The Heartbeat of the Church

ACTS 1:15-26 (NRSVUE) ***In those days Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said,*** [16]***"Brothers and sisters, 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 Psalms,***

'Let his house 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.***

THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD…

You may already know that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are one two-volume work. Each stands alone, but for a clear understanding of the whole two volume set, one needs to read them together. One follows the other.

Acts connects the Gospels and the epistles. It's the only biblical book that reports the beginning and expansion of the church as it continues the work of Jesus and rethinks and grows in its own self-understanding of what it means to be disciples of Jesus in new times and strange places.

The writer is Luke, a Greek traveling companion of Paul, a Greek educated Jew, a Pharisee who had come to believe that Jesus was God's anointed one—the Christ. Paul struggled to make sense of it all, because it contradicted everything he had learned, and now he was trying to communicate it to Gentiles who knew nothing about Judaism. It's interesting to watch Paul's own faith and understanding grow through stages from his first Epistle to the Thessalonians (ca. 50 CE) to his final epistle to his friend and protégé, Timothy, some 18 years later.

Part of the literary genius here is that Acts mirrors Luke. In the Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, and moves eventually to Jerusalem. In Acts, the disciples being in Jerusalem and through the first 8 chapters, with Peter being the primary mover and shaker, move outward into "all Judaea, and into Samaria." Then, in chapter 9 Paul is converted and becomes the primary focus of the Christian mission as it moves "into the uttermost part of the earth" (1:8).

From the beginning—Pentecost—the church was a Jewish movement. After his conversion, Paul never ceased to be a Jew; he never regarded his call as an apostle to be a conversion from one religion to another. It wasn't even called

Christianity for several years. It was called, simply, "The Way." In his letters Paul describes his experience in language very similar to the call of Old Testament prophets. Still, in a real sense his encounter with the risen Christ initiated a radical transformation of his life—a fundamental change.[1]

Have you experienced a fundamental change? I was reared in a conservative evangelical tradition that did not prepare me for life. In Vietnam, I was with HQHQ3MarDiv, and gratefully wasn't out in the field very much. But it was a war zone. Stressful. So, I turned to Scripture for stability and comfort. Like Luther, my awareness was awakened by reading Paul's letter to the Romans. But, to my consternation, the text didn't say what I had been taught—what I had memorized.

And, here's the thing: I had never read the Bible, nor any of its books, from cover to cover. I had memorized verses, out of context. I had studied Sunday School lessons and heard sermons based on texts, again, out of context. When I read an entire writing, within the context of the whole those memory verses didn't always line up with what I expected. Note: during this time, I had no access to commentaries or theological treatments of the texts; in fact, I had enough undergraduate hours to qualify for a minor in religious studies, but I'd *never* used a commentary. I'd read textbooks but was never introduced to commentaries. Nor was I taught to think for myself; in fact, it was discouraged. There in Vietnam, I had only a King James version of the Bible.

Our Chaplain, the late Harold Phillips, was a Disciple, and his sermons lined up with what I was finding in Scripture. With his guidance and some commentaries he loaned me, I began to trust the Scriptures instead of defaulting to my previous indoctrination and being troubled when the Scriptures didn't line up. Maybe it wasn't as radical as Paul's transformation, but it was a transformation.

I've often said, "If you don't want your life to change, stay away from the Bible." It was Jesus, the Word-become-flesh, who said, "You have heard that it was said to those in ages past… But I say to you…" I don't advocate change for change's sake. But life *is change*. Growth is change. Learning is change. If you have a heartbeat, change is inevitable.

The disciples spent three years with the Word-become-flesh. The seeds of change were planted. In the passage Bill read, they didn't know it, but those seeds were about to sprout; their lives were about to change. Radically!

A consistent theme throughout Acts is that even though the disciples were changed, The Way was not a new religion. Rome tolerated pre-existing religions, but new religions were illegal. And one of the charges brought against the "followers of The Way," including Paul, was that they were starting a new religion.

[1] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 466). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

They had changed; but their faith was still Judaism. They still went daily to the Temple. Their understanding of the Scripture was formed by a Jewish rabbi. But the seeds of change were planted.

My favorite Hebrew Prophet is Elijah. If I were to do a movie about him, he would be played by Christopher Lloyd—you know, the eccentric professor in "Back to the Future."

Elijah spoke truth to power; got in King Ahab's face, which ticked off Queen Jezebel. She put out a contract on him, so he ran for his life—out into the desert—and had a pity party **(I KINGS 19:4-15)**. He prayed—whined would be more accurate: ***"It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."***

The Lord said, ***"Elijah, what are you doing here?"***

Elijah whined some more: ***"I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."***

The Lord said, ***"Get up, Elijah. You've prayed enough. Go back to work."***

Life goes on. Somebody said, "Life is what happens while you're making other plans." Jesus' disciples had been making other plans for three years: who would be vice president, who would be secretary of state, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff… Judas threw a monkey wrench into those plans. But life goes on.

Their plans of kingdom and glory were shattered. Jesus had said, "Wait." He'd said, "You will receive power and you will be my witnesses—and like God said to Abraham—through you all nations of the earth will be blessed. So, they waited.

And, while they waited, Luke says, in the verse just prior to the passage Bill read, "(They) were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." But, life goes on. So, in today's text, Peter said, "We've lost Judas. We've lost leadership. We've prayed enough, so let's elect someone to fill that vacancy, and get back to work."

It's good to pray and study and worship. That's how God's intentions and purposes are revealed to us—how we're empowered to partner with God. But comes a time when we've prayed enough. So, the disciples elected Matthias.

Elijah had run away. God had to jerk him up by the collar and tell him to get back to work. And things changed. Ahab was killed in battle, and Jezebel fell out of her bedroom window and was trampled to death by horses. Pigs licked her blood—which is ironic (kind of dark humor), given Jewish dietary laws. *[Phoenician]*

The disciples hadn't run away. They were waiting—and praying. Jesus was gone; but life goes on, so they made preparation to get back to work. And as soon as they activated that balance between praying and working—talk about radical transformation—you won't believe what happened next! The very next verse: ***When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.***

Pastoral Prayer

PHILIPPIANS 1:6 (NRSVUE) ***I thank my God for every remembrance of you, [4]always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy [5]for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. [6]I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.***

God of wisdom and insight; God who calls your people into your future and who continues to work your transforming grace in us, we want to be complete in our imitation of Christ and never become stagnant in our growth toward the fullness of his stature.

By Your grace and through Your transforming love, open our hearts wide to you; forgive what we have been, help us change what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways.

Remind us that in your transforming grace you have empowered us to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with you. Awaken your Spirit within us, change what needs to be changed in us, and enable us to engage this world with integrity, so that your kingdom may come and your will may be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.