

“Transition in Leadership”
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
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Our story this morning from Acts 1 begins right after the ascension of Jesus into Heaven and just before Pentecost. Luke spends the first 8 verses in chapter 1 telling them that Jesus after his resurrection appeared to the disciples and other believers and spent 40 days with them and taught them about the coming kingdom of God. He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem because “in not too many days you will receive power from God in the form of the Holy Spirit.”

Then they ask him about when the kingdom of God was coming and Jesus told them it was not for them to know the time or the hour of such things which were only known by God. Then Jesus told them goodbye and ascended into heaven. They were staring up at the clouds when suddenly two men dressed in white asked, “Men of Galilee, why are you staring up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go.” (Acts 1:11)

The implication is there was work to be done. Don’t spend your time looking up toward heaven, Jesus will be back one day but it won’t be today or tomorrow or next week or next month and probably not next year.

So, they went back to the upper room in Jerusalem where they were staying and prayed and they sang and they waited. They waited for the promised coming of the power of the Holy Spirit. The eleven were there and they are named: Peter, James and John, Andrew, Philip and Thomas and ... well you know the names of the others. And certain women including Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers were there.

“In those days, Peter stood up among the believers” don’t miss the irony that the one who had denied he ever knew Jesus was standing up to retell the story of Judas, the one who had betrayed him. Luke adds parenthetically the group numbered about 120.

Now it is time to get on with the church business of electing someone to replace Judas. Jesus has just ascended into heaven. So here we are between the ascension of Jesus and just prior to Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit and Peter wants to hold a congregational meeting to elect a replacement for Judas. Does that strike you as a little odd? I think it was Luke’s way of telling us that even in the band of disciples they had issues whether or not they were going to follow Jesus. One of them completely deserts Jesus and another one completely denies him for a day or two.

Back in the late 1980’s when they were making the movie, “Jesus of Montreal” the producer asked the director one day why the movie was so over budget? The director said, “It’s because of all of these actors we have to hire, the large cast you know the twelve disciples, etc.” The producer looked at him and said, “What is that about, can’t you get by with six disciples?”

What's the deal Peter and Luke can't you get by with eleven apostles? Well, I guess not. Earlier in Luke's gospel Luke tell us that Jesus had sent the disciples out two by two among the villages of Galilee, to the House of Israel, to teach and to heal. (Luke 9:1-6) Later in the gospel Jesus tells them they will sit on thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22:28-30) The tribes were named after the 12 sons of Jacob. Twelve seems to one of those perfect numbers. Is Luke now reminding us that each tribe needs a witness? Whatever the reason Peter is convinced and Luke tells the story that they need to get the count back up to twelve.

And they do it "decently and in order" like good Presbyterians would do it ... to a point anyway. They begin by listing the qualifications: you had to be someone who had witnessed the baptism of Jesus at the hand of John the Baptist even though Luke doesn't tell us in his account of the baptism of Jesus that any of the disciples were present. (Luke 3:21) And be with Jesus continually through his resurrection and ascension - "a witness with us to his resurrection."

They were looking for an eyewitness who had seen the whole three year process. They wanted a reliable accounting that would guarantee the authenticity of Jesus' resurrection. They wanted someone who could witness ... someone who could give an account ... an orderly account. Not someone who would allow a "maybe" or "we think" this is what happened to crop up in the telling of the story.

Leadership in the new community of believers would be based on qualifications and more importantly they prayed about it. Here is the operating principle of the church in every age in verse 24. They prayed; God chose. That is the same principle that we live by today. On the form in the bulletin this morning you have the qualifications for the new class of elders that you are being asked to suggest names to the Nominating Committee and we ask that you pray over any name you suggest and the names others suggest. The Nominating Committee will also spend time in prayer. We pray; God chooses.

Two names were given as qualified to serve as the twelfth apostle, "Joseph who was also known as Justus, and Matthias." This is the one and only time that either of these two are mentioned in the Bible. We don't know anything about them other than they had followed Jesus around for three years and were there to the very end. Isn't it funny how ordinary people show up in the Bible and we're talking about them a couple of thousand years later. Two names were nominated and then they prayed ... "Lord you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place."

They then cast lots ... which probably mean they rolled the dice which is not very Presbyterian. It doesn't say they voted, it doesn't say all who want Matthias raise your right hand. Now, casting of lots may sound odd to us but it had been firmly established as a divine way to make decisions for a long time. For example you may remember that the soldiers at the foot of the cross "cast lots" for the garment of Jesus because it was a single piece of cloth and had more value if they didn't rip it into 4 parts for each of the soldiers. The term means literally "receiving something through divine grace without any effort on the part of the one receiving it." In 90 A.D. the Rabbis were trying to decide what Hebrew books should be included in their scripture (our OT

today) and there were a couple books they couldn't decide on through their normal process so they cast lots. After prayer they tossed the scroll of Esther on a table, if it stayed on the table God had chosen it, if not then it would not be included. Casting of lots Esther won so she's in the book.

“And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.” (Acts 1:26) And that is the end of the story and the last time we hear of Matthias or Justus ever again. Now truth be told we barely hear the names of the other apostles except for Peter, James and John much either. What we do know of the careers of the other apostles mainly comes from writings of the early church fathers or from legends passed down through the generations.

Now, let's get back to my suggestion a little earlier that “something big” is possibly going on here in this story that Luke tells in the first chapter of Acts. Apostleship was important. I think that something really big is happening. As Carol reminded us last week, the plan Jesus had for spreading his good news to the ends of the earth was simple ... call 12 disciples tell them and some women the good news and then turn them loose on the world. That was his plan ... when the angel asked Jesus what if that plan didn't work, Carol said, Jesus replied to the angel, “There is no plan B.”

It was important work they were about. I think it was an Easter event or at least in line with Easter this replacement for Judas. They could have just gone back to the upper room where they were staying and prayed, sang hymns, told stories about Jesus and waited for his return. They could have been passive about his message because after all they were going to be saved, right? Why would they care to be possibly mistreated, arrested as Jesus was, treated harshly. No, just lay low and wait for Jesus to come back.

But they didn't do that. You and I sitting here this morning are witnesses to that fact. Their Easter event was ... they too had their lives changed. Their faith was restored ... resurrected and they couldn't do anything else other than follow Jesus.

These people had just lost their best friend in all the world. When Jesus was arrested and then crucified, executed by the authorities. Can you imagine what it would be like to lose your best friend? Someone who was going to lead you into a new future in the kingdom of God? They suffered what I call a spiritual death. It was a crushing blow and it takes us awhile to get over that.

But glory be in three days Jesus is resurrected and is raised from the dead and is alive. Jesus is alive! At first people didn't believe just like you and I wouldn't believe it. It says they saw Jesus - some worshipped and some doubted. Among his faithful disciples it took 40 days to register that this had really happened. So they went from spiritual death to spiritual resurrection. They had gained a whole new world. So it was an Easter event to call another disciple to this ministry.

You and I are witnesses today that they went out and witnessed to the world. Because of that witness the good news of Jesus Christ is still alive today because of this Easter event that happened between Ascension Day and Pentecost.

As Will Willimon suggests, “Jesus didn’t come to us as some noble, abstract idea, some mushy inner feeling. He came to us in the flesh, as a Jew from Nazareth. He didn’t work alone, momentarily touching peoples “hearts” and letting it go at that. Jesus from the first called real flesh and blood people like you and me and called us to follow to visibly, daily take up our cross and follow.

“So when you think about the election of Matthias, all that nitty gritty business right after the ascension of Jesus, it was a thoroughly Jesus/Easter event. Thereby the resurrection was given bodily form, extended, preserved in the life of the church ... the message was not going to be bottled up only for those who knew Jesus, not only for the House of Israel, but for gentiles like you and me. Offered to future generations made real and present in the lives of believers like Mary, Martha, Peter and Mathias.” (Pulpit Resources, May 1994, Willimon)

It is all because of the grace of God given to us through the Matthias’s down through the generations. For me I first experienced the grace of God at the Pigeon Creek PC in the heart of Western Pennsylvania farm country - two hundred members strong. The preacher was always young, right out of seminary with lots of enthusiasm and not much experience, a choir that struggled every week with whether there would be enough tenors and altos to sing the anthem - Pigeon Creek’s “big barn” of a sanctuary and fellowship hall modeled after what they built best was big enough to overwhelm the doubts of a seven year old in white shirt and itchy trousers.

I remember getting paid a silver dollar for memorizing the books of the Old and New Testament in order and receiving a new Bible for coming in third place in a Bible reading contest. I remember Miss Henry, who taught the Junior Missionary Society during big church once a month, telling us mission stories about the way Jesus loved each of us - Miss Henry who concluded our lessons by leading us in songs like “Bringing in the Sheaves” and “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations.” And I would hear her tell some of the other members, when they said our singing was disturbing the preaching upstairs in big church, “aren’t these children wonderful!”

It’s the message that Jesus empowered his disciples with. It’s the message that came upon them as the Holy Spirit spread out among them in tongues of fire. It’s not a surprise because Jesus promised that. Jesus said I will not leave you alone, I won’t leave you comfortless. I’m sending the Holy Spirit to empower you.

So, you and I are here this morning in this sanctuary not in some never-never land of divine bliss. We live among real people who have real bills to pay, children to rear, parents to be cared for and questions to be answered. And the beautiful thing is Jesus planned this for us ... a place where God meets us, gives us thoroughly visible proof of his continuing care.

He gave us this great thing called the church to carry out his message on this earth and to that I hope you can all say thank you and amen.