

Empowered by the Spirit
First in a Series on the Acts of the Apostles

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Acts 2:36-47

Peter said: ³⁶Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” ³⁸Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls.” ⁴⁰And Peter testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”

⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

It was way back in April, around Easter, when I first had the idea to preach from the Acts of the Apostles this fall. You remember that, at the beginning of the pandemic-enforced isolation, we had no idea that it would last this long. In the absence of being able to be with one another back then, I imagined that re-examining what the Bible says about the church as community would be worthy of our attention when we re-gathered. Sometimes not having a thing invites us to consider its value all the more.

So six months ago, I envisioned the church filling up by now, and the Book of Acts being a wonderful guide as we re-considered what it means to be the church together again. I imagined that we would fill up this space as on the Day of Pentecost, and filled with the Spirit as God's new post-pandemic church would reveal a congregation ready to follow bravely in the way of Jesus together. That was then, and this is now, and we are still unable to be together as we would like. But during these intervening months, I have been reminded that the Book of Acts is not so much about the church as a community gathered as it is about being a community sent.

In the Acts of the Apostles, there are some mighty big worship services at the beginning, to be sure, but when you get past the high drama of the opening chapters, like today's scripture telling about the baptism of three-thousand souls, where exactly do we find the followers of Christ being the church?

With a little preview of the story as it will unfold, we will see these early Christians are in very similar circumstances and places as we are today. They are in their homes for worship and communion. They are gathering their resources to meet the needs of one another and to share with the poor. We will find them in the streets protesting – fighting against the corrupt powers of the empire – demanding greater justice for the oppressed. They will be at odds with the violence of their communities as they follow in the way of Christ. They will take the sick into the streets to be healed in great number. They are advancing the

cause of Christ in a world that is officially secular but at the same time religiously pluralistic. They are breaking down barriers of race and nationality and gender as a community of faith without walls.

All the things that have become critical issues in our time are here in the dramatic unfolding of The Acts of the Apostles. As one biblical scholar puts it, “Acts looks back on the transformations rooted in the Spirit filled church of the past, and in so doing holds out hope for the present and future church.”¹

So in the coming weeks, we will explore a number of stories from Acts that feel unusually relevant to our current realities. But today we start with a glimpse of the church at the beginning to show how empowered by the Spirit they are able to do remarkable things wherever they are.

Peter finishes his Pentecost sermon with the strong affirmation that Jesus rules over all creation. Then we are given a snapshot of the communal life of the church newly created by the Holy Spirit and the waters of baptism. Now, many biblical scholars suggest this is an overly idealized picture of life in community: washed in forgiveness, an intergenerational commune of sorts – filled with awe and gratitude, sharing their worldly possessions in common, devoted in prayer, serving the poor, eating together with glad and generous hearts while the Lord worked wonders through them, and added to their number day by day. Scholars acknowledge that this idealized picture of the community does not hold up for long, and we will see it break down as the larger story unfolds, but it does proclaim that the community created by the Spirit of God is to be characterized by the qualities of genuine hospitality, charity, and mutuality.

When the Spirit of God moves among us we are always greater than the sum of our parts; and we become the kind of people our world so desperately needs.

¹ Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, Preface, p. iiiiv.

Acts scholar Matt Skinner interprets these verses saying: “This description given at the end of Acts 2 suggests what the Holy Spirit can do. “The life and work of a Christian community can reflect – even if only dimly – the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed... manifested in the homes of believers and in the world, benefiting its members and earning the admiration of outsiders. The community exists not for its own sake, but to care for its most vulnerable members and to be a means by which God extends salvation to others.”²

I know that it is hard to be this kind of community while we are apart from one another, but I believe that in this season of illness and division, of reckoning with our long history of racism, of the clashing values between people in power and people in need, of political conflict, corruption and rancor, through the lies and deceit and uncertainty, this Gospel Light can shine through us. Even while we are apart, we can be joined in Spirit, and transformed for the common good.

I have shared with you before that I was proud to call John Lewis my Congressman for the twenty years we lived in Atlanta. Just prior to the 1994 Super Bowl in Atlanta I spent a cold January day side by side with him working on a NFL-sponsored Habitat for Humanity house nailing hurricane clips on the roof trusses. Occasionally on weekends, I would cross paths with him again in our neighborhood Publix grocery store.

After his death this summer, I re-read his autobiography, which begins with a story from his childhood and gives the title to the book, *Walking with the Wind*. He was about four-years-old at the time, growing up among the pine forests and cotton fields of Pike County, Alabama. All of his family were sharecroppers. Every adult he knew was an aunt or an uncle, and every child a first or second cousin.

² Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, p. 21.

One Saturday afternoon about fifteen of those children were outside playing in his Aunt Seneva's dirt yard. "The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I was not thinking about playing anymore," Lewis remembered. "I was terrified. I had already seen what lightning could do. I'd seen fields catch on fire after a hit to a haystack. Lightning terrified me, and so did thunder. My mother used to gather us around her whenever we heard thunder and she'd tell us to hush, be still now, because God was doing God's work. That was what thunder was, my mother said. It was the sound of God doing God's work.

But my mother wasn't with us on this particular afternoon. Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside. Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And the corner of the room started lifting up. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it. That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told.

Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift. And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies."

As John Lewis concluded this story, an introduction to his life as a great leader of the Civil Rights Movement, a public servant, and a person of faith, deep faith, he reflected upon it saying, “More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house... rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart... It seemed that way at the height of the Civil Rights Movement – so much tension, so many storms. Yet they never ran away, they stayed, they came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest. And then another corner would lift, and we would go there. Children holding hands, walking with the wind...”³

Friends, we are God’s children, in the midst of a multi-faceted storm. We cannot literally clasp hands at this moment, because the pandemic is forcing us to be the church together even while we are apart. And yet, it feels like a moment when the wind and thunder of God are calling the church to new expressions of hospitality, and mutuality, to be unified as a people of God, devoted in prayer, sharing our possessions, serving the poor, countering the corrupt powers of the empire with love and justice, letting the Lord work wonders through us, as we walk with the wind of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

³ John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, prologue.