

The Story We're In

We define ourselves by the stories we find ourselves in. For instance, as citizens of the United States, we are defined by Christopher Columbus, the Pilgrims, the Boston Tea Party, the Declaration of Independence, Bunker Hill, Valley Forge, and Washington crossing the Delaware.

We remember the Alamo, and the Gettysburg Address, President Lincoln's dedicatory speech for the cemetery where the victims of the Battle of Gettysburg were laid to rest.

We are shaped by the pioneering wagon trains on the Oregon trail and the cowboys who drove cattle in the old west. In the last Century we survived a great depression bracketed beginning and end by two world wars. The first we called the war to end all wars. The second began December 7, 1941, a day that shall live in infamy. There was D-Day and Iwo Jima and finally the grim finale that ushered in the atomic age.

We remember President Kennedy's assassination, and then his brother Bobby's. We had civil rights marches and the murder of Martin Luther King. The American story is marked by Viet Nam, hippies, protests, and Kent State.

More recently we had the space shuttle Challenger disaster, 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the oil spill.

These are all stories that help define the larger story we find ourselves in here in America.

We have family stories: albums of pictures, keepsakes and living histories of parents and grandparents who remember relatives lost to us but whose lives shaped our heritage.

And as followers of Jesus Christ, we have been welcomed into God's story, the overarching story that trumps all others. It's the story of a good creation corrupted by human sin. It's a story of covenants and exodus and redemption. The story climaxes with God's dominion breaking into human history in the person of Jesus the Christ, the story of God's mercy and grace to us in Jesus. And it is the still unfolding story of God's involvement in the world through his church, the Body and Bride of Christ.

This church, this assembled body of Christ-followers here in Jackson is deeply embedded in God's story.

We are indebted to a Gentile physician for most of what we know about the beginnings of the church. Luke, an associate of the Apostle Paul, researched and wrote a two-volume work that fills about thirty percent of our New Testament. His first book is the Gospel known by his name.

Listen to how Luke begins that Gospel: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have *carefully investigated everything* from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an *orderly account* for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the *certainty* of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4).

Theophilus seems to have been a new believer of some social or political prominence. Luke wrote after careful inquiry in order to provide certainty to this believer, and to all believers, concerning the message of Jesus.

What is the second volume of Luke's work? It's the book we know as *The Acts of the Apostles*. At one time the two books, Luke and Acts, circulated together. Later Luke was grouped

with the Gospels and Acts found its place after John.

Listen to how Luke begins volume two: “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen” (Acts 1:1-2).

The Gospel is all about what Jesus began to do and to teach until his ascension into heaven. It is a record of Jesus’ ministry that includes his birth narratives but focuses chiefly on those few years between his baptism and his passion.

But notice the word in the middle of this sentence: “...I wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach...” What does that suggest about the content of this second volume, *Acts*? The *Book of Acts* records the *ongoing* story of Jesus’ activity in the world through the ministry of his church by the power and direction of his Holy Spirit.

We are beginning this morning a short study of the first nine chapters of Acts. Acts is the third longest book in the New Testament, following Luke’s Gospel and Matthew’s Gospel. Our study will take us up through the conversion of the Apostle Paul. At that point Luke’s focus will turn to the Gospel’s advance into the wider Gentile world.

Luke writes history, but not like we write history today. We write history like we do science and math. We’re obsessed with details: dates and facts and precise chronology.

The ancients were careful about their facts, but what mattered as much to them was the larger significance of events and the character of the people involved. They recorded vignettes and stories that revealed the nature of the times and the people that inhabited them.

Luke wrote Acts that way. He presents historical facts. The events he recorded really happened. But he chooses his facts in such a way that we get a taste of what happened. We step into the real world of people and events, not as a data recording, but as a telling of God’s story: the story of how the church began and how the Gospel spread. It’s the beginning of the story we inhabit today as ongoing members of the Church of the living God.

Turn with me to Acts 1:1-11.

In these verses, Luke expands our understanding of what happened after the resurrection. Jesus appeared to his followers off and on for a period of forty days. He presented himself alive—actually physically present with them—by means of “many convincing proofs.” Luke used a term reserved almost exclusively for historians to describe irrefutable evidence. The witnesses to the resurrection had zero doubts about what had happened to Jesus. The man they saw crucified, whose life was snuffed out on a Roman cross, whose body was buried for three days, had come back from the dead. Against all expectations, Jesus was alive—beyond any shadow of a doubt.

The disciples, just like us, tried to figure out what this all meant. Jesus said he was about to send out his Spirit. Their Hebrew Scriptures talked about God sending his Spirit as something God would do in the last days.

Jesus had been raised from the dead. The resurrection indicated that the end of days had broken in upon them.

So they wondered out loud to Jesus: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

From their perspective it was an entirely reasonable conclusion. They wanted to know if Jesus would now begin to rule from David’s throne and restore Israel to international prominence.

Notice how Jesus answered—v.7-8.

Memorize verse seven. What does this verse teach us about prophetic speculation of last days and the return of Jesus? “It is not for [us] to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.” Our job is not to second guess God’s schedule for the universe, God’s timetable for history. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God.” Times and dates are among the secret things that are not for us to know.

What is our job in the interim while Jesus is away? Look again at verse eight: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And after Jesus gave them this commission, He was taken up into heaven until he disappeared in a cloud. His followers stood gawking at his ascension, fixated by what they had just witnessed.

So God sent two angels to bring them back to earth. To paraphrase their words: “What are you doing standing around staring into heaven. Jesus will come back just like you saw him go. Get back and get busy!”

And they did. They got it! They waited for the Spirit to come. We’ll look at that next week. Then they got on with the business at hand, being witnesses to everything they had seen and heard. Listen to these clips:

In his first sermon ever, Peter declared: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact” (Acts 2:32).

After healing a lame man in the temple, Peter told the astonished crowd: “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this” (Acts 3:15).

On trial because of their bold preaching about Jesus, the apostles told the Jewish religious leaders: “We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32).

Time and again, they punctuated their message with the claim to have been eye-witnesses of Jesus life, death and resurrection. When Jesus confronted Saul—aka Paul—on the road to Damascus, he commissioned him this way: “I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a *witness* of what you have seen of me and what I will show you” (Acts 26:12-16).

The church’s role in the ongoing story of Jesus Christ is to *be* a witness to his resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit. We don’t *do* witnessing as some special event at specifically defined times with carefully scripted presentations. We *are* witnesses.

We testify to the presence of the living Christ:

- not by our buildings, although our buildings and how we care for them say something about our presence in the community.
- not by our programs, although our programs may be helpful vehicles by which we enact ministry and help people learn and grow and follow Jesus.
- not by our organization and organizing structures. Our constitutions and by-laws help us function as people together, but in and of themselves they say very little about the presence and power of the risen Christ. Sometimes they can even get in the way.

We bear witness to Jesus by the authenticity of our lives, our character, our worship, our sacrificial service, our loving relationships, and our *words*. We bear witness in spite of our innate fears and anxieties. Not by getting psyched up until we’re weird and obnoxious. But by the gentle, wise boldness produced in us by the presence of the Holy Spirit as we follow Jesus.

Those of us gathered here this morning exist as a church family together for many purposes. Looming large among them is our call to go out into our fair city and bear witness to

the reality that Jesus is alive.

There is no serious question about whether or not Christ-followers are witnesses. The only question is what kind of witness are we? Are we clear about the story we're in? Do we define ourselves more than anything else by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the power of the resurrection, and the ongoing presence of Christ in this world through his Spirit-empowered church? Have we experienced anything of his mercy and grace? Then we have a story to tell.

I have tons of pictures of my kids. I have pictures of a very pregnant Jeannette before they were born, pictures of them coming home from the hospital, in the crib, drooling on our laps. That photographic proclivity has only been magnified as a grandpa with a digital camera. I could fill whole albums with shots of my grandkids' first days and weeks of life.

The Book of Acts has been described as a photo album of the church. We see snapshots of her birth, her first signs of life and her struggles to survive and thrive.

It's a family album. These are our pictures. That's why we're starting this study. We are the heirs of an inheritance passed down to us from them. We exist because they were faithful to what Jesus told them to be: his witnesses. They began where they were in Jerusalem. They went out into all of Judea and Samaria. And then the Gospel went global.

We share their same calling: we are witnesses to the presence of the risen Christ. May God's story define us. And may generations of Christ-followers in years to come look back at us some day and thank God for our faithful witness to the real presence of Jesus Christ in our community and in our world!