



Week 3: Leading the Early Church

Day 1 - Acts 1:1-26

1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he 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."

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." 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. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, 16 "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— 17 for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. 19 This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 "For it is written in the book of Psalms,

*'Let his homestead become desolate,
and let there be no one to live in it';
and 'Let another take his position of overseer.'*
21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Understanding the Reading:

The book of Acts is essentially the sequel to the gospel of Luke, one of the first century biographies of Jesus of Nazareth; and, like Luke, most biblical scholars categorize Acts as "history." By history, these scholars mean what Luke means in his gospel: "an orderly account." Both Luke and Acts have the features of a written work created by a meticulous author who set out to comprehensively record a series of important and formative events. Most often, Luke and Acts are found together when biblical archaeologists find manuscript copies of either of these works, and in your reading of Acts you may notice similar language and details between the two works.

Acts begins essentially where Luke left off. Jesus has been raised from the dead and Acts begins with a short retelling of his ascension into heaven. Then, as the disciples gawk at what they've just seen, they set out to begin the mission they've been entrusted with. This is where we find Peter. Now Peter is in the continuity of this chain of leadership one could trace from the beginning of Luke and through the events of Acts. John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus and Jesus begins his ministry. Jesus is crucified and raised from the dead and promises to send his Spirit to animate this new community, the church. The Spirit, in this first passage, enables the apostles to choose Judas' successor; and, empowers Peter to stand up "among the believers" and take his place as "the rock" of this baby church. From Peter's betrayal of Jesus in Luke to his active participation in this new movement, we begin Peter's story of leadership.

Peter's leadership, we can assume, wasn't immediate. Even as a foil to Judas' failure, we can imagine Peter is still reckoning with his own betrayal of Jesus. Acts 1:15 says, "in those days" Peter stood up and started leading, and one might read "in those days" as a description of Peter's eventual assertive act. We are watching the development of a leader, not the arrival of a fully formed one.

Questions for Reflection:

1. As we reflect on the continuation of God's mission through John the Baptist, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and now Peter and the Apostles, how might we be in that chain of entrusted leadership? How are we continuing the mission that was once given to Peter?
2. Acts says the early Christians were "devoted to prayer" and discernment. How does prayer play a part in your own leadership? Do you turn to prayer as the source of your decision-making?
3. Can you identify with Peter as a trepidatious leader? Can you think of a team where you reluctantly took a leadership role?

Day 2 - Acts 2:1-15, 22-28, 32-33, 37-47

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

22 "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— 23 this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. 24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. 25 For David says concerning him,

'I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
26 therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will live in hope.
27 For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.
28 You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. 33 Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" 38 Peter 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. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

2:43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day 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, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Understanding the Reading:

While we study the life of Peter, it's important to note that he is not the main character of the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit is the main character of the book of Acts. The Spirit, as described in Luke's story, is not just a force that Peter and the Apostles tap into, but the personal presence of God working to grow this new community. Today's reading ends with the affirmation that it is God who is adding to the numbers of those "being saved," not the apostles or Peter himself.

Today's passage also marks one of the church's main holidays and celebrations – Pentecost. The Spirit drives and directs the new Christian community and from the outside the Spirit's activity seems to be making these Jesus followers look drunk. That's how odd the early Christian community looked to the Jewish and Gentile communities around them. In response to this assessment, Peter quotes the prophet Joel; and, to sum up Peter's use of Joel, Peter essentially says that what's happening with these spirit-filled followers of Jesus has been a long time coming. God has been plotting to break the barriers between Jew and Gentile this whole time, and now they are witnesses to that.

Pentecost now has a new meaning, but is rooted in its original celebration. Originally in the Jewish community Pentecost marked the spring harvest and then was eventually associated with the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. Both celebrations are in view here. The harvest has come, but this time the harvest is the abundance of peoples and nations being drawn into this multiethnic community, and like the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai, the law of love of God and neighbor is being universalized.

We will see the word "witness" over and over in Acts, and this not only describes the visual apprehension of an event (as we would describe a witness in a court case having seen a certain event) but also the active assignment a person has after witnessing a radical event like Pentecost. A witness sees something, and then a witness is obligated to say something. As Acts describes these witnesses, they were "cut to the heart." What's happened demands a response.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How might we remind ourselves that the Spirit is a main character in our own story? Are there ways we can sideline the activity of the Spirit in our lives?
2. The work of the Spirit to include all peoples is not over – how can we participate in this invitation that began at Pentecost?
3. Reflect on a time where you witnessed something that you couldn't wait to tell others about. What made you compelled to share it? How could you feel that sense of urgency about sharing your faith?

Day 3 - Acts 3:1-16

1 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. 4 Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 All the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

11 While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. 12 When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? 13 The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. 14 But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, 15 and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. 16 And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

Understanding the Reading:

Peter's story is really a story about borrowed power. The lame man in today's passage is looking for something. Maybe money or some other form of material assistance and something about Peter and John leads him to believe that he can find it in them, so he looks to them with expectation. Peter is straightforward in saying he can't offer what he thinks the man is looking for, but he can give him something that he's been given – God's power to heal and transform lives.

Notice that when the man is healed and he leaps up for joy, he doesn't point back to Peter and John, but praises God. His wholeness points back to God's desire to reconcile the whole world, and because he was known as the lame man who hung out by the beautiful gate, it's a powerful sign to the witnesses.

Peter's story is also a story about continuity. There's a common belief today that there's a divide between the story of God in the Hebrew Bible and the story of God in the New Testament. Acts, and Peter's speech here in particular, combat that common misconception. The same God who shows up in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead, and the same God who made this lame man walk, and the same God who gives this Jesus-denying man the power to do it. Additionally, Peter refreshes our understanding of the word "faith." Another commonly mis-defined religious word, faith is not belief in something without evidence, but faith is "simple trust," as John Wesley defined it, that is rooted in evidence and experience. We trust in someone or something because of the evidence, not in spite of it, and Peter says that this trust in Jesus is what makes people whole again as it's met with Jesus' faithfulness and promise to us.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Has anyone ever entrusted power to you? At work, at home, in some other situation? What did that feel like?
2. Is there something in your life that you can attribute to God's power? Can you, like the lame man, find ways to point back to God's faithfulness in your life?
3. Other than your religious faith, what else do you have faith in? What evidence do you have that gives you reason to put trust in it?

Day 4 - Acts 4:1-31

1 While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, 2 much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. 3 So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4 But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6 with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7 When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10 let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11 This Jesus is

*'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.'*

12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. 14 When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. 15 So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. 16 They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. 17 But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." 18 So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; 20 for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." 21 After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. 22 For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

23 After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, 25 it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:

*'Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
26 The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah.'*

27 For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." 31 When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Understanding the Reading:

The message of the resurrection was offensive, and even threatening, to many who heard it in the first century. The Sadducees, for instance, were an important group within Palestinian Judaism from the 2nd century B.C.E. to the 1st century C.E., and what we know about them has to be cobbled together from their sparse mentions in the New Testament, descriptions that might refer to them in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, and in other rabbinic literature. One thing we do know from the New Testament is that they taught "there is no resurrection" (Mark 12:18). That teaching is probably in view here, though this is the thin description we get of them in nearly every New Testament mention of them. Because they were a powerful and important group, and because the message of Peter and John was so contrary to their message, they use what power they have to arrest the apostles and imprison them.

Standing before the power brokers of the time, Peter speaks boldly, and as in yesterday's reading, he speaks on borrowed power. We see this sort of thing all over the New Testament beginning in Acts and afterward, but it also is deeply connected to the prophets of the Old Testament. Peter is in a long line of prophetic figures whose speech comes not from his own conscience or ability, but from God's Spirit (e.g. Moses speaking before Pharaoh or metaphorically depicted as a hold coal placed on Isaiah's mouth in Isaiah 6). Peter is bold, not because boldness is a quality of Peter himself, but because the Spirit enables him to be bold even in shackles.

While the story of Acts is primarily about the work of the Holy Spirit, one might also argue that the gospel message itself is the main character of the story. The story and impact of the life and message of Jesus is so dangerous to its hearers that Peter is commanded to shut up about it (4:18). As you continue to read Acts, and as you eventually read Peter's words in his epistles, remember this undercurrent of "dangerous speech." Not only is the gospel message powerful to its hearers, but also to its messengers as Peter says explicitly that he can't help but share it (4:20).

For today's reading there should also be a warning: count these passages of Acts among the many that have been abused in antisemitic interpretations. For much of Christian history, the words of Peter have been misinterpreted for nefarious and violent purposes in reading Peter's message as an anti-Jewish message seeking to replace the Jewish people with a new and better people.

Questions for Reflection:

1. The message of the resurrection fostered negative reactions from its early hearers. Is that still true today? Is it for the same reason? Have you ever found yourself uncomfortable or even offended by the message of the resurrection?
2. Have you ever been entrusted and empowered with a message that wasn't originally yours? Reflect on a time when you spoke on someone else's behalf. Did you feel like you accurately represented the message? Did you feel empowered by the person who gave you the message to share?
3. What are some practices we can adopt to avoid abusive and prejudicial readings of the Bible? How might we avoid the trap of antisemitism in our readings of the New Testament?

Day 5 - Acts 4:32-5:11

32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35 They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). 37 He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

1 But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; 2 with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" 5 Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. 6 The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Understanding the Reading:

The previous readings centered on the message and ministry of Peter outside the Christian community, and today's reading offers a glimpse into the inner circle of what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "the beloved community." Of course, they shared common religious belief and conviction, but as a result of those theological ideas they practiced radical hospitality and intentional Christian community.

We know from a variety of extrabiblical voices from around the same time period that these practices of communal living and hospitality bothered non-Christians. Christians were charged with including the wrong types of people in their community. Celsus, an early critic of Christianity said,

“[Christians] show they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable, and stupid, only slaves, women, and little children.” This was seen as a terrible offense in the Greco-Roman world, but was a hallmark of the Christian faith. Additionally, their shared meals were viewed as promiscuous and immoral. We see a deep connection between how Luke reports it in Acts, and an opposite reaction in Celsus and critics like him. Celsus goes on to deride the Christians for meeting in homes – this was viewed as a low and unsophisticated way to gather, especially since the Christians gathered with no respect to gender norms. Other critics like Lucian and Minucius Felix had a particular grievance with the community’s inclusion of and leadership by women, whom Minucius called “the dregs of the populace.”

Today’s passage also includes a very difficult story to interpret in Ananias and Sapphira. Some Christians have called the fate of this couple, “the first instance of Church discipline” which with some historical distance is humorous, but the story remains uncomfortable to talk about and certainly difficult to preach. What may be most helpful in parsing out the meaning of Ananias’ and Sapphira’s demise is pointing back to two features of the early church. First, there is an anxiety among the New Testament authors about the preservation and protection of this new little community. Many of Paul’s admonitions in his epistles to a variety of new Christian communities ultimately boil down to keeping destructive practices out, so the community can thrive. Ananias and Sapphira may be an illustrative (though still dramatic!) example of such a practice. That is, if people are withholding their resources and lying about it, that could spell a quick end to this new thing God is doing. Second, we can remind ourselves of the major player in the whole story of Acts – The Holy Spirit. It’s not that Peter or the other apostles had members of the community killed because they were threatened or their status was threatened, rather the whole community was at risk by what they did and the Spirit removed the threat. That said, the story is still not Children’s Sunday School appropriate and we should be willing to embrace our discomfort in reading stories like this rather than smooth over them or ignore them.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What features do you notice in this passage about the “beloved community?” How does it look different than the church today? How are they similar?
2. The first century church was derided for who it included, not who it excluded. Are we known for who we include today or who we exclude?
3. Are there other Bible passages like the story of Ananias and Sapphira that make you want to skim right over or ignore? How can we learn to better understand tough passages of scripture like this one?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. What has it felt like you to take on mantles of leadership in your life?
2. What empowered Peter to go from someone who constantly stumbled in his faith to the leader of the early church?
3. How did the Holy Spirit hone and focus Peter's gifts for leadership? Have you ever felt like you needed to be honed and focused in a different direction?
4. What role does the Holy Spirit have in your life? How much do you allow the Spirit to lead you?
5. Peter demonstrated leadership with actions, not just words. Do you take action?
6. Peter is willing to be bold in his leadership and confront people when needed. Do you feel comfortable being similarly bold when it is called for? If so, what gives you the strength? If not, what might you do to move toward confidence in this area?
7. Peter knew what his anchoring point was. Do you?
8. What was your biggest takeaway this week?

Prayer requests and other notes: