

God Never Gives Up: Are We There Yet?

Acts 2:1-4

So, we are still in this series about God never gives up. And we are looking at the big picture of the Bible. What is the story of our relationship with God. And last week we had Jesus and the coming of the kingdom. This is what the Christian faith is founded on. It's all about Jesus. It is the climax of the story. However, it is not the end of the story. For some people their faith finishes with the coming of Christ, as if that is the end of the story. "Yay, I'm saved. Now I can live my life." If we do that, if we stop with the gospels, we leave out the story of the remaining 22 books of the Bible. The story has climaxed, but it is not over. And Luke knows this. The writer of the Gospel of Luke now writes the sequel, the book of Acts. Luke and Acts, they go side by side even though that is not the order they are in in your Bible. And although Luke calls this second book the Acts of the Apostles, what it really is, as N.T. Wright calls it, "the Acts of Jesus book 2." It is about what Jesus continues to do, through the apostles, through the Holy Spirit, and through the church. So let's continue in the book of Acts, this time in chapter 2.

Acts 2:1-4

¹When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them.

³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "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 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

So, we have these two passages from Acts this morning. The first one is about waiting, and the second one is about doing. Waiting, then doing. Apparently both are important. Now if you have ever traveled a long distance in the car with a child in the back seat there is a question you know you are going to hear. "Are we there yet?" How many of you have ever had that question? I was a youth leader for 11 years and every summer when we went on the mission trip and I had 11 teenagers in the van behind me, the question "are we there yet" was so common that I would charge them for that question. They had to give me 5 cents every time someone asked the question are we there yet?

Well in Acts chapter one the disciples were asking the same thing. They have been expecting Jesus to be the new King of Israel. They thought it would be a political overthrow of Jerusalem. Then they found out they were wrong when Jesus was crucified. Then Jesus is resurrected and as Luke points out at the beginning of Acts 1, Jesus has been appearing to multiple people for 40 days telling them about the Kingdom of God. And so the disciples say in verse 6, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, “are we there yet?” And they don’t get the answer they want. They still don’t understand what this “kingdom” really means. And Jesus answers them with a commission, and then instructions to wait.

Jesus commissions them to be his witnesses and he gives them a specific agenda. In verse 8 he says “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” He gives them a map. He specifically commissions them. In some ways this is where they become apostles. Jesus has a specific plan for them in the building of the kingdom. So they ask “are we there yet” and Jesus says basically, “no, that’s not your concern,” and follows that up with “You are the ones that are going to build the kingdom, once I give you the power through the Holy Spirit to do it. Now wait”

I think the order of events here is important to note, because it is the same for the Christian today. There are four steps in this passage. If you notice Jesus chose them, then Jesus revealed himself to them, then they were commissioned, and then they were given the Holy Spirit, as promised since the Old Testament, to do what Jesus commissioned them to do. The journey of a Christian today is the same. We are chosen by God, God reaches out to us first. Then Jesus is revealed to us in scripture and the experience of God. Then we are commissioned to be witnesses for Jesus in the world, and then Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit in order to be able to do just that. So this layout of the experience for the disciples is a mirror image to our experience as Christians. And as I will talk about more later, many of us want to stop at the revealing of Jesus, at the conversion experience and think “OK, I’m good.” But according to this, that is only the half-way point of those four steps. The power of the Holy Spirit and being witnesses to the ends of the earth must follow.

Last week and this week Pastor Steve and I have been talking about the kingdom of God. The already here but not yet kingdom. And I think it is worth it to look at what we know about this kingdom from this passage. We know it is not a physical place or space. When we think of the word kingdom we usually think in terms of geographical places, like the British kingdom or United Kingdom. In fact there used to be this saying that the sun never sets on the British Empire. That was because at one point they had colonized so many different countries on multiple continents that indeed the sun never set on all of them at once. That is what we tend to think about when we think about the word kingdom. We think about land.

But that is not what the kingdom of God is, and certainly not at this stage of it. From this passage we know three things about the kingdom of God. One, the kingdom of God is spiritual. When the disciples ask Jesus if he is going to establish the kingdom of Israel Jesus immediately responds with news about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is going to be the power by which

people will become God's people. This is not a geographical conquest. It is spiritual power at work. Commentator John Stott puts it this way: "But power in God's kingdom is different from power in human kingdoms. The reference to the Holy Spirit defines its nature. The kingdom of God is his rule set up in the lives of his people by the Holy Spirit. It is spread by witnesses, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms...or revolutionary violence." This kingdom of God is nothing like what we think of as kingdom here on earth. We have to adjust our thinking to a very different kind of kingdom. The second thing we know about this kingdom of God from this passage is that it is international. The disciples were concerned with the restoration of Israel, which was a nationalistic viewpoint. But Jesus says this is going to go to the ends of the earth. The missional nature of what will be the church is in Jesus' statement. This kingdom will be for gentiles and all other nations, which is what you find happening if you read the rest of the book of Acts.

To recap, one we learn that the kingdom of God is spiritual. Second, we learn that it is international. The third thing we learn is that it is gradual in expansion. There is not going to be an instant overthrow of Jerusalem as the followers of Jesus were hoping for. This is going to be gradual over a long period of time. Much longer than they were expecting. It is still expanding now, 2000 years later. And we will soon look at our part in that. That pretty much covers our first Acts passage from chapter 1. Jesus commissions them to spread His kingdom, he promises the Holy Spirit, and then they have to wait.

As I mentioned earlier these two passages have different goals. The first one is about waiting and the second one is about doing. This waiting on God idea is important. Sometimes we have to wait for God's timing. And I will be honest in this current culture we live in I don't like waiting for anything. We like instant gratification don't we? If the drive through for fast food takes more than 5 minutes I find myself getting annoyed. We do not live in a world to teaches waiting. But God teaches waiting over and over again in the Bible. Waiting on God is a biblical concept and a spiritual discipline. Abraham and Sarah had to wait for the children God promised. They had to wait a long time. Hannah had to wait long for children also. Joseph had to wait through being wrongfully imprisoned twice before God's plan for his life was obvious. And the list goes on. The disciples at the beginning of this first passage don't want to wait. They are asking Jesus are we there yet? They don't want to wait. But waiting on God is something we have to learn to do. It's good for us. God's plan and timing for the coming of the Holy Spirit is perfect as we will see in a minute. But it required waiting. And waiting on God is not just waiting for what we want. It is not the same as waiting in traffic, or waiting in line at the grocery store, or waiting for a doctor's appointment, or waiting for this sermon to be over. Waiting on God is part of the process of becoming who God wants us to be. It is not passive waiting, it is actively waiting and searching and seeking God's will, with some patience.

So at the end of Acts 1 we are left waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Then we have our second passage which is the beginning of Acts chapter 2 which we know as the famous

Pentecost passage. Now for us Pentecost brings up the coming of the Holy Spirit and the image of tongues of fire and people speaking in tongues. However, this is not what the apostles would have expected for Pentecost. Long before Acts chapter 2 Pentecost was already a holiday. It was the 50th day after Passover. And it was an agricultural festival where farmers would bring their first fruits in thanksgiving to God. Now Passover and Pentecost were both festivals for the Jews, but they also both had a lot of religious significance. Passover was the celebration of the escape from Egypt and the angel of death. Pentecost, 50 days later, was the celebration of the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai.

When you look at this in that light, the light that the early readers of Luke's account would have known, the Holy Spirit coming on Pentecost is hugely significant. Think about it. For Jews Passover and Pentecost were the reminders of the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. At Passover you sacrificed a lamb to be saved. As we just learned in the Gospels Jesus becomes the final Passover lamb who is sacrificed on the cross so that we can be saved. Now, 50 days later, on the holiday that marks the giving of the law to Moses, Jesus will give his people the Holy Spirit. And the first fruits that I mentioned were part of this festival? That will be the people that come to Jesus through the witness of the apostles to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. It all makes sense. It gives this grand story of God never gives up perfect balance. None of this is by accident. It is all one grand plan to save God's people because God never gives up.

When the Holy Spirit comes, in verses 2 and 3, Luke says "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them." A lot of artwork pictures the day of Pentecost with wind and fire, but we need to remember what Luke says here. He says it was a sound *like* the wind and what *looked like* tongues of fire. They aren't really present but it seems like they are. I think the significance of this is that wind and fire are untamable sources. Uncontrollable forces are associated with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has all the same power as Father God and Jesus. It is not just an extension of God and Jesus. It is all the essence of God and Jesus and so its power cannot be reigned in any more than the power of the God that created the universe. In fact the Spirit of God is present in the creation account. So the Spirit has been around from the beginning and now it is being offered to humanity in order to spread the kingdom.

When this happens people ask Peter, well now what do we do? Peter replies starting in verse 38: "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 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." Peter makes it pretty clear what we are supposed to do. Repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Repent, which Pastor Steve told you last week means change your thinking. And for humanity I think this means change your thinking about who gets to be God. Stop thinking you can be your own God. Turn to Jesus. Let Jesus be your God.

And then be baptized in the name of Jesus. This is the public sign that you are going to be a follower of Christ. The visible sign of the invisible grace you have received. And notice you don't get baptized in the name of anyone else. Baptism existed before Jesus. Outward immersion to represent cleansing on the inside existed back in the Old Testament. Prophets did this in Isaiah and Ezekiel and the Psalms. What is different here is that you need to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, no one else. It is Jesus Christ that can cleanse you from your sin. So Peter is being specific when in verse 38 he says "be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." In baptism you publicly proclaim that you will follow Jesus because he is the only one that can provide forgiveness of your sins.

And then you will receive the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit is a gift from God. It is not a power you get to claim on your own. You have to receive it from Jesus. And it is a gift for everyone. Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and then Peter says this will be given to everyone that calls on Jesus as their Lord and savior. And this brings us to the last verse of this passage, verse 39. Peter says "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." The promise. That sounds familiar doesn't it? We talked a lot about promises when we started this sermon series and looked at Abraham. God promised Abraham that God would bless all those that came after him through him. Well, here is the promise again. And it is for quote, "you," that would have been the people standing there on the day the Holy Spirit came. Right? Then it is for "your children." So that would be the generation following the generation of the apostles and all that were there on the day of Pentecost. And then Peter says "and for all who are far off." All who are far off. That's us! And that is what is so exciting about the rest of the Bible. It is about what Jesus does through us. We now enter this big story of God never gives up. We're the ones who were far off. N. T. Wright puts it this way which I liked: "The stage opens up and we discover we're in the middle of the action. That is part of the point of the 'ending' which isn't really an ending: the story continues, and we are part of it! What we are reading (he's talking about the book of Acts) from this moment on, is the opening scene, or set of scenes, in a play whose action we ourselves are called to continue."

So, are we there yet? No. The kingdom is just unfolding. That spiritual kingdom to be offered to everyone is still spreading. And we have a lot to do. The call to be witnesses to the ends of the earth applies to us. And there are so many ways that we can do that. We support missionaries that literally do this to the ends of the earth. Daniel Salinas is in Ghana right now. Michelle Petersen is teaching missionaries that will go to the ends of the earth to translate the Bible for people that have not heard it yet. But Salt Lake City is also part of this earth. And the Gospel needs to reach the people of Salt Lake City as well. And that is our calling. We are part of a promise. Let's keep that promise in everything that we say and do. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

