It's Not for You to Know

ACTS 1:6-11 (NRSVUE) ***So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But 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." 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They 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."***

The Word of God for the People of God…

Today, we move into a new phase in our congregational life. It's mostly symbolic for now; the concrete manifestations will become evident soon; but some planning and preparation must come first. Last Sunday afternoon, eighteen of us, including three of our youth, shared an afternoon of listening prayerfully for God's response to our prayer, "God, what do you want to accomplish through us?" Bottom line, the results are a walk of faith— "We walk by faith, not by sight;" and yet there was strong consensus among the four small groups that were working. And Wednesday night our Cabinet kept the momentum going. The minutes of the Cabinet meeting will be emailed to you soon.

One outcome is the decision to develop themes that will focus and energize our worship, our study, and our work. One early theme idea was, "Are We Needed?" a question probably very few churches ask. By the end of the day we adopted, "Where Are We Needed?" as our theme through Pentecost.

I already had decided to preach a series of sermons from Acts, and the theme leads right into the prologue, a part of which Bill just read: "Where Are We Needed?" ***"…you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*** John Wesley said, "The world is my parish." It's a good mission statement for the universal church; but we need to zero in a bit more precisely.

So, let's back away and get an overview of Acts. Acts is unique in all the New Testament. It's the second of a two-volume writing from Luke, a physician who accompanied Paul on parts of his missionary journeys. The Gospels, including Luke, are secondary sources, narrating some of the events in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus a generation or two after the events took place. Luke's opening prologue is clear: he has done his homework, gathered resources and listened to oral traditions from some who may have been eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus. While his *Gospel* is a secondary source, parts of Acts appear to be eyewitness accounts from Luke, himself.

In the Gospels, there is overlap; in fact, some passages are verbatim duplicates; but there also are differences, and those differences allow us to see the Gospels as a combination of reporting and interpretating, intended to communicate the meaning of the Christ event. We find meaning in comparing and contrasting the four Gospels.

But in Acts, which is an extension of the work of Jesus (via Luke's Gospel), we have no parallel account for comparison; but, we do have letters from one of the main characters in the story (Paul), letters that deal with some of the same events and confirm much of the story of Acts. It would be to our advantage if we had letters from Jesus or Peter, written during the life of Jesus, to confirm the Gospel accounts.

So, while the letters of Paul confirm parts of Acts, there also are discrepancies which allow us, again, to see that Luke is presenting theological truth in narrative form, which means that in some cases he is interpreting what an event means, rather than presenting rigid, factually accurate historical reporting. [1]

My main source for these introductory statements is *The People's New Testament Commentary*, which identifies six theological themes running through Acts. Those themes will form the basis of the next seven sermons. They are:

1. The Holy Spirit in the life of the Church
2. The Church in a non-Christian Culture
3. How to become a Christian
4. The Church as the continuation of the Plan and Purpose of God
5. The Relation of Christians to the Secular World
6. The Unity of the One Church

And it all emerges out of what Luke reports as the last two sentences Jesus uttered on the earth: ***"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will e my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."***

Everything in Acts emerges as some manifestation of these two sentences.

The disciples, like all of Israel, had been waiting passionately for the coming of one who had been promised—in their understanding—to come and lead them to overthrow their oppressors and to reestablish the Kingdom of Israel—restored to the glory of David: "bring back to 'good ol' days'!"

And Jesus was tempted to do that! Luke's Gospel describes in detail the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness; how would he live out God's claim on his life: he could provide for basic human need—turn stones into bread. "Bread for the world" has a nice ring to it. Although he rejected that idea, he gave it a shot when he fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. It didn't work out too well. The people chased after him like children chasing a clown in a parade, scooping up the candy the clown tosses out. There's a difference between meeting people's needs and making them dependent upon one's benevolence. Nobody disagrees with that; but where to draw that line has been an unresolved source of division in America's politics for generations.

[1] Adapted from Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 364). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

And Jesus was tempted to fulfill his role as "Son of God" with a highflying demonstration of heavenly power. "Jump off the highest point of the Temple grounds!" That'll draw a crowd! Oh, he drew a crowd, all right. It was the Sunday he entered Jerusalem in what we call his "Triumphal Entry." That didn't work out too well, either. On Friday that same crowd was calling for his crucifixion. You can always work up a crowd. Hitler was a master at it. Didn't work out too well for him, either!

Or he could simply have adopted the way of the world—the way the tempter suggested: use political and military power and rule the world. The tempter will provide the power and resources you need, and think of all the good you could do with that power. That was the image Israel had maintained since their return from Babylonian exile. Do it the way the world does it. Join the conquest cultures and rule the world!

Thankfully, Jesus rejected it all and chose, instead, Isaiah's 'Suffering Servant' image. But the disciples never got it. And after three years of teaching and demonstrating God's love through servanthood and sacrifice, the disciples still want to know, "Now are you ready to lead the revolution and establish the kingdom?"

There still are Christians looking for a Messiah to come and "fix things." I lost a high school friend during the past year. He and I maintained a close friendship in spite of 180° opposite politics and theology. He opposed any church involvement in confronting systems of injustice and racism (in fact, he denied racism as anything more than isolated and unrelated occurrences). He said there's no need to try, because this world is currently under Satan's control, and nothing will change until Christ returns. The Disciples asked, ***"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"***

And Jesus' response totally negated my friend's approach: ***"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority…"*** Both Matthew and Mark, the other Synoptic Gospels, quote Jesus saying, ***"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come."***

Luke goes a step further: ***"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."*** If I may be so bold as to try to interpret the words of Jesus: "Quit obsessing about what God will do at some unknown point in the future. You've got enough to do right here, right now!" I think it is consistent with words with which he began his ministry: "The Kingdom is at hand! The Kingdom is within you! Here and now!"

I am convinced that in those words Jesus declared, for each generation, the present moment is the appropriate time to witness for Jesus; and all through the Gospels Jesus declares that what we do to correct injustice is as important as what we say on his behalf. And I think his words to his disciples still ring true: "Get on with it, right here and right now."