

“We’re on a mission from God.” John Belushi and Dan Akroyd made the line famous through their characters, Jake and Elwood, in the 1980 movie, “The Blues Brothers.” It’s an absolute classic – the kind of movie that never won any awards because it wasn’t dramatic enough or pretentious in the right kinds of ways, didn’t feature Meryl Streep or Lionardo DiCaprio, and it wasn’t generally received well by the cinematic critical community.¹ It’s part musical, part comedy, part action, with over the top chase and crash scenes, guest appearances from some of the greatest musicians ever...and an overriding Christian theme that Jake and Elwood “are on a mission from God” – though no one would ever mistake it for being a “Christian” film.

And that theme serves as a great introduction to the sermon series we begin this morning. From now through Labor Day weekend, we’ll be going through the Book of Acts. And the book of Acts is all about God’s mission and how the early church, the very first disciple of Jesus, carried out that mission. By the time we get to the end, I hope that we will understand more about what it means to be a follower of Christ, to be a part of His Church, and to be “on a mission from God” – both in our personal lives and in our life together as a church. So, let’s dive in...

The full title of Acts is “The Acts of the Apostles.” But it might be more appropriate to call it “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” Because what we see, right from the start, is that Acts is all about God continuing His activity and carrying out His mission in the world, through his Spirit-filled disciples in the Church. It is written by Luke, whom Paul mentions a few times in his letters as a partner in ministry. We can deduce that Luke is the author in part due to the similar style of writing, vocabulary used, and other literary similarities between Acts and the Gospel according to Luke. Most immediately obvious, however, is the opening sentences of Luke and Acts that connect the two together. In opening lines of Luke’s gospel, he addresses it to his friend Theophilus, saying that he has “carefully investigated everything” in regards to Jesus, and that his purpose for writing this account of the life of Jesus is so “you [Theophilus] may know the certainty of the things you’ve been taught”

(Luke 1:4). Essentially, it's a carefully researched biography on the life of Jesus that he's writing for his friend.

Then in Acts, we read, **“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1)**. So there's this connection of “to whom Luke is writing,” in addition to the similar style, grammar, vocabulary, and so forth. So the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are a two-volume set of books that Luke wrote for his friend, so that he would “know with certainty the things [he's] been taught.”

Now, we see here in Acts 1 that Jesus returns to be with his Heavenly Father. This is the ascension of Jesus Christ. Ascension Day has been celebrated in the church going back to at least the 300's A.D., though St. Augustine said that it went back to the days of the Apostles.ⁱⁱ **Ascension day is 40 days after Easter Sunday, which was this last Thursday.** But it is often kind of ignored in the Church today – did you have a big Ascension Day celebration this last Thursday night or post “happy ascension day” comments on Facebook? Probably not. And let's be honest: The Ascension of Jesus raises a lot of questions that probably cause us to be a little uncertain about what to do with this: How did Jesus breathe once he got to around 30,000 feet above sea level? Is he now residing in space somewhere? Is that where heaven is? Or did he get up to a certain height, beyond the clouds, and then have a metamorphosis of sorts, so that his physical body dissolved, but his Spirit continued on into heaven in a totally different realm outside space and time? And I'll be honest: I don't have a lot of good answers for these kinds of questions, because the Bible doesn't address them. There's a step of faith to be taken in regards to the actual ascension of Jesus, and I trust that God was able to handle it however he needed to. But, before Jesus says, “Beam me up, Scottie” he gives some final instructions in regards to the mission that he gives to the disciples, that are hugely important for us today as well.

The first of these mission instructions is in regards to what God will do very shortly, in giving them the Holy Spirit: that they will be baptized in the Holy Spirit and have power in the Spirit. Jesus' words about the Spirit are in verses 5 and 8, and I want to kind of take them together here. Now, the Spirit does not originate here in Acts. The Holy Spirit, oftentimes called the

Spirit of God, has been around since before Jesus, and is mentioned throughout the Bible from the Old Testament and right on through the New Testament. In fact, the second verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:2, which describes the start of the creation of the universe, says, “And the Spirit of God hovered over the waters.” So the Spirit is not new with the Gospels or Acts, much as gravity existed before Sir Isaac Newton.

However, in the Old Testament, whenever a person was filled with the Spirit or operated in the power of the Spirit, it always was for a special time, for a particular moment or task or season. In the New Testament we see the Spirit coming upon believers, and staying, continuing to operate in the world on an on-going basis. This on-going presence, power, and work of the Spirit in believers lives is described in different kinds of ways in the New Testament: Christians are “baptized in the spirit,” the spirit dwells “in” us, it rests “upon” us, and so forth.

And with this comes power. The word for power is “dunamis” and we get our word, “Dynamite” from it. “Dunamis” is used in Scripture to mean a variety of different kinds of power: power for performing miracles, moral power, power in numbers, and more. Perhaps what best describes it here is “inherent power.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Holy Spirit inherently has power, and gives Christians inherent power, by virtue of being baptized by the Holy Spirit. Now, we’ll spend a lot more time on this next Sunday when we look at Acts 2 and the Spirit coming upon them in a powerful kind of way...and we’ll see the fruit of that throughout this series, so the Spirit isn’t going to be a topic of discussion for just one or two messages...but for now, it’s enough to know that this is a crucial piece of Jesus’ mission for the church, for people like you and me: for the Spirit to “baptize” us...to wash us and make us new, to dwell in us...and for us to then live in the power of the Spirit going forward. So that’s the first element of the mission Jesus gives his disciples.

The second of these mission instructions is that: **The timing of God’s activity in our lives and in the world is not for us to know in advance.** The disciples once again display their desire for Jesus to act on their schedule. They ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?” They’re anxious. They can’t wait for Jesus to call in the

cavalry and lead the charge to restore Israel to prominence with an earthly kingdom. And they want that to happen now.

So often, we want things right now. We want a new job, and we want it now; we want peace...right now...We want our home addition finished...now; We want the Mariners to win a World Series...sometime before we die. I can't tell you how many times I have prayed, "Dear God, please give me patience...and give it to me now." Any of you prayed that? Of course, that's a prayer that God usually answers right away, which is why it's a dangerous prayer to pray. But: **One sign of spiritual maturity is trusting God and His timing.** Which means, things may not move the way we want them to, because there's a bigger picture that God sees, but we don't. There are things happening around us that we're not aware of. Or there's a future that we can't anticipate. But God sees all that, and so it's a matter of trusting God in His timing.

So Jesus gives them the response that we all need to hear: **"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority"** (Acts 1:7). Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "The kingdom isn't coming." It is. They understand, to some degree, what is happening. They probably didn't understand it fully – they probably still envisioned a kingdom that was more reflective of earthly kingdoms than a truly heavenly kingdom...but none-the-less, they have a certain degree of understanding about what Jesus is doing. But what he *hasn't* told them, and what they cannot be privy to, is *when* that kingdom is to come to fruition. And Jesus is saying that it's in his Heavenly Father's time, not ours. Only God knows the answer to that question.

Now, in the meantime: Waiting on God's timing does not mean that there is nothing for the disciples to do, and this gets us to the next-to-last part of the mission, and really is the key part of it. This desire for things to be different "now" – whether that's God's Kingdom coming, or something else – isn't all bad. We shouldn't be too critical of this desire for "now." Without that desire, we'd all be pretty apathetic and lazy. If you want to get a college degree, for example, and you wish you had it now...well, that can motivate you to do something so that you will eventually get that degree. If you just wait

passively, it will never happen. Similarly: **We don't wait passively for the Kingdom to come; rather it's an *active* waiting, participating with God in His mission of bringing the Kingdom to fruition.** Jesus says in verse 8, "...and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This is ultimately the mission we have as Christians, and is crucial for us today. Our lives bear witness to the good news of Jesus, they bear witness to the message of forgiveness of the cross, to the hope and joy of the empty tomb, they bear witness to the truth of Jesus, they bear witness to the power of the Spirit, and so forth. This is what we are called to do; this is our mission, wherever we are.

Any good lawyer can tell you that a good witness is a person who says, "This is what I *know* to be true." A bad witness is a person who says, "Well, I *think* this is true;" or "I *heard* this is true." Remember why Luke said he was writing to Theophilus? So he would "know with certainty the things he's been taught" in regard to Jesus. And a good witness "knows" with certainty what is true, rather than speculating or hesitating. So the question for us to ask is, "are we good witnesses?" **Do our lives testify to what God has done in Jesus Christ?**

The story is told of Paul Smith, a man who grew up in a poor home, but died owning a million dollars' worth of forest land. He was talking about property disputes with an old friend. Paul said to his friend, "Did you hear of the lawsuit over a title that I had with Mr. Jones last summer?" The friend had not heard. "Well," said Paul, "Here's what happened. Before the trial opened I sat in the courtroom with my witnesses around me. Mr. Jones walked in, stopped, looked my witnesses over carefully, and said: 'Paul, are those your witnesses?' 'They are,' I said. 'Then you win,' he said. 'I've had those witnesses twice myself.'" Mr. Jones knew they were good witnesses. They didn't speculate...they didn't have uncertainty. They knew what was true.

And a good witness to Jesus...a person who can witness with real power...is a person who's full of the Holy Spirit and can say, "I know Jesus is true." There's power in those words right there, and it's the Spirit who gives power to say that; It's the Spirit who gives the power to live life as God intended it; It's the Spirit who gives the power to live life transformed, so that the old is

gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17), to live with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22-23). That's a life that says "I *know* this to be true, because I once was lost and now I'm found (Luke 15)...I *know* this to be true because I was blind but now I see (John 9:25)...I *know* this to be true because I was once dead in my transgressions but now I'm alive in Christ" (Ephesians 2:1-5; Colossians 2:13). I *know* this to be true and so I live with joy, I live with hope, I ask for and extend forgiveness as Christ has done for me on the cross, I live with a full trust in God...And the Holy Spirit empowers us to do that, to be witnesses to the saving, transformational grace of Jesus Christ. So, we don't know the time, but we wait...and we wait actively, working with God to bring about His kingdom as the Holy Spirit gives us power to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

Lastly, Jesus goes on to say *where* his disciples are to do this witnessing, and if we were to translate what he says into our culture and our place today, we would say that: **We are called to be his witnesses in Kirkland, King County, the United States, and to the ends of the earth.** That's roughly the equivalent of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. It literally begins in our homes, as well as our neighborhoods, places of work, schools, the coffee shops, restaurants, grocery stores, parks, baseball fields, and elsewhere. Probably for most of us, 99% of our opportunities to witness to Jesus are going to take place in Kirkland, or Redmond, or Bothell, or wherever we live.

The Good News, however, is that in other parts of King County, in other parts of the U.S., and in other parts of the world, all the other Christians are doing the same thing: bearing witness in their "Jerusalem" equivalent. That's not to say we shouldn't look for opportunities to bear witness elsewhere, to serve as missionaries long-term in another part of the world or go on short-term mission trips and so forth. But it's important that we realize that witnessing to Jesus begins right where we are. We don't have to go anywhere to bear witness to Jesus Christ, and he didn't command only certain Christians who live in a certain place to bear witness. We're all included. Wherever our home is, wherever we spend most of our time: This is where God has placed you and placed me. And we're called to be his witnesses

here, and wherever we go.

In fact, you may have heard this line before, that **“God hasn't retained many of us as lawyers, but He has subpoenaed all of us as witnesses.”**^{iv} Are you living as a good witness to Jesus Christ? That's the mission that he gives us. Would our friends and co-workers be surprised to hear that any of us are followers of Jesus? Like one guy, after a friend had talked to him about faith in God, he was then talking to his Christian co-worker, and he said, “Well, I never knew before that you were a Christian, even though we've been on the job together here for two years. When my friend talked with me about my soul, I told him ‘if so clean a guy as my co-worker could get along without religion I believed I could do the same.’” The Christian co-worker realized he hadn't been a good witness. It's not about “clean living” and following the rules. It's about living in the power of the Spirit, and bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23, mentioned earlier) in our lives.

No matter how well our lives already testify to Jesus, you and I can be better witnesses to Jesus Christ, starting right here, and right now. I know we all want to be good witnesses...the desire is there...we're all already doing some things. So this is intended as an encouragement in that, not a critique. And this isn't about working our way to a relationship with God; it's about responding to what he's already done, to doing our part in the relationship that already exists because of Jesus Christ. But Jesus is telling us today, as he told his Disciples then, to be His witnesses; to be witnesses to His truth, to His grace, to His death and resurrection. We do that when the Holy Spirit fills us up so that we witness to Jesus Christ with power, as we bear the fruit of the Spirit, and as we live and say, “I know this to be true.” Let's make sure we're doing that today and always, right here in Kirkland and in our own towns, and wherever we may go. Because truly, “we're on a mission from God.” Let's Pray...Amen.

ⁱ For example: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9c05e6d61638f933a15755c0a966948260>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.churchyear.net/ascension.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Strong's Dictionary, as found at www.Bluelettercible.org.

^{iv} www.moreillustrations.com