

Ascension and Promise of the Spirit

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, good afternoon and happy Eastertide. I am excited to be with you on this first experimental Sunday, in a while, where we are only doing evening service. So thank you for coming out on this 85 degree day, for arranging yourself with whatever you were doing, probably outside to be here. Just so grateful for that. I'm also excited today to just introduce to you our new sermon series, and to start us off in a new sermon series for this post-Easter season. For the past two months, our preaching team has been in the book of Exodus really diving deep down into the nature of salvation, into what it means to be delivered. The nature of this complicated spiritual and political journey that we at the table consider paramount.

And then last week, Pastor Anthony rounded out that series with this beautiful service that we had together on Easter Sunday, Resurrection Sunday. And now, as we move into the season of Easter, which is several weeks long, we're going to pivot a little bit. We're going to turn to the book of Acts, and spend several weeks there thinking about the tangible fruit of the resurrection. The tangible fruit of the ascension of Jesus, which is the church, which is us sitting here in this room. We're going to try to talk about what it means to live together a tangible life together as a community and explore our calling to be church, and what that is all about.

It has been a hard two years to be church, y'all. So we want to spend some time reorienting ourselves to what that is all about in this season.

And then before I go further, I have to say that the book of Acts is this particularly important place for us to settle as we talk about this vocation, but it's also a book that maybe for many of us is a little bit full.

It's a church that in some moments and in some places has, you know, people in the church have not maybe done the best time, have not handled the best.

[2 : 5 0] And I know this from firsthand experience. I have said this before. I grew up in what I would call Baptocastical spaces. We were people who deeply cared about the work of the Holy Spirit, and the book of Acts centers that work.

In the best ways, we felt that the Spirit, the Holy Spirit was present, was here, was available, was among us. God was close. And I've heard it said, and I kind of love this, and I think I agree, that Pentecostalism is the most African form of Christianity on American soil.

There's this sense of the Spirit of God as a touch in that tradition with our bodies and with our hearts and with our emotions. In ways that can be really, really, really important.

I remember at one point growing up in the church that I've maybe grew up in, I began to hear teaching about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is something you'll hear that phrase in the text we're going to talk about this evening.

I was very much the kind of girl who did things like cry in church because of her sense of need for God.

[4 : 1 0] I was like nine. I was that kind of girl who felt like there's anything that God has for me that I don't yet have, I want. I want to take you to the church. And so one day there was an altar call for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

And I, of course, went forward. It seemed like a good thing. I didn't fully understand it. And I went forward, and I was ushered into this room in the back of the church with just a few other people.

And one of the leaders of the church, somebody I deeply trusted, put his hand on me and just said, be filled with the Holy Spirit. And I realized, as I say that, that the story could go a couple of ways.

But the way it went was that I, the next day I could basically, I was on my back, and I was experiencing something to this day that I still cannot explain.

That was one of the best feelings of peace I've probably ever had. Something that is deeply outside language, that is deeply somehow I'm trying to figure out on the other side of reality.

[5 : 22] Now, you might get asked this, but I don't tell that story much. This is definitely the largest group of people I have ever, ever told that story to. Part of that is that I, like everybody else in the school, took science, and science requires empirical evidence.

And that story has no empirical evidence, right? Other than that I say I've experienced it. But I also don't tell that story because there's been so much abuse inflicted in the name of following the Holy Spirit.

One example, close to my heart, easy to name, is people trying to cast out the demon of homosexuality in the name of the Holy Spirit.

Using the book of Acts and the Spirit's primary role in that book, I have seen, and maybe you have seen, pressure placed on people to say that they were healed.

And that story, demons were, in my spaces, sometimes imagined and then exercised from people in the name of the Spirit. People were coerced in coercion experiences that rode on, essentially, the emotion of a good song.

[6 : 39] And this, they said, is what the early church did and what it means for us to be called together. Years later, many years later, it would be a decade later, I can remember standing in an artisan market in Wagadougou, Puerto Rico.

And I was living with a family of missionaries, and they were mentoring me. So what I felt my goal was in that season.

I picked a lot of stuff on that trip, for example, when I went out there, no French. I do not recommend this. So I picked up some French, for sure. And I also picked up a lot more conflicted feelings about the thing that we call missions.

That's something we've been exploring in the series we're moving through on the book of Acts, by the way. But on that day, as I stood in this artisan market, I asked an artist who, I basically was going to sketch this thing up, and I was going to come back, I asked him to make a boutique, five boutiques, actually, for each member of my family.

And the one that I had made for myself, I actually still keep at my parents' house. They might only bring it up here. But it is at my parents' house. And I keep it because I realize I don't want to think like that anymore.

[8 : 12] It's a good reminder of what I am able to fall into. So the sketch that I asked for... I can't remember what I showed this.

Okay. It pictured me, or a person that looks like me, holding a Bible and handing it to somebody that was clearly indigenous to the Sahara area.

Somebody called a Campbell. I'm not sure if that was me, or if that was the other person. But I put it in there. I even speak in church teaching.

That was about the book of Acts, with this idea that the gospel goes to the ends of the earth. And that was primarily what this book was about.

And that I had to fulfill that. And this was the way to do it. I knew well the stories of Paul's heroic, I thought they were heroic missionary journeys in that book.

[9 : 13] I even at the time owned this book. I wonder if anybody's heard of this, called Operation World. What's that matter? Okay. And it laid out in detail, essentially the population details, of who remaining in each country in the world still needed to be converted.

And then the idea was basically that we were staging a military operation, and this was our battle guide. So I proudly had that teeth made up.

Everything I had been taught about, Christian missions and everything, I had unconsciously imbibed about American supremacy culture, was depicted on that piece of fabric. We were going to take the gospel like warriors.

That's what I thought the book of Acts was about. I was told that this is what the early church did, and that this too is what being called together meant.

Now I start here because I don't think at all, it's not obvious, that this is what the book of Acts is actually about.

[10 : 23] What following the Holy Spirit is about, and definitely not what the early church was about. I'm actually pretty sure this could have been what they were about, because at the time, any kind of unnecessary antics in the Roman Empire would have drawn life-threatening consequences for these people.

And I'm also sure this wasn't what they were about, particularly in terms of supremacy culture, because so many people in the early church were colonized and were slaves. And so they were at the bottom of society in many, many cases.

So this book gives us a very different sense of what it means to be called together as the church Lord of the Spirit.

It challenges us toward a revolutionary way of being together, of being community for one another. It makes us ask questions about how we are to follow the Spirit toward the mission of God.

It invites us to pray, amen for prayer. It invites us to wait. It invites us to reimagine what it means to be sent and to radically redistribute our resources toward the common that makes us one.

[11 : 45] It summons us to cross every single boundary and border possible to follow the Spirit's passion for joining. So Table and Red City are launching.

We've gone through two years of pandemic. We're currently, as Dustin said, looking for a church space. Like a lot is going on. We're hatching a lot of plans in this community. So we want to revisit this idea, this astonishing invitation to life together in the next few weeks.

Political philosopher, Ranson McPadon said this, each generation must have a relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.

And I think that's true of the church in general. I think that's true of our church. We're called this generation, this time, this place, and we have to consider what it looks like to fulfill our unique calling.

And I think the book of Acts can help us with that.

[12 : 54] So, let's take out the scriptures. If you have a Bible, if you have a phone, whatever you have. I do not have a slackness. So if you have something, pull that out.

If you don't, just listen. We're going to Acts 1, 1 through 11. I wrote the former account, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.

After being given orders by the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. To the same apostles also, after the suffering, he presented himself alive with many convincing proofs.

He was seen by them over a 40-day period and spoke about matters concerning the kingdom of God. While he was with them, he declared, Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait there for what my father promised, what you have heard from me.

For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. So when they had gathered together, they began to ask him, Is this the time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?

[14 : 37] He told them, You are not permitted to know the time of the period of the Father set by his own authority. And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be by witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the farthest parts of the earth.

After he said this, while they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud hid him from sight. As they were still staring into the sky while he was going suddenly, two men in white clothing stood near him and said, Men of Yahweh, why do you stand here looking up into the sky?

This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven. All right, so mostly we're just going to kind of witness to this text.

We're going to witness to this text. So I don't have a ton of technical things to say. I would say a few super basic things that will help us through the rest of the book of Acts.

One, really important to know that the book of Acts is the second book in a two volume series. So Luke, Acts are written by the same author. Who that author is, like many biblical books, is a bit disputed.

[15 : 57] But the themes run across both of those books. So that's important to know. And then both the Gospel of Luke and this book, Acts, mention this person, the Apostles.

And it just literally means the lover of God. And here's just a bit of practical business that's going on. Whoever's writing Luke has realized that they need someone to sponsor the work.

And in order to circulate the work, which is pretty common. And so this person is directly being addressed. We can help do some of that. Some people also think that Theopolis may have been like a young believer.

Like may have been somebody that was being catechized. And so that both Luke and Acts are really this compact structure to somebody to just become a believer.

And then the other thing I'll say is that when Luke, the writer of Luke, is starting this Gospel, they have in mind the end of Luke. So if you're at all interested as we move through the series, go back Luke to a great place to go to think about the themes of the Spirit.

[17 : 04] And the appearances that he has in mind. So at the end of Luke, the Gospel of Luke, like Jesus meets the disciples and they were moved to a place. Jesus invites them to touch him and eat with him.

So that's really the starting point for the passage that I just read. In our book, The Purpose of Power, Black Lives Matter, co-founder of Alicia Barger Wright's movements are the story of how we come together when we come apart.

The early disciples clearly created one of the most important and profound and powerful movements that has ever been known in world history. Yet the passages that Luke uses to begin recounting that movement make clear that there is this crisis.

Jesus is leaving. And this is a story about the instructions that he is giving to this community he's leaving. This is like a last will and testament.

The disciples have to figure out what does it mean to be Jesus followers when there is no Jesus? What is that about? What does it mean to be called together when everything is falling apart?

[18 : 17] I think that's one of the first things that it means to be church. To figure out what it means to be called together when everything is falling apart.

And I know too in this text that the disciples don't necessarily even seem to know at first what they're to do. Because they just keep looking at heaven in a way that these two other men have to kind of say, Hey, you can't just keep looking up at heaven. You actually have to go do some things.

Because things have fallen apart from them. This is ultimately an ascension narrative. Jesus goes up to heaven. And for the first heroes, an ascension narrative meant a succession narrative.

The first people who heard this story would have known really the only other ascension narrative that's like really famous in the Hebrew Bible, the story of Israel, which is the story of Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah goes up to heaven. There were like flying horses and stuff. It's cool. Seven Kings, too. It's really cool. But his kind of disciple and follower sees it happen.

[19 : 23] But before it happens, he says, Can you give me another portion of what you have? And that's what these people, as they watch Jesus ascend, and the hearers of this story would have realized like, Oh, these disciples are having the opportunity for this double worship after Jesus goes away.

So it's an ascension story that's about following the prophetic work of Jesus in the Spirit. So to be called together means coming together and everything is falling apart.

But it also means waiting for the Spirit together. There's going to be a lot of we in this sermon series. Like a lot of collecting. What are we doing? How are we reflecting together?

So here's what 1st verse says. While staying with them, you want them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Spirit. To wait together. To wait without taking action.

It begs how good we are together at waiting. Particularly in a city like D.C. that trades on action.

[20 : 36] It prides itself on taking action. Like how do we cultivate waiting in this context? Most of us have probably heard the phrase, Don't just stand there, do something.

But it's kind of the opposite of that. How do we learn how to just stand there without doing anything? Don't just do something. Stand there. I have a feeling that these people were able to wait.

Because the text says that they had convincing proofs. They saw Jesus. What are our convincing proofs that help us wait?

We, most of them probably. You probably haven't seen Jesus. I don't want to take away your experience. But most of us probably haven't physically seen Jesus. So then what are our convincing proofs as a community?

And how do we keep them in front of us? And then these were people who hate from Jesus. They had these physical encounters together. And that was also a part of their ability to wait.

[21 : 42] It's real hard to like eat with one another these days. It's really hard. And yet part of this ability to wait this sentence about how we make space and time for each other.

How we talk to each other and greet each other and ask about each other's lives. And I realize as I say this that all that sounds real simple. And yet it's really hard to actually do over and over again.

How do we wait? The other thing I want to say about this waiting is that to be called together for these disciples who have to stay.

The book of Acts is often, like we often talk about the book of Acts is about going. But the first thing they're told is actually to stay in Jerusalem. To stay in the city where they are. To go down deep where they are.

Jerusalem is where the power of God is at work. Their first task is to witness to God at home. And you'll notice that even the book of Acts they don't get to the ends of the earth.

[22 : 49] They go to Rome, which is the center of the Roman Empire. And I think that that has a double message for us in this room. Because we are called into this city and we are called into this city that is so often the center of the status quo for our world.

So hypocrisy. How do we value here as a church? This place, this ground, this soil.

Dr. Willie James Fittig says this. Geography matters. Place matters to God. From a specific place the disciples will move forward into the world.

To go from place to place is to go from people to people and to go from a bold identity to a new one. Jesus prepares them for the journey of their lives by holding them in that place.

And from that place they will be changed. Church, how is this place, Washington DC, our communities, our neighborhoods, how are they changing us and forming us and forming what it means to do the prophetic work of Jesus?

[24 : 02] How do we wait for the Spirit of God on this soil? And then I would say that being called together means embracing that this community of Christ is without limitation.

I hope you noticed this. Jesus tells the disciples that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And the first thing they say to all, the first thing they say is, Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?

It's actually a pretty good question because in the Hebrew Bible, any time the Spirit is outpoured, God is poured out pretty much, it's about the kingdom of Israel. It's about the kingdom of the people of Israel, it's about the great, it's about all of those things.

So it's a good question. And Jesus doesn't actually directly refute it. And yet the Pope of Acts, this is something we're going to talk about a ton in this series, is so clear that being called together is about crossing every conceivable boundary of ethnicity and economic life and job title and sexuality.

It's about being called to move against diaspora and the practicality of survival. It's being called to move against colonial forms that demand assimilation and have this veneer of difference on top of them without any authentic integration of life.

[25 : 32] We are called to cross boundaries and that is, that was considered transgression. We are called to transgress every border and boundary that keeps humans apart.

Here's Jennings again. The book of Acts is an unequivocal assault of nationalism in all its forms. God from the very beginning of the Acts, will not share a holy desire with any nationalist obnoxious that draws borders and boundaries.

The Holy Spirit will break open what we won't close and shatter our strategies of protectionism. Nationalism gives energy to the false belief that only by its single efforts can a people sustain its story, its hope, and its life.

Such belief for the Christian is unbelief. So we're going to reflect some on what it means for our community. What, what, what, what, what, what, what, what, what, what, what, what are we going to reflect some on who the table church and who resurrection see, see themselves as for, and then how to step outside of that and expand that sense of who we're for in ways that are horrible, you know, scary.

All right, so I can go on and on and on and on and on. All right. But that's what the series is for. So the last thing I was going to say today is that, yes, the book of Acts is about all these things being called together, coming together when things fall apart, taking up the work of Jesus.

[27 : 14] It's, it's about being fueled by convincing proofs and staying and waiting. It's about boundary-crossing, transgressive community that results in radical acts rejoining.

But it's also, y'all, about God's power to move out. And this is the thing that really is what this passage is going for. In the book of Acts, the power that is most expressed is prophetic witness to the reign of God.

It's witness. And no one cannot witness to abstract theological truth. You can only witness to what you have seen and heard. The power shows over and over again in this book.

It shows up over and over. It shows up in jail breaks. It shows up in exorcisms and healings and miracles. It shows up in all the flesh-ish ways. But more than any of that, it shows up in the church's power for people to see.

That's the church's superpower. Vulnerability. Mutuality. God's strength, like in 2 Corinthians says, God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

[28 : 35] God's power is made perfect in weakness. So how are we weak together? How are we weak together? All right. It's been two hard years where people who are living inside the reality of resurrection and trying to figure out what it means to be called to our generation.

May we are, as two communities of being one, discern what it means to be called together. Amen.