

“THE ACTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

April 15, 2018, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Acts 1:1-5

Give your attention to the reading of God’s eternally true Holy Word in Acts 1:1-5. If you are wondering what happened to II Peter, I have moved the continuation of that sermon series to the evening, so this evening we will take up II Peter 1:12-15, a great and important text.

Prayer:

Introduction.

So how would you say you are doing this morning? Fine. Yeah, but, really? Do you have your world by the tail or does your world seem to have you? As I sometimes say, are you just hanging on to the world by the grass?

Do you feel like there are things going on that seem out of your control or you can’t figure out how to change or fix? Maybe there are things in you, habits, issues, you seem powerless to control. Maybe you are dealing with some physical or health issues, illness, pain, cancer.

Maybe there are some things in your relationships or in your marriage that don’t seem right but you don’t know what to do, you feel powerless to change. Maybe somethings with your kids. Kids are a huge challenge, they have a way of pushing us past our pay grade, past our abilities and wisdom.

How about at work, on the job, at the office? Things could be different or better, but how? You can’t seem to get a handle on it.

And how about our world. Yikes, the headlines and breaking news stories just keep getting crazier and crazier. Things seem to be spiraling out of control and all kinds of smart people have all kinds of conflicting ideas. Trade wars and war wars. The stock market. Milk prices down, but other commodity prices are up.

Do you feel powerless, weak, uncertain, foolish? Or where you just fine until I started talking, but now not so much? Is ignorance bliss?

Remember two weeks ago on Resurrection Sunday morning I preached how the cross and the resurrection exposed the foolishness and weakness of man and demonstrated that Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

But that was Easter, what about now? Sure we believe in Jesus and what He did on the cross. Yes, He died to save us from our sins, we accept Him as our Savior. Sure, we are going to heaven, but what about life on earth until then? “Jesus, what have you done for me lately?”

What does the power of God and the wisdom of God look like in real life, in our practical daily living? In our world today?

The Book of Acts.

The Book of Acts is about how the resurrection power and wisdom of God changed and shaped the lives of the first Christians, and how it impacted the world during a time in history that was not so much different than our post-modern and post-Christian world. We face similar challenges and opposition.

We find in the book of Acts an unleashing of a power so great it turned the world upside down, a power that can turn our worlds around and upside down.

The Sequel. The Book of Acts.

This morning I will just give a brief introduction to this truly powerful book that we will spend some time in at least for the next couple of months. The book begins:

“In the first book, O Theophilus.” What does that mean? It means that Acts is volume II of Dr. Luke’s writings, a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Here is how Luke started his first book:

Luke 1:3-4 ... it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

So Acts is Luke II. Some call it Acts. Some The Acts of the Apostles. Others suggest Some of the Acts of Some of the Apostles. Perhaps more accurately it could be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit. This is the record of the outpouring of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit through the words and actions of the apostles.

Someone proposed the cumbersome title, “The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by His Holy Spirit through His Apostles.”

In other words, if Luke’s first volume covered all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven, then we can assume volume two will cover what Jesus *continued* to do and to teach through the Holy Spirit *after* he was taken up to heaven.

By whatever name this is a book of acts, not thoughts, not ideas, not musings. This is the church in action and on the move.

This is what the power of God and the wisdom of God looks like when men and women take it to heart and put it into practice in real and personal and practical ways in their lives and in the world around them.

Luke was a medical doctor and a scholar. He carefully researched and interviewed eyewitnesses and wrote in order to give Theophilus greater certainty and assurance that these things are true.

Glory to God for doctors and lawyers and other professionals who pursue a second career in ministry as pastors, evangelists and missionaries. He used his gifts to help the church.

This book is important in the NT to show that our faith is built on the solid foundations of historical fact. This is not a myth, some made up fairy tale. The times, places, people and events are all verifiable.

Around the turn of the last century a skeptic and atheist scholar, Sir William M. Ramsay, took on the truth of Luke's writing but was so impressed with the historical accuracy of Luke that he renounced atheism and became a believer. Ramsay writes, "Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect to its trustworthiness...Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

As Christians, it's no surprise a book inspired by the Holy Spirit is historically accurate!

Acts 1:2.

Consider what happened to the apostles Jesus choose. Twelve uneducated, simple, ordinary blue collar kind of guys, with nothing to commend them, no big names, no degrees, no letters after their names, no money, nobodies.

That's part of what drove all the important people crazy. Who are these guys and how in the world are they turning the world upside down?

How in the world did their movement become the most dominant force in the Roman Empire in just two centuries? And how in the world despite all the efforts of the world, the flesh and the devil, and all the persecution of evil men, is Christianity and the church still such a huge part of world history and still flourishing all over the globe? Where did they get their power and wisdom?

There are two sources of their power and wisdom.

Acts 1:3.

First, the many proofs of the resurrection of Jesus.

I Corinthians 15:5-8 He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Jesus presented Himself alive, by appearing to them (visible) and by speaking to them (heard as well as seen), eating with them (clearly not a ghost). He proved Himself to all their senses.

The apostles were all witnesses of the resurrection. He was very much alive. He had power and victory over death. He was who He said He was.

The resurrection from the dead proves Jesus is God. That Jesus has all power and authority. That all His words are validated and true. That the Gospel is true, we have complete forgiveness of all our sins and are reconciled to God, because Jesus has offered up Himself as the complete and perfect atonement for sins at the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

This is a radical claim that only Christianity makes. All the founders of other religions completed their words and actions during their lifetime. When they died they were done. But Jesus was only getting going at His death and after His death, He kept going as Acts shows.

The story doesn't end at the resurrection or at the ascension.

A risen Christ is a complete game changer, it changes everything, it literally changed the course of history. Now everyone has to deal with Him. You and I have to deal with Him. You can't just take or leave Him. You can't just dismiss Him as some dead historical figure.

He is the power of God and the wisdom of God and He turned the world upside down and you are going to come face to face with Him soon. You have to deal with Him.

Is Jesus real to you? Do you see Him and hear Him in His Word, in worship, in the sacraments when He presents Himself to all our senses?

He was the power of God and the wisdom of God at the resurrection and He is the power of God and the wisdom of God in His church by His Spirit. Without this proof we have no power and no wisdom.

Acts 1:4-5.

The second source of the apostles surprising power and wisdom is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus told them to wait for Him. Don't leave home without Him. You won't be able to do anything without His power and wisdom. Because He is absolute essential for life. In other words, the coming of the Holy Spirit would change everything. This is the promise that changes everything. We will consider this more closely when we get to chapter two.

Implications and application.

The Book of Acts begins in Jerusalem with a small band of eleven men, a few women and some other followers. Only a few days before they had been a frightened, cowardly group.

The Book of Acts ends some thirty years later in Rome, the pagan center of the world with Paul preaching boldly after establishing dozens of churches.

“Acts describes the amazing transformation of the disciples from doubters who denied Christ, to world changers filled with the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts does not finish the story of God's amazing work through His church. It continues today” (Kevin Halloran).

Acts is the story of a wild fire that erupted in about 33 AD and is still burning and spreading. It is the spreading flame of the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit dwells in us giving us power to change our lives and our world.

How did this happen from such a tiny little mustard seed of faith? We will follow their journey, their path from fear to great faith. Let's be Theophilus and listen and read and learn and experience. Does the Gospel really have power to change lives and even the world? Can weak, broken, seemingly powerless and foolish vessels like us be instruments of God's power?

I want us to capture their confidence, enthusiasm, vision and Spirit-filled power. They weren't perfect by any stretch but they were filled with the power of God and the wisdom of God and it made a life-changing difference and was cause for much joy and fruitfulness.

This is the continuing story of what Jesus came into our world to do. This is the foundation on which we are called to build.

God is always up to something. God never wastes a moment of time.

As we walk with the apostles out into a foreign and pagan and hostile world, may we be willing instrument of God's wisdom and power in a way that actually turns our little corner of the world upside down.

I want to conclude by reading one man's experience as he encountered the book of Acts. I first read this 30 years ago and have never forgotten it. This little out of print book is one of my treasures. A pastor by the name of J.B. Phillips set out to translate the NT into a modern paraphrase. Here is what he wrote after he finished translating Acts.

The Young Church in Action, Translator's Preface, by JB Phillips

“It is impossible to spend several months in close study of the remarkable short book, conventionally known as the Acts of the Apostles, without being profoundly *stirred* and, to be honest, *disturbed*. The reader is *stirred* because he is seeing Christianity, the real thing, in action for the first time in human history. The newborn Church, as vulnerable as any human child, having neither money, influence nor power in the ordinary sense, is setting forth joyfully and courageously to win the pagan world for God through Christ. The young Church, like all young creatures, is appealing in its simplicity and singleheartedness. Here we are seeing the Church in its first youth, valiant and unspoiled – a body of ordinary men and women joined in an unconquerable fellowship never before seen on this earth.

“Yet we cannot help feeling *disturbed* as well as moved, for this surely is the Church as it was meant to be. It is vigorous and flexible, for these are the days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle-bound by over-organization. These men did not make “acts of faith,” they believed; they did not “say their prayers,” they really prayed. They did not hold conferences on psychosomatic medicine, they simply healed the sick. But if they were uncomplicated and naïve by modern standards, we have ruefully to admit that they were open on the God-ward side in a way that is almost unknown today.

“No one can read this book without being convinced that there is Someone here at work besides mere human beings. Perhaps because of their very simplicity, perhaps because of their readiness to believe, to obey, to give, to suffer, and if need be to die, the Spirit of God found what surely, He must always be seeking – a fellowship of men and women so united in love and faith that He can work in them and through them with the minimum of let or hindrance. Consequently, it is a matter of sober historical fact that never before has any small body of ordinary people so moved the world that their enemies could say, with tears of rage in their eyes, that *these men “have turned the world upside down!”*”

Holy Father, as we enter into this wonderful, inspired book in your Holy Word I pray that you would fill us with you Holy Spirit's power and wisdom that we might hear and understand and believe and obey, and that this would transform us and our lives the way it did the apostles and bear good fruit in our hearts and homes and church, for your glory. Do this by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and is now at work in us. In His strong name we pray, Amen.