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Acts 2:14-46, abbreviated. (Peter addressing the early believers in Jerusalem)
English Standard Version

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ " 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;

¹⁹ And the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,

before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

²¹ And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

²² "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴

²⁵ For David says concerning him,

" 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;

²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope.

²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.

²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

²⁹ "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection

*of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.
³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”*

³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸ And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” ⁴⁰

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.

The new church.

The Book of Acts is dedicated to someone named Theophilus, which translates literally from the Greek to “lover of God”. It could be that it was a letter addressed to a single person, but it’s really a document that describes the emergence of what became known as the Christian church. It was written by Luke, the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Although we often categorize it as “history”, it is not a detailed, step-by-step literal history, according to today’s notion of history. Rather, it is a series of stories. It is a continuation of the biography of Jesus, as begun in the Gospels; but in Acts, we follow the followers of Christ as they move outward from Jerusalem, eventually bringing this new faith to the Gentile world. Acts establishes Christianity in the Roman world.

We have traditionally called it the Acts of the Apostles, but most of the Apostles are ignored in it. We read about Matthias replacing Judas. James gets one line. John gets just a bit more attention. Mostly, it is about Peter, the reluctant evangelist to the Gentiles, and then we move on to the story of the widely traveled Paul, the far more enthusiastic evangelist to the Gentiles. Paul, in Acts, appears less beleaguered than he does in most of his letters. Some have actually suggested that Acts should be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, since Acts begins with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, as we celebrated two

weeks ago, and then continues on with those who have been energized by the Spirit as they courageously move outward from Jerusalem.

The passage that we have just heard comes early in Acts. The famous speaking-in-tongues event has just occurred, where people, rather than talking in random nonsense, as some believe, speak in their own languages, but are understood by others as speaking in their languages. Then Peter gives a motivational sermon to the early church. This sermon is considered an example of *kerygma*, which is a word that is used in the New Testament to refer to a sermon. We associate *kerygma* with the sort of preaching which was very common in the early church. In such a sermon, we are typically told that 1) the kingdom of God, the end of time, is at hand, 2) the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the vehicle that is about to bring the End Times, 3) the Holy Spirit is the sign of Christ's power on earth, and 4) forgiveness comes through repentance.

But remember that we are in Jerusalem, and Peter is a Jew preaching to Jews. That is why he keeps referring to Jewish Scripture, what we call the Old Testament. His job is to provide a basic foundation to these new followers of Jesus. His point is that the promises of ancient Scripture are fulfilled through the actions, words and death of Jesus. Importantly, Luke never says in Acts that this document is about the founding of a new church, even though this is how we see

it today. We are witnessing not the birth of a “new Israel”, but the culmination of ancient prophesy – something that is extremely core to Jewish belief and was very important to the Jews of the day. Peter’s people have been waiting for eons for this. As it turns out, as the story unfolds, we see that a new church is indeed being formed. As God directs these early evangelists to spread the word of Christ, they – without even realizing it at first – are indeed building a church.

In our passage today, I took the liberty of putting in bold the references that Peter makes to the Old Testament. Consider this:

***“ ‘I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;
26 therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
my flesh also will dwell in hope.
27 For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One see corruption.
28 You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’***

Peter is referencing a very well-known piece of Scripture, something that would have been burned into the minds of his listeners. It is from Psalm 16, a Psalm that is believed to have been written by David. Peter then goes on to say: *Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”* He is saying that indeed, this Old Testament promise from Psalm 16 is fulfilled through Jesus.

Then we are told the following: *Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"* ³⁸ *And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* ³⁹ *For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."* This is why this Book might be better called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. How does Peter say that this ancient promise is to be met? How do we find this path of life? By being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit. That is the story of Acts. This is what Peter will tell the Jews and Paul will tell the Gentiles, over and over and over.

Our passage ends with a glimpse of what might be the very first Christian church. It's a passage that we will return to some Sunday. It has been the focus of a lot of intense discussion by American Christians, especially during the fifties and sixties, as it seems to suggest that Christians should be socialists, or even communists: *And all who believed were together and had all things in common.* ⁴⁵ *And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.* We won't worry about this issue of socialism now. We'll just note that the early followers of Christ took care of each other. The first churches were small and very, very close – like this church is.

Now, a lot has been said about the many, many references to the Old Testament in the New Testament. Christian scholars and preachers have written countless pages about how the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New. But to be honest, this is perhaps the opposite of how we should view it, at least in Acts. It's not that the Old Testament has somehow been Christianized, or reduced to a giant preface or prequel, with the really important stuff being what's taught in the New Testament. Rather, the Old Testament is seen as the promise of God, the foundation of the new faith, the structure on which the New Testament sits. To the early readers of Acts, we see the teachings of Jesus as being core to ancient Scripture. The Old Testament provides the proof that the New Testament is valid – not vice-versa.

By the way, it is only by tradition that we believe that Luke wrote the third Gospel and Acts. The author never identifies himself in either Book. The Book of Acts does appear to refer to the Gospel of Luke and it seems to indicate that the same person wrote them both. Both Books are addressed to Theophilus. Also, the author of Acts does not appear to have ever met Jesus, and we believe that Luke indeed never met him. The Greek in Luke is also very erudite, significantly more sophisticated than in Matthew and Mark, and in the Gospel of Luke, there are a handful of very precise statements that are medical in nature. Since Luke

was a physician, and most likely highly literate, it would seem that indeed he is a good candidate for having written both Books. Most notably, though, the tradition that Luke wrote these two Books is quite old, dating back to at least the year 200, and numerous ancient sources attribute these Books to him.

Why would this person whom we call Luke – mostly likely correctly – write these two Books? It's because he wanted to tell both parts of the story: the life of Jesus and the life of the church that followed after Jesus. When the Gospels and the Book of Acts were being written, people were under the impression that Jesus would return soon and that this would usher in the End Times. They were wrong of course, and Peter and Paul, to a large extent were commissioned with the task of planning for a future that they were just now aware was going to happen. It was time to dig in and build a church. This second part of the story – the unexpected emergence of the church – is what Acts is about.

The Book of Acts is the story of the movement of the old church, which was Temple-based, from Jerusalem to the greater world. The new church would be home-based at the beginning, with many tiny congregations meeting in people's homes. Then, gradually, separate church buildings would emerge. The old church would, of course, remain. It was and still is the Jewish Temple-and-Synagogue system, a continuation of the covenant made between God and the Chosen

People. For us, though, the new church would be our faith home. Because of the story told in the Book of Acts, we are not isolated believers, scattered around the world. We are group-based, and a primary reason why I love being a Methodist is that our denomination is especially connected. Indeed, we believe in “connectionalism”, in pulling together all Methodists into a single faith family.

So, the church is critical. We cannot maintain our faith, our trust in God, our belief in the teachings of Jesus unless we gather together as an individual church. We do this on Sunday morning. But there is a greater church, the one that spread outward from Jerusalem and far past the known world of Peter and Paul. We live out the fulfillment of the Old Testament, of the Hebrew and Aramaic Bible.

I want to end by saying that this past Sunday, when I wasn't here, I was being commissioned at the Annual Conference in Montana. I'm very proud to serve First United Methodist of Pierce as my first church, first as your Local Pastor, and now as an Elder. But our church is bigger than this church. And the head of our church is God. When we lose a loved one, or when we find ourselves on an unfortunate medical journey, or when we are feeling isolated or like a failure, we know that God will absolutely always be there for us.

Now, Geery had been planning on attending the Annual Conference, but she was not able to. In part, I'm glad she couldn't make it – because the hotel was the

worst that Wendy and I have ever stayed in. The ceiling tiles in the hallways were falling down. The carpet was held together with duct tape in hundreds of places. The outdoor security card locks did not work and one of them had been ripped off the door, with wires left dangling out. There was old, beat-up furniture laying around the back of the hotel. The desk chair in our room was broken and wouldn't rise up, so I had to perch myself on the edge of it and poke my nose up over my keyboard. The parking lot was filled with huge pot holes. The emergency phone had been torn off the hallway wall. Our room had not been vacuumed, and I learned that I couldn't go barefoot, or I would get sharp objects stuck in the bottoms of my feet. The bushes outside were dead. The bathroom door was warped and would not close, and it was peeling apart. Before going to sleep the first night, I told Wendy that I hoped there were no bed bugs.

But the experience was amazing and rejuvenating. I wore my new clerical robe that arrived the day before we left. As I knelt there, with the Bishop laying her hands on my shoulders, I felt very close to God. I realized at that very moment that you were here, having your Sunday service without me. I thought of this congregation, of all of you. I thought about how excited I am that this is where I serve the church founded largely by Peter and Paul, based on the teachings of Jesus, and in fulfillment of the ancient Scriptures. Amen!