with confidence to share this good news with others. Amen.



Friday, March 5, 2021

Text: Acts 11:27-30

“At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.”

This passage, among others, gives evidence that Christian response to social needs was an important part of the church’s evangelical outreach right from the beginning. I say “evangelical” because proclaiming the good news of God’s love for all people in Jesus Christ includes putting words into actions. God not only desires our eternal salvation, God cares about our well-being in the here and now. The disciples, concerned about the Christians facing a famine in Judea, started with themselves, reaching into their own pockets to send relief to the sufferers. This passage is a precursor to our caring and sharing ministries through the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, the ELCA Domestic Disaster Relief and Lutheran World Relief. It has its modern-day equivalent in our support of local food pantries, programs to provide food, clothing, personal hygiene products and school supplies to students, and the like. What a joy and privilege to be part of the ongoing outreach mission of the church that had its beginnings with the first disciples.

Let us pray: *Blessed Father, open our eyes to those in need in our own communities and around the world. Open our hearts to express compassion. Open our purse strings to act in generosity. For in so doing, we proclaim your love and concern for everyone in need. Amen.*



Saturday, March 6, 2021

Text: Acts 17:22-23

“Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.’”

On January 20, following the inauguration ceremony at the U. S. capitol, President Biden and Vice President Harris went to Arlington National Cemetery and laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. When Paul arrived in Athens, he noted the preponderance of temples, statues and altars to a wide variety of gods. It was said at the time, “It is easier to find a god than a man

in Athens.” Then Paul noticed one altar dedicated “To an unknown god.” Paul found his opening and wisely declared to the Greeks who had gathered to hear what he had to say, “Let me tell you about the God who is unknown to you.” He went on to tell them about the God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (v. 28).

When Paul wrote his first Epistle to the Christians in Corinth, he stated, “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” Yet in Athens he matched wits with philosophers and learned thinkers. Paul had the wisdom and ability to tailor his message to each audience. Effective communication of the good news of Jesus Christ involves not coming with a pre-conceived notion of what others need to hear, but sensitively listening and entering into the needs, concerns and questions of others and responding with the good news *they* need to hear.

Let us pray: *Gracious God, grant us the guidance and encouragement of your Spirit in all our efforts and opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. Amen.*

