

# Daily Devotions

June 26 – July 2, 2022

By Rev. Doug Schoen, Retired  
Menominee, MI

## Nuggets from the Book of Acts

This week's devotional messages are a continuation of my last round of devotions based on the Acts of the Apostles. More than a history of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century church, the book of Acts is a witness to the work of the Holy Spirit in forming the church through the apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ.

**Sunday, June 26, 2022**

Text: Acts 1:6-8

**“So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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.”**

In Genesis 1:1-2, we read that the Holy Spirit is the breath of God, active in creation. In John 14, we read that the Holy Spirit is God's gift to us, abides in us, advocates for us, and teaches us. In Romans 8, we read that the Holy Spirit brings us life and peace, helps us when we are weak, and intercedes for us in prayer. The Acts of the Apostles expands on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is mentioned more in the book of Acts than anywhere else in the Bible. The Spirit not only works in the lives of individuals, the Spirit builds the church. We say that the church is both the work and the workshop of the Holy Spirit, that is, the Spirit builds the church and it is in the church that the Spirit does its work. Someone called the book of Acts, “A series of God's surprises affected by the Holy Spirit.” Reflect on these passages and consider how the Spirit has worked and is at work in your life. Then give thanks to God for the gift of the Spirit, to you and to all who profess faith in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: *Dear heavenly Father, “by my own understanding or strength, I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith.” Thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit without whom I could not know you, love you or serve you. Guide me this day by your Spirit. Amen.*

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**Monday, June 27, 2022**

Text: Acts 1:8

**“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.”**

The risen Christ’s words to his followers at his ascension serve as a prelude to what we read in the rest of the book of Acts. The action in the first seven 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. The spread of the gospel in our time is taking place in a somewhat unexpected way. For a year or more, our churches were shuttered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though most of our churches have returned to in-person worship, our members are returning in substantially smaller numbers than before the pandemic took hold. However, most of our churches have adapted to the use of social media or expanded on what they were already doing. The result is that, while we are serving our members who are not yet ready to return in person, we are also reaching people (inactive members and non-members) in increasing numbers. People have a vast variety of opportunities to hear the good news of Jesus Christ proclaimed by clicking into Facebook, YouTube and the like, on Sunday mornings or any time during the week. I recently shared a wonderful devotional message from Robin Steinke, President of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, on Facebook. I received “likes” from people all over the United States. While we may lament the slow return of people to in-person worship, let us rejoice and give thanks that the “witness” to which Christ has called us is taking place in new and effective ways.

Let us pray: *Dear Lord, thank you for showing us new and effective ways to spread the good news of your love and redemption in Jesus Christ. Continue to show us how we can broaden our outreach that more and more people may come to know you, love you and serve you. Amen.*

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**Tuesday, June 28, 2022**

Text: Acts 4:8-13

**“<sup>8</sup> Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’ There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.”**

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day this year, I read a newspaper article that compared the 20<sup>th</sup> century protest leader to the 16<sup>th</sup> century protest leader for whom he was named. The article told about a trip MLK's father, MLK, Sr., took to Germany in 1934 to attend a Baptist Congress in Berlin. MLK, Sr. was one of several African American clergy who attended the conference. The article pointed out why so many African Americans, historically, have been drawn to the Baptist church. Whereas most churches receive ministers appointed by higher-ups, Baptists allow each church to choose its own minister — regardless of training or background. The article stated, "In a Baptist church, you didn't have to have training at an official seminary or have degrees. You could be trained by another minister, as King's father and grandfather were. It was the one institution where a Black person didn't have to depend on a white person for a job."

We might rightfully claim that one of the strengths of the Lutheran church is that its clergy are well-educated and certified, meeting a high standard of preparedness to qualify for ordination. This does not, however, negate or lessen the witness provided by the laity. These PrayFaithfully devotions are a good example. I am continually inspired and enriched by the witness to God active in the lives of the lay members of our synod who write devotions for this platform. I am often times "amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus."

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, thank you for the inspired lay members of our synod who boldly proclaim their faith and witness to your love and grace in Jesus Christ through the devotions they write as well as their words and actions in daily life. Continue to strengthen us all in our shared witness. Amen.*

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Wednesday, June 29, 2022

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.'"**

On the festival of Pentecost described in the second chapter of Acts, the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak, proclaiming the good news of salvation through the crucified and risen Christ, in languages unknown to them. The people questioned this, and some accused them of being drunk. In response, Peter stepped up and delivered an incredible, impromptu sermon that resulted in some 3,000 converts becoming charter members of the newborn Christian church. In chapter 4, we read of Peter and John being arrested for publicly witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus. They were arrested and brought before the high priest and other high-ranking leaders in Judaism. Undaunted by their interrogation, Peter once again proclaimed salvation through Christ alone. We are told that "*when they saw the boldness of Peter and John..., they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.*"

This is a far cry from the timid, frightened Peter who denied being associated with Jesus while standing in the same place at the time of Jesus' arrest. Where did he get this boldness? We are given an answer in Acts 4:23-30: *"After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness."*

When your faith is challenged, or you are given an opportunity to witness to your faith in Jesus Christ, pray, as the apostles did, that the Holy Spirit will give you boldness.

Let us pray: *Lord God, so fill us with your living Spirit that we may have boldness to witness to Jesus our Lord whenever you give us the opportunity. Amen.*

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**Thursday, June 30, 2022**

Text: Acts 15:11

**"On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."**

Who can be saved? What must one be required to do to be saved? These were critical questions the early church struggled with. At first, Christianity grew out of Judaism. Most of the apostles held to the belief that Jesus was the Messiah to the Jews and that Gentile converts to Christianity had to become Jews first by being circumcised, adhering to food laws, and so forth. But in time, Gentile converts to Christianity outnumbered Jewish converts. Chapter 15 of Acts tells that Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the other Apostles to discuss this matter. They reported the conversion of many Gentiles in Phoenicia and Samaria that *"brought great joy to all the believers."* *"But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses'."* Surprisingly, it was Peter, not Paul, who stood up and said, regarding the Gentiles, *"God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a*

*yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”*

Thank God for the liberating good news proclaimed by Peter, Paul and the other Apostles. Salvation comes to all, regardless of nationality, ethnic background, social status, or any other condition. There is nothing we are required to be or to do to qualify for salvation. It is a free gift of grace offered to all who believe that Jesus is Lord.

Let us pray: *Gracious God, thank you for accepting us and saving us, not because of who we are or what we have done, but solely because of your expansive love for us mediated through the death and resurrection of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Help us to speak, demonstrate and rejoice in this great good news. Amen.*

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**Friday, July 1, 2022**

Text: Acts 18:24-28

**“Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.”**

Twice in this passage, and once again in 19:1-10, we read that the early Christians were known as the Way, or followers of the Way. In fact, according to Acts 11:26, the word “Christian” was first applied to the followers of Jesus Christ in Antioch. The followers of Jesus were more commonly known as the Way. This seems an appropriate and fitting title for those who believed in and followed Jesus as their Lord and Savior because Jesus said of himself, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Two essential characteristics of the Way are revealed in this passage. One is the belief that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one who would bring salvation to his people and restore them to a right relationship with God. The second is that one becomes a believer by grace. Luther wrote in his Small Catechism, “I believe that I cannot, by my own understanding or effort, believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts (grace), and sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” We do not believe by our own ability, but by the grace of God working in us through the Holy Spirit. The Way is not a directional term, but a Way of life. Jesus is our Way to the Father. That belief defines the way we should live our lives. If we daily follow Jesus as the Way, then we will not lose our way in life.

Let us pray: *Dear Father, this world beckons us to go in many different directions that lead us away from you. Help us, by your grace and the guidance of the Spirit, to go in the way you have set before us in your word, following Jesus who is the Way. Amen.*

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**Saturday, July 2, 2022**

Text: Acts 17:1-6

**“...they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.’ Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason’s house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also...’”**

Paul and Silas, by their preaching, were “*turning the world upside down.*” That’s what the word of God, particularly the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection for our salvation, does. Jesus said the word of God is a two-edged sword, that is, it cuts both ways. This certainly happened in Thessalonica. Some were so outraged by Paul’s message—that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and that he, who was crucified, rose from the dead—that rioting ensued. But others—Jews and Greeks (Gentiles), men and women, leading citizens and common folks, embraced Paul’s message and their lives were never the same. From the witnessing of Paul and the other Apostles to this day, this incredibly good news has continued to turn the world upside down. Paul had his own world turned upside down on the road to Damascus. There could not have been a more radical transformation in a person’s life than there was for Paul. Even his name was changed to signify the difference.

How has the good news of Jesus Christ transformed your life? Has it turned your world upside down? For some, it is a total transformation. For others, like myself, who have grown up in the faith, it can mean a daily transformation from embracing the values, influences and priorities of the world, to embracing and walking in the values, influences and priorities of the kingdom of God.

Let us pray: *Great and glorious God, continue to invade our lives with your redeeming word in ways that will turn our world upside down. Then use us to turn the world around us upside down with each word of hope and each act of kindness we offer. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

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