



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"The Sequel" — Acts 1:1-12

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Have you seen these movies? "Speed 2, Jaws 3D, Grease 2, Rocky 5" (can you believe that they actually made a "Rocky 5"?; the truth is they made a "Rocky 6" which was hailed by critics as a much better film than "Rocky 5")? These four films are sequels to what most film critics would say were great original films. But the main characteristic all these sequels share, in my humble opinion, is that none of them—not a single one of them—should ever have been made. Some of these movies are terrible films that prove the fact that writers need to know when it's time to stop.

This week we begin a six-month study of the Book of Acts, which is the sequel to the Gospel According to Luke. Did you know that? The same guy who wrote the Gospel According to Luke also wrote the Book of Acts. And THIS is a great sequel to what is an absolutely incredible first book. From now until Easter, we're going on a heart-pounding adventure with the early church.

But before we get into this amazing sequel we need to understand one very important thing. The only explanation for the courage, the only explanation for the love these disciples had for one another and their world, the only explanation for the determination and the sacrifice we see in the people we're going to meet on the pages of the Book of Acts is that

every single one of them had been filled with God's Holy Spirit.

Just wait until next week when we see the Holy Spirit poured out on these followers of Jesus. God filled these women and men with himself at nine o'clock in the morning on the day of Pentecost. And you know what the people who saw that happen said? "They're drunk. They're drunk on new wine." Well, they weren't three sheets to the wind. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. God Himself moved into their lives and filled them with his joy, with courage, with passion and with His love.

Studying the Book of Acts is guaranteed to call us out of our comfort zones. Just like these first followers of Christ, we will be invited to join Jesus in what He's doing in our world. But the reason these first Christians joined the risky mission of Christ in their world is not because they felt obligated to do so. They didn't risk it all because their pastors told them they needed to do that. They joined Christ's mission of love because they had experienced God's grace.

They knew that Jesus had done absolutely everything for them and that set them free to give their lives for their world. They joined Christ's mission in the world because Christ Himself was living in each one of them by his Spirit. It was the love and grace they

experienced from God that compelled them to love their world. A deep experience of the grace of Jesus Christ had begun to change these women and men just as my friend Steve Schibsted said last Sunday.

On the day of Pentecost, God Himself filled the disciples of Jesus with Himself and that began to change them. Filled with His love, living in His grace, they went out and God used them to transform their world.

I'm excited that we're going to study this remarkable sequel to Luke's Gospel. If you haven't read the Book of Acts you're in for a wild ride. There isn't a dull moment in the 28 chapters of this book. A brand new age in human history opened on the day God filled these first Christ-followers with Himself.

On that day they discovered that God was doing something brand new in the world. New life, the forgiveness of every sin, new hope for the future and a power to live in ways they never dreamed of living was not just for them. New life, complete forgiveness, an unshakable hope and power for living was for everyone. And they were eager to tell every person they met this good news.

In Act One, Scene One of Luke's sequel he writes this to his friend Theophilus.

Theophilus was probably a wealthy, high-ranking Roman official who had asked Luke to help him verify the truthfulness of what he had been taught about Jesus.

“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach (I like that translation better than the one I had read a few minutes ago).” At the beginning of his sequel, Luke tells us that in his first book, his gospel, he *“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. After His suffering (meaning His death and resurrection), (Jesus) presented Himself to (His followers) and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”* Acts 1.1-4a

Luke packs a lot into those first four verses. But his most astounding assertion is that Jesus is alive and continues to do His healing and transforming work in our world. The religious and political authorities thought Jesus was dead. They thought He was buried securely in a tomb.

Well, Luke says, “He’s not”. Luke tells his friend Theophilus that he’s personally verified that fact by interviewing a lot of people who were eyewitnesses and participants in everything he writes about. Jesus is alive and at work. He’s on the loose in the world.

The one who was, from His birth, a serious threat to the religious and political powers of the first century, continues to bring the gracious, merciful, compassionate and just Kingdom of God to the people of the world. Look at Acts 1, verse 4.

Acts 1:4 While staying with them (with his disciples), (Jesus) ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Acts 1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7 - He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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.”

Jesus tells His disciples to wait. I hate waiting. I particularly hate waiting when I’m feeling anxious. Jesus’ disciples were probably anxious about staying in Jerusalem because of all that had happened there. But Jesus wants them to stay right where they are.

Their first response was to ask a question. It was the best question they could come up with and I think it was a question born of fear. Jesus tells His disciples to remain in one of the most dangerous places they could possibly stay—in the city, whose leaders had arrested and crucified Jesus. Stay in Jerusalem and wait. When they heard that they asked Him a question. The disciples still wanted to know if Jesus was going to change the political realities of Israel. Would He take over the government and make this place safe for them?

Jesus had just spent 40 days teaching them about the kingdom of God. Jesus had spent three years with them showing them what it

looks like when the kingdom of God breaks into the world and the best question they could come up with was, “Lord, is this the time when You will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

There are at least two big issues here. The disciples what to know, “What are YOU going to do for us? We want it to be like the way it used to be. We want a kingdom like the one Israel had when David was king. Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

First there is a big problem with the verb in that question. The fact that they use the word “restore” to talk about the kingdom of God shows that they’re looking for and expecting Jesus to set up a political, earthly kingdom like the one Israel had in the glory days of King David. They’ve mistaken Jesus for George Washington.

There’s also a big problem with the noun “Israel” in that question. They’re still expecting that what Jesus came to do was to be primarily for the benefit of one race and one culture. What they are going to soon learn is that the kingdom of God Jesus is bringing to our world is a kingdom that was for everyone. They will begin to understand that when the Spirit of God fills them up.

His first disciples were still not on his agenda. They want him to be on theirs. “Hey Jesus, we really appreciate all You did on the cross and Your resurrection from the dead is amazing, and what You’ve been saying about the kingdom and the power we are going to receive is all good but what about our nation?” They could not see beyond the borders of Israel until God filled them up with Himself.

For the first disciples this was probably the best vision they could imagine. They wanted to return to the way it used to be. The best they could imagine was a return to the good old days of David and his kingdom. But Jesus wasn't going to fulfill that vision. He has a vision and a dream that He was inviting them to join.

It's apparently very difficult for Jesus to get people to change their worldview, to get people like us to consider a vision for our lives and for our world that is larger than our own personal self-interests. It's difficult until the Spirit of God fills us up.

I have a lot of sympathy for these first followers of Christ. I know exactly what it is like to want Jesus to remake my world in the way that I want it remade. Take me back to that place where my life felt settled, where I was surrounded with everything that meant everything to me. I am living through a huge transition in my life right now. I know what it feels like to be anxious about all the changes that have occurred in my life in the last four months. It's tempting for me to want Jesus to hurry up and create a world where I feel deeply known and at home. He is actually well on his way to doing that here. This church could not have been more welcoming.

God is reminding me that he has a new plan, a new chapter, and new vision for this season of my life. He has called me here because He has something new for me to do and learn. "We're not going backwards, Tim. Follow Me into the new chapter of your life and ministry that I have prepared for you." So, I have a lot of sympathy for these first followers of Christ. They want Jesus to fulfill their best thoughts and dreams for their lives. But Jesus has something surprising ahead for them. He has good and risky work for them to do.

Acts 1:8 ...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." 9 - When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 - While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 - They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." 12 - Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

For us to really begin to understand what unfolds here in the Book of Acts and its implications for each of us and our church, it is super important that we know a little bit about the historical context in which it occurs. So buckle up. We're going to get into some historical weeds here.

Luke was a companion of the apostle Paul and most scholars believe that Luke the historian, Luke the physician, Luke the highly educated follower of Jesus wrote this account of the early church no later than AD 60 since he makes no mention of the reign of terror that broke out against the Christian church in AD 64. Both the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter lost their lives in that persecution that was instigated by Emperor Nero, who was a madman.

In the first century, the Roman Empire stretched from what we would now call India in the East all the way to England in the West. The Roman Empire crushed anyone who tried to oppose them. The story

we're going to read takes place in a time and in a world dominated by a very powerful empire that exerted influence over the daily lives of the people we're going to meet on these pages.

The Roman Empire was ruled by a progression of emperors. Some of these Caesars were better than others (Hadrian, Trajan – not so bad, guys like Caligula – he was a nut job). Many of them abused their power. Caesar Augustus, who was the Roman ruler when Jesus was born, decided that he was going to try and convince everyone in the empire that he was a god. He set up statues of himself in pagan temples. Whenever Rome conquered a town a statue of Augustus was set up and people in the village would celebrate Caesar as lord.

If you look at the coins of first century Rome, it's fascinating to read what was printed on Roman money. Here's some of the propaganda on the coins of Rome:

- Salvation is to be found in none other save Augustus
- There is no other name given to men in which they can be saved.
- Caesar is lord. He is the one who is going to bring peace and happiness.

Do you see how dramatic the story we are going to read really is? A growing community of followers of a crucified carpenter in Palestine is on a collision course with the Roman Empire. This group of followers of Jesus is proclaiming that He is Lord. And they're telling everyone they meet that this Jesus, who was publicly executed, is alive. They're writing letters to people all around the empire saying that they have 500 witnesses who have seen the risen Jesus. In fact, they are starting to meet together in groups.

We'll see in our study of Acts, chapter 4, one of their leaders, the Apostle Peter—the guy who was crying like a baby after he publicly denied that he knew Jesus—this same Peter will courageously stand up one day in front of the Jewish religious leaders of his day and say of Jesus that, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men and women by which we must be saved.” He was able to do that because the Spirit of God had filled him up.

These first disciples take the political propaganda used by the Romans and use it to tell others what they believe about Jesus Christ. Caesar is not going to bring about peace. He's not going to bring about change. Jesus will. It's no wonder that Domitian and Nero hated these first followers of Christ. Domitian required everyone around him to refer to him as dominus et deus—my lord and my god. He even made his wife refer to him as my lord and my god.

All around the Roman Empire there were a growing number of people who began to rebel against this emperor worship. They refused to bow to Caesar. Caesar isn't lord. Jesus is Lord. Roman culture was filled with gods. So on the one hand the Christians were free to worship Jesus as a God. What Rome would not tolerate was their insistence that there is only one true God.

When the Christians claimed allegiance only to Jesus they were saying that there is only one ultimate authority and even Caesar was answerable to Christ. That was considered treason. In that day people got killed for saying things like that.

Before they were filled with God's Holy Spirit, the first disciples of

Jesus want to know, “When are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

That's their agenda. Jesus tells them. “That's not the right question. But in just a few days when the Holy Spirit comes, you are going to receive power to enable you to be my witness in this city and nation and to the farthest regions of the world, even to Rome.” Jesus is going to continue to do what He has already been doing. And He invites His first disciples as he invites us to join Him in the work of His kingdom.

The women and men we will meet on the pages of this sequel will have much to teach us about what it looks like to be a community called by God to proclaim the good news of the gospel. They will give us an idea of what it will cost us to truly be the community of Christ here at the beginning of the 21st century. And we'll get a glimpse of what it looks like when the kingdom of God begins to break into the world bringing deep change to people, to families, to cities and to the entire world.

The sequel God wants to write in our lives is all about living a life shaped and defined by God's priorities, not ours; God's vision for the world, not our self-focused vision for our lives. God promises to ignite our hearts for what He cares about. God will ignite our hearts and begin to reshape our priorities as He fills us with his Spirit.

As we come to this Communion Table this morning, let me invite all of us to come confessing our need for a deeper experience of God's grace and let me invite all of us to come asking God to fill us with His Holy Spirit, to fill us with Himself so that he might

send you and me into this broken world He loves—to be His witnesses here and throughout the world.

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Note: The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw is an associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also found at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: fpchkoolau@gmail.com