

“Series Intro”

Acts

Downtown

Week 1

January 9, 2022

Somewhere around 2000 years ago a little boy was born to a young woman and her fiance. They are lower class from a small, nowhere town. This boy grows up and participates in the family business in a Israeli town called Nazareth. Nazareth is the sort of place that, when people hear it's where you're from they say things like "can anything good come from Nazareth?"

He grew up and around the age of 30 he left the family business to walk around and teach the Hebrew scriptures, what you and I now call the Old Testament. And he was apparently very good at it. Over time he drew quite a crowd when he would show up in a town to speak. And the things he said and did were so compelling - things like the forgiveness of sin, and treating and teaching that those marginalized in society - tax collectors, prostitutes and the like, were as equal and valuable and loved in the sight of God, as anyone else - that some started to believe he was the long-awaited Messiah - the one who would re-establish the Kingdom of Israel and overthrow their oppressors.

The problem was, some of the things he said and did deeply offended the current religious and political establishment. Those groups rarely if ever agreed on anything but over time they began to agree that this Jesus from Nazareth was a legitimate threat. So they conspired to have him dealt with. And they had him executed through a method unique to the Roman empire, called crucifixion. It was such a disturbing, embarrassing way to die that Roman citizens in polite society refused to speak of it. They considered it shameful to even talk about or acknowledge its existence. So even though thousands and thousands of people were crucified during Rome's reign, there are very few mentions of crucifixion in any documents or writings of the time.

Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and died. Those who had been following him around, learning from him and believing that he was in fact Israel's deliverer all scattered. Some went back to their previous place of employment. Because Jesus's death, to them, proved to everyone that he in fact was not the promised Messiah. The Messiah was to lead the nation to prosperity and obviously that had not happened. So they are confused and sad and disappointed and probably a bit embarrassed that they had gotten caught up in the hype and had been deceived. So whatever they thought was going to happen fizzled out to seemingly nothing.

Ok, I want you to think of all of that as point 1 on the timeline. The life and death of Jesus. Somewhere around 2,000 years ago. So that's one point on the timeline. Here is point 2.

This morning, you woke up. And you checked for the time. And it was 6am, January 9th, 2022AD. The initials AD stand for Anno Domini, Latin for “in the year of the Lord”. In contrast with BC which stands for “before Christ”. And probably didn't think about it but your clock and calendar are based on the life of the man who was publicly, shamefully executed with all of his followers leaving and scattering into the night.

And then you checked the news. And maybe you heard about a human rights violation taking place in our world and you thought to yourself instinctively "that is not ok. Human beings have rights, it is unjust for those rights to be violated." And you probably didn't realize it, but that instinctive belief has not at all been instinctive to the vast majority of human beings in history. It's a by-product of the teachings of the man who was killed, hanging naked on a cross by the Roman government.

The idea that individual humans have rights didn't come from ancient Rome or Greece or any other ancient thought leaders.

And you walked out of your house, a citizen of a nation called The United States of America. It's a democratic republic that was founded as an experiment. To see what would happen if we put into play some core ideas like "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Now you should know what was self-evident to Thomas Jefferson is anything but self-evident to those who find themselves outside of the long stream of thought emanating from Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, apart from a creator God endowing equality, human beings are anything but equal. We aren't equally productive or successful. We aren't equally intelligent or competent. We aren't equally attractive or talented. In fact there are very few practical things in which we are equal. The only possible way to think that it is self-evident that human beings are equal is to be steeped in the ideas flowing down from a lower class middle eastern man from a nowhere town.

And you arrived here. In an old warehouse in Downtown Columbia. A former nightclub that used to host events such as "twerk thursday." You've gathered with hundreds of others, some similar to you and some quite different from you. With one thing in common...you're here to worship Jesus of Nazareth. And you, this morning, join with billions of other people all across planet earth in believing that Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. The son of God who has come to save us from our sins and will one day return to restore the earth.

That's the second point on the timeline. Point number 2.

And if you're thoughtful at all, the question is...How in the world are these two points capable of existing on the same timeline? How could we possibly have gone from point 1 to point 2? Not a person in the world who was present for point 1 could have imagined that point 2 would ever exist. In fact, during the moments of point 1, to have suggested that point 2 would exist would have sounded so ridiculous no one would have even listened to you.

So the question is, how? How in the world do timeline points 1 and 2 exist? How could such a small, hopeless endeavor by a middle eastern impoverished traveling teacher become a history altering, globe sweeping movement? Well that's what the book of Acts is all about. It's about the beginnings of a movement that would go on to sweep the planet to such an extent that thousands of years later some of its teachings could be called "self evident." To such an extent that billions of people are caught up in it. To such an extent that you find yourself here, on a Sunday, singing songs about it with people who would otherwise be strangers.

In the opening lines of his book on Acts, **30 Years that Changed the World, Anglican theologian Michael Green puts it this way,**

“Three crucial decades in world history. That is all it took. In the years between AD 33 and 64 a new movement was born. In those thirty years it gained sufficient growth and credibility to become the largest religion the world has ever seen and to change the lives of hundreds of millions of people. It has spread into every corner of the globe and has more than two billion putative adherents. It has had an indelible impact on civilization, on culture, on education, on medicine, on freedom, and of course on the lives of countless people worldwide. And the seedbed for all this, the time when it took decisive root, was in these three decades. It all began with a dozen men and a handful of women: and then the Spirit came.”

The book of Acts is the only account we have immediately following the life of Jesus that shows us how these two points could possibly coexist. And so for the next few months, we're gonna dive into these things together. To see the life and testimony of these early followers of Jesus. To see what happened, how it happened and what that means for us now.

Let's get started...

Acts 1:1–2 [1] In the first book, Acts is written by Luke. A follower of Jesus and traveling companion of Paul. When he says 'in the first book' he means the book of Luke.

O Theophilus, Both Luke and Acts are addressed to someone named Theophilus - who was apparently an early follower of Jesus.

I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, [2] until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

Acts 1:3–6 [3] He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Jesus presented himself alive, after his crucifixion. Over a stretch of 40 days. We learn in other places in the bible that at times he ate with them. They touched him, examined his scars. In 1 Corinthians we learn that he appeared to hundreds of people, alive. After his death.

I know today, we like to think of ourselves as very smart and very enlightened. And sometimes people read things, like for example this claim that Jesus rose from the dead. And they think, well obviously that didn't really happen. People don't rise from the dead. Back then, folks were very superstitious but now we know better.

Well it's true that people in the first century probably had a more supernatural worldview than the average American does today. But the problem with this line of reasoning is that no group, supernatural worldview or not, superstitious or not, thinks dead people come back to life. Because they don't. It's observable and doesn't require the scientific method to investigate. Dead people stay dead and they knew that just like you know that. So this is really important...the evidence they received in order to be convinced that Jesus actually rose from the dead would have also convinced you. If you saw and experienced what they saw and experienced, you would have responded like they did. By realizing that Jesus had actually risen.

This fact will be central to the message of Jesus's followers as we read the book of Acts. That God rose Jesus from the dead, proving that he is in fact who he claimed to be, the long awaited Messiah sent by God to usher in the kingdom of God.

[3] He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. [4] And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you 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, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Notice in vs 3. What is Jesus teaching his followers during the 40 days he has with them after his resurrection? It says he's speaking about the kingdom of God. And then in vs 6 their question to him is whether or not Jesus will full and finally restore the kingdom of God in Israel. Which indicates they have a bit of a misunderstanding because God's intentions were never actually to simply restore the nation of Israel to glory, but instead to spread his kingdom all over the earth.

The Kingdom of God is actually a storyline that runs throughout the whole of Scripture. The Kingdom is the thing that God is doing and has been doing with the world he created. To put it simply, the Kingdom of God is the place where God's rule and reign exists.

From the beginning in the creation narrative. Everything as it should be. It's something the Bible describes in Hebrew as "shalom" and it's a word that translates as peace, but it's more than just the absence of conflict - it's a completeness, a wholeness.

In the words of theologian Cornelius Plantinga, It's the place where "everything is as it should be."

So, imagine a life where every need is supplied for. Where there is no anxiety or fear or uncertainty about the future. Where there was no relational conflict or disunity. No gnawing senses of insecurity or competition with one another - for the record, this what the Bible means when it says our first grandparents were "naked and unashamed." A place of acceptance and approval and love - by God and each other. No rebellion against God causing ruin and chaos in individuals or society. No oppression, no war... No injustice, no lying, or stealing or cheating. No disregard for the life of another. Along with no sickness, no disease and no death. A state where humanity and creation thrive not just *as* God made them, but *with* the God who made them.

This is and more are all the ideas wrapped up in the Kingdom.

However, instead of sharing in the rule and reign, our first grandparents defected and sought to create their own kingdom, they distrust God and seek to make our own rules and decide what is right and wrong for ourselves. And that rebellion - which we call sin- fragments the created order. It breaks shalom - bringing with it everything we lament around us - conflict, violence, greed, pain, sorrow and more... and it destroys our relationship to God, each other and the world.

And this becomes the central plot line of the Bible. What is God going to do about this?

And the answer is Jesus. From the second Jesus stepped onto the scene his message was, "The Kingdom of God is at hand. So, repent and believe the good news.

This was his message - not a plan for self-improvement, or a religious pattern of life that forces God's hand to accept you... no, he came bringing news... what the Greeks called, "gospel"... that He has done what we could not do for ourselves... that through his life, death and resurrection the Kingdom of God is at hand... that sin, death are defeated enemies - there is an end of guilt, shame, and conflict; that oppression, disease, disfunction, pain and and brokenness will not have the last word... and, in Christ, eternal - fully, abundant, restored, forever-return-to-the-garden life is on the horizon.

This is the work that Jesus came to do and this is the work that He *has* done and this is what is available for you! This is what is available for me... and what is available for the rest of the world!

And so when Jesus is spending these 40 days, proving to them his resurrected life, teaching them more of the Kingdom of God... these are the dots He's connecting.

And so... it makes a lot of sense that the disciples would then ask in verse 6, "Is now the time? Are you gonna fully and finally restore the Kingdom now?" You can almost feel the excited anticipation in their question...

But, look at what happens next...

Acts 1:7-9 [7] He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed 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 and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." [9] And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

I can't read this without seeing some humor in it. Can you imagine you've grown up your whole life hearing about a messiah who would come to make right everything that is wrong. You meet Jesus who

claims to be that messiah. You follow him and see miracles, you see him be popular and see him be rejected. You see him killed and think your hopes are gone. Then he rises from the dead and proves it to you. And you're with Jesus again and he's been teaching about his kingdom and you ask "Ok Jesus. This has been quite the rollercoaster. I mean the ups and downs, wow. But finally you've defeated sin and death, proving you're the long awaited messiah. It's been years now of waiting for you to establish your reign. Is it finally time? How does this work, do you snap your fingers or what?" And Jesus says "I'm not telling you." But what I will tell you is that I have a plan to spread my kingdom to the ends of the earth and that plan is you." And then he just floats off.

Can you imagine standing there watching him float up. "Did he just say we were the plan?" If I'm there, I'm thinking "Jesus, no offense man but you need a better plan. I mean, just a few days ago we abandoned you. Do you wanna have a strategy session real quick? I can find us a whiteboard." I mean, has there ever been a larger assignment given to a more unqualified group of people? Former tax collectors and religious zealots, prostitutes and salty fishermen. For all practical intents and purposes, this is the B Team. And Jesus says, "You're the squad."

In fact, Verse 8 is actually the thematic statement for the entire book.

That word "witness" in Greek is the word μάρτυς (mar-toos) and it's where we get our word martyr from. But long before it was associated with martyrdom, it described a person who would provide testimony - like a witness who takes the stand in a courtroom, or someone interviewed on the news after spectating a major event.

And it becomes one of the primary ways Acts will talk about who the church is and what she does. We are witnesses to the inbreaking kingdom of God. Jesus tells them they will take the news of his life, death and resurrection, the kingdom of God and they're gonna go to the ends of the earth with it.

10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?"

"Because a person just floated up there and disappeared. That's why we're lookin'."

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Just like Jesus left, he's coming back again. And until then, there's work to do.

You will be filled with power and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

God's intention is to advance his kingdom, through his people, by the power of His Spirit.

And do you know what happened? What happened was exactly what Jesus said would happen.

Jesus's spirit empowered followers were his witnesses. They proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God in word and deed. It happened just like he said it would happen. Listen, you and I are the ends of the earth. It happened just like Jesus said it would. When they heard him say the plan, they could have doubted him. You and I can't because we're looking at it.

God has and continues to advance his kingdom, through his people, by the power of his spirit. What started in Acts continued to happen, and continues to happen to this day.

So here we are, a church in a long line of churches, participating in the mission of God to spread his shalom wherever we go. Being ministers of reconciliation. Kingdom ambassadors.

You and I are a small part of something much bigger that is doing in all corners of the globe and has been doing for centuries. It's our turn. With the time that we have.

This is what our church is and has always been about.

-Our FoC planted in DT Columbia in 2007 with really one thing in mind - we wanted to see the Kingdom of God take root in the Columbia area. We couldn't necessarily articulate it well then... and there were a lot of growing pains and maturing that happened along the way... but the fundamentals never changed.

-We wanted to see people come to faith in Jesus - to find forgiveness of their sin, freedom from their guilt and shame, and life - real, abundant life, eternal life - in Jesus. And we have. We like to put up pictures of our baptisms around our office and building. If you ever need a pick me up I might recommend scrolling the hundreds of baptism videos on our Vimeo page. It's just stunning what God has done over our short existence as a church, the depths from which He has rescued so many and given new life in Christ.

-We wanted to see a community of people actually put into practice the things that Jesus said. Not people who just cordially tipped their hat to him, but people who took him seriously. Whose lives known for love and grace and mercy and service. And to a large extent we have seen a lot of that.

-We wanted to see healing in marriages, relationships, and pasts. Broken situations. Redeemed and restored because of who God is. If you've ever been a part of a Recovery cycle, you've seen this firsthand. The stories of changed lives are shared on the last night of each cycle as people talk about what Jesus has done for them.

And even with all the fruit we've seen, there is a sense in which it feels like the need is even greater now. If the past 2 years have done anything, they have highlighted how much we need the kingdom of God in our city. I could point this out in so many different ways.

- **Mental health issues are at an all time high.** A recent Pew Research study found that 21% of adults have reported feeling "high levels of psychological distress" over the past year. That's roughly 1 in 5 adults.
- According to another study, **42% of people** surveyed by the US Census reported symptoms of anxiety or depression... an **11% increase** from the previous year.
- The spirit of cynicism, about God and other people and life in general, has grown to an extent that it pollutes just about everything. It feels like distrust is at a fever pitch - no one trusts anyone anymore it seems - as people retreat into their own media bubbles and personal echo chambers of those who look, think, and speak like they do.

And beneath all the hustle and bustle of modern life, it feels like there is just an increasing sense of purposelessness and hopelessness to it all. We need more of the kingdom of God, here.

Your neighborhood needs more of the kingdom of God.

Your social circle needs more of the kingdom of God.

Your family needs more of the kingdom of God.

You and I need more of the kingdom of God. I don't know about you but I could use a little more patience, peace, kindness. More truth with less lies. More courage and steadfastness. More perseverance. More wisdom and joy.

There is so much yet to be made whole, yet to be healed, yet to be brought into the light, even here. There are so many burdens we are carrying that are meant to be handed to Jesus. So many wounds left unprocessed with and before the great Healer. Areas of our lives where we've demanded control, refused to bring under the rule and reign of Jesus.

And just like Jesus showed these early disciples He wants to show the same to you. To help you embrace the hope and promise of His coming Kingdom for yourself... God's intention is the same today... to build his kingdom, through his people, by the power of His Spirit.

As we end, let's just look at how God's people first responded...

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James

the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Their first response to being given the mission is to pray. Well I guess technically their first response was to stand there staring at the sky. But then after that, they prayed.

So here's what we're planning to do...

Starting today, we're going to begin 21 days of prayer and fasting

For 21 days, we're going to go to God to ask, plead, beg for his movement, his kingdom to come... in our hearts, in our church, in our city and world.

At least once a week, we're going to fast. If you're unfamiliar with fasting - it's simply a practice disciples have done for centuries to press further into our dependence on God. Essentially, we fast to feast. We fast from food to feast on God. To tangibly feel the weight of our neediness... that we are dependent on God as much as, if not more, than we are for food...

And as part of this, instead of our groups meeting in homes, we're going to gather corporately on the nights our groups would normally meet to pray together.

You can find the complete rundown of our plan at Acts21days.com...

And we're gonna add some extra time to respond here and now. As we sing and take communion, I also want to invite you to pray with someone. It can be someone you came with or a friendly stranger nearby. If you'd rather not, that's fine. We will also have people up front here at the stage who would love to pray for you. We're beginning 2022 with an intentional emphasis prayer, asking God for his kingdom to come, his will be done here in columbia as it is in heaven.

Let's pray.