

Acts: Introduction:

Preface:

Well, People of God!

It feels like a long time since last Sunday, you know?

I am glad we made it through the cold.

If you weren't here, we did have a wonderful moment remembering Bill in our service. I also talked with us about the challenges that we face as a congregation, and how those challenges line up with the situations many of us are facing in our own lives. It's online, if you want to check it out, and I'd encourage us to, honestly.

Today:

Today we're launching our walk through the New Testament book of Acts. Our walk through Acts will carry us deep into 2019.

It's an amazing book; fundamental to how we understand what the early Church thought about itself, about the world, about what God had done in Jesus. It's a story that engages us. I'm looking forward to

walking through it.

But today...today is introduction day. And so if we can do me a favor and just lower any expectations we have as low as possible, because the truth is it's hard to make basic information compelling, you know? And today we're walking through the basics of Acts: The who, what, when, where, why and how of this hefty New Testament book--all this sort of informational stuff that, you know, isn't that exciting. It's like, I don't know, permits. You have to get permits if you want to build something amazing, but it's no fun getting permits. Unless you're, like, a permit nerd.

My deep prayer is that we're permit nerds, and so this introduction is like the best thing ever. Let me pray for us.

Prayer:

Who?

We'll start with "Who?" Who wrote Acts?

Or, if we call it by the full name tradition has given it, "The Acts of the Apostles."

Because at its most basic, Acts is a letter, written from one person to another person. It's a gigantic letter, an enormous letter, but it is a letter. And it isn't a stand-alone letter; it's a Part II, the second in a series. A really, really long P.S.

The first letter that the author of Acts wrote is called the Gospel According to Luke, or, you know, Luke.

Both Luke's Gospel and Acts are anonymous. They weren't signed by Luke, although the earliest Church tradition has affiliated Luke with both of these. And we can actually know a lot about Luke, really.

We know that Luke is, well, he's a clear thinker. He's orderly. His greek is excellent in its use of grammar and language--he knows medical terms, nautical terms. He knows how to think critically, and research and organize. In the Gospel that this Luke wrote, there's information that only he recorded, because he spent the time to find it--interviewing Mary, Elizabeth, others.

Every early record we have agrees that Luke wrote not only the Gospel that bears his name, but Acts as well, and a lot of academic work has been done looking at

the way Luke & Acts work together in parallel, are structured similarly, are two volumes that go together. The Gospel of Luke starts this way:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Acts begins like this:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

We could spend all day wondering about this Theophilus who Luke wrote his Two-Part Letter to. The name means "Lover of God." Some people think it's an

actual person Luke wrote to, maybe a patron who paid for his accounts. Some people think Luke simply dedicated his books to me, and you, and anyone who picked up the letter because they Loved God and wanted to know more about what God had done through Jesus and later the Holy Spirit. I tend toward the first option, but won't die on that hill.

This author we call Luke was Paul's companion in his missionary travels, and Luke talks about his time with Paul in Acts 16, 20, 21, 27, switching from "them" and "him" to "us," and talking about what his time was like journeying around. Paul makes reference to Luke in Colossians 4, a letter to a congregation they both visited, pointing out there that Luke wasn't Jewish, but was a Gentile. This makes sense, too, because in both Parts of his Two-Part letter, Luke is always explaining Jewish customs, translating for his first readers, who were Gentiles, too, cultural things they wouldn't have understood. Paul also describes Luke as a "physician," as most translations put it.

And Luke talks about medicine and sickness and the like over 300 times in his Gospel and in Acts. And at one point, when he includes a story from Mark's Gospel in his own, a story that has the sentence "She

had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather, worse,” Luke goes and leaves that line out. So, you know, it’s something people notice.

There are other, less historically-certain things, that could be said about Luke. Maybe he was a Jewish convert before he was a Christian one? We don’t know, but feel free to write papers about it. Maybe he Most ancient sources agree where he was from, where he died: names of places none of us would know on a map if I said them. One source says he was single, and died at 84. Okay. You could do an interesting reading of Acts from the perspective of single-hood, I guess, if you wanted to? We probably won’t linger on that angle.

What?

And we’ve already mentioned that at its most basic Luke is a letter written to someone. If we were a little more exact, we could call it a history, but a narrative history. A story of what happened after Jesus’ resurrection. Acts is a story Luke has put together for the purpose of telling what happens after “the orderly account,” the Gospel, he put together ends.

We'll see soon a passage in Acts where Jesus tells his followers, gathered around him, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." At its most basic, Acts is an accounting of the way this prophetic command plays out in the world.

People will talk about what Luke wants to do through Acts beyond just tell this story, and I appreciate what one author suggests is Acts' six-fold purpose (Powell, adjusted, per Wall NIB). Acts was written with the purpose of promoting:

What? Unity

Unity: Acts is written to create a sense of solidarity among different congregations, some rich, some poor, some Jewish, some Gentile, some mixed, from all parts of the Roman Empire.

What? Unity, Caution

Caution: Acts is written to dissuade people from idolatry, whatever form that might take.

What? Unity, Caution, Defense

Defense: Acts is written to defend and explain the

traditions and individuals behind the early Church's life.

What? Unity, Caution, Defense, Mission

Mission: Acts is written to explain and inspire the mission of the Church, how it carries out Jesus' prophetic mandate, and how it lives faithfully in a complex political and religious world.

What? Unity, Caution, Defense, Mission, Theology

Theology: Acts is written to correct bad theology. Some argue that Luke wrote to correct a group of people who were overly-enthusiastic about the end of the world coming soon, or to answer the same questions Paul himself had to answer in Romans, questions about how the Gentile believers fit into God's purposes and plans.

And Luke masterfully weaves these things in this story he tells. He does it through a handful of literary devices, tricks and techniques that show up again and again. We'll see, as we walk through Acts (Wall NIB):

Speeches, Summaries, Repetition, Drama, Scripture

Speeches: Luke loves speeches. He records speeches like crazy. A third of Acts is speeches. So as we walk through Acts over and over we'll see some action, and then someone will talk forever about what's going on, and then some more action will happen. The characters in this true-story that Luke tells are super chatty. But these speeches, over and over, have Jesus at their center. They're speeches about what God has done in Jesus, and they serve all these purposes Luke has in Acts.

We'll also see a number of little **summaries**, little interludes, that sort of stop the action of the story Luke tells, and update us on what's happening either in the Church or around the church.

Repetition is all over the place. There are phrases Luke loves: Boldness, Kingdom of God, Signs & Wonders. People have the same sorts of responses to the speeches they hear: mass conversion, or interest, or mass rebellion. There are, of course, only so many responses to the news that Paul and others share, but Luke turns to a few again and again. As we move through Acts we'll be continually reminded of a scene we've read earlier, and the ways that same situation is playing out in a different context, and those same

words are being responded to by a different group of people. It could be really, oh, boring, I guess, except for another thing that's true of this story.

There's a lot of **drama** in it. Luke describes skin-of-the-teeth escapes, weepy goodbyes, arrests and conversions and healings and visions and miracles. Acts is full of Acts, it's full of action. And somehow Luke is able to weave together these long speeches, these interludes, this action and all his repetitive language in ways that are just really, really interesting and compelling and challenging.

And we see **Scripture**. Over and over and over Luke returns to what we call the Old Testament, and presents us with ways the Early Church understood the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament coming true right in the middle of their lives.

And in ways that are structured really, really thoughtfully.

How?

This long letter, this personal communication, it's not, you know, like a rambling facebook message about a slightly hassled trip to Target. It's incredibly well-

structured.

I have a two-volume set of books in my office called “The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts.” Which is not only a great band name--kidding--but says most of what we need to remember. The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles go together. Even their basic structure hints at this.

I don’t expect us to remember from when we walked through Luke’s Gospel together, way back in 2012, but we talked about outlining it this basic way (Adapted from DeSilva, New Testament, p.311):

Luke's Gospel:

Introduction: 1:1–2:52

Jesus In Galilee: 3:1–9:50

Journey To Jerusalem: 9:51–19:27

Jesus In & Around Jerusalem: 19:28–24:53

It was a super simple, straightforward way to keep the structure of Luke’s Gospel in our heads, a structure that was oriented around the journeying Jesus was up to. When Luke’s writing Acts, his second letter to Theophilus about everything that happened after Jesus’ death and resurrection, he doesn’t stray far

from this outline, and doesn't move away from this journey theme. Theophilus liked this stuff, apparently.

We could outline it this way:

Acts:

Introduction & Set Up: 1:1-2:13

The Church In & Around Jerusalem: 3:1-8:1

The Church In & Around Judea & Samaria: 8:1-8:40

The Church In & Around "The Ends of The Earth": 9:1-15:35

The "Ends of The Earth" Take Center Stage: 15:36-28:28

This structure follows from that prophetic mandate Jesus laid out for the Church: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

I've put a much longer outline in our bulletins, but that outline basically expands upon this one. And what I like about this is that it really does keep the emphasis on the way the early Church is living up to Jesus' charge, which I think Luke himself cared a lot about.

Now. Many ways of outlining Acts will emphasize what get called “Paul’s Missionary Journeys.” Luke does present, broadly, four trips Paul makes in Acts. The first of these trips happen in Acts 13 & 14, the second from mid-chapter 15 to mid-chapter 18, the third from mid-18 to mid 21, and then Luke describes Paul’s long journey to Rome in the last five chapters of the book, chapters 23 through 28.

It’s fine to think of Acts in terms of what Paul is doing, but only if we can remember, continually, that what Paul is doing is in service to what the Holy Spirit is calling Paul to do, and what Jesus mandated the early Church to do. I think a better outline is the one up here, the one that I’ve presented us with, and what I like about the long version in our bulletins is that it does point out what can get missed, which is that Paul isn’t just roaming around the Gentile World. He’s also regularly returning to Jerusalem. And it’s important, as we walk through Acts, that we remember this isn’t about how the “Ends of the Earth” are all that matter, but about how “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the Ends of The Earth” all fit together into the outworking of God’s plan.

Centrality of Paul:

That said, look: If Jesus was central to the Gospel of Luke, Letter I, it is Paul who is central to the Acts of the Apostles, Letter II. And this isn't arbitrary.

Paul calls himself the "Apostle to the Gentiles" (Eph. 3, Rom. 11). It's a good title. Apostle, we might remember, means more or less "Sent one," And because Acts is centered on the Church's arrival and establishment in the world, it can't help but shine its spotlight on the one who was sent by God to help establish most of the congregations in the New Testament, the one who authored most of the New Testament, and whose legacy is a Church made up primarily of Gentiles.

But I think we do Luke a disservice if we ignore that, while Acts emphasizes the expansion of the Church into the Gentile world, it never, ever dismisses its Jewish roots as non-essential and unimportant. And maybe highlighting Paul's Missionary Journeys to the exclusion of his Jerusalem Pilgrimages does that. But maybe not. Anyway: An outline!

When?

What Luke never does tell us in Acts in when Paul dies, although most scholars date that to around AD 64 or

68. He never tells us about the fall of Jerusalem, which fell in AD 70. These things are helpful in dating both his first letter to Theophilus and his second. It means that they were both likely written before AD 70, and before Paul's death, probably in the early 60s--just a few decades after Jesus' life and ministry. Others will argue, though, that these were written later, Acts well after the Gospel, and Luke doesn't mention what happens to Jerusalem and Paul for any number of reasons, but many suggestions are because he didn't want to be a downer. I dunno. I'm not in that camp.

Ultimately, either way: These people he interviews, these stories he collects--they're relatively fresh, relatively new. In fact, he's part of the group that helps spread this message throughout the Roman world; he wasn't an eyewitness to Jesus, but was only a step removed.

Texting:

That said, when it comes to Acts we have had to, as the Church, make tricky decisions now and then.

Some books in the New Testament? We don't have much variation in the things we see from our relatively recent ancient texts to our oldest existing copies. They

are more or less unified in their textual witness. Acts isn't. Not only are there the more typical piles of texts written in this or that ancient language, which themselves are like bonkers old, there's also what we could say are two larger ancient manuscript camps (Wall & ff, NIB).

And basically all the English or Spanish translations we're going to read neglect some of what is written in one of those, because in one of those, one that's considered slightly newer, say, 200s, there are these little notes, that most scholars think were scribal notes because they don't appear in other collections of manuscripts. They are these little markups made by scribes as they copied down Scripture, and these little mark-ups, these "scribal interpolations" in this major ancient manuscript collection are really kind of anti-Jewish, and just dog Judaism a little bit. They come from a time when the early Church was a couple of hundred years removed from Jesus, and had become deeply aware of the differences between Judaism and Christianity.

Luke would be disappointed by that, I think, and those textual scholars, who spend their whole scholarly lives discerning what's the best, most accurate fragment of

some ancient biblical manuscript, when they weigh the pile of evidence, and collate the very best version of the Greek text of Acts, which our English translations are based on, I'm thankful they recognize that this one major ancient collection of texts has real bias in it. They don't draw on it. But if you opened a Greek New Testament, you'd see far more notes describing the different manuscript witnesses in the Acts section than you would in some other New Testament books.

And I mention this because, it is clear, even early in the Church's history, just a small pile of decades after Jesus' resurrection, that Gentiles were prone to neglecting and even taking an antagonistic stance to the Church's Jewish roots. That's not part of Luke's message.

What is the message?

So what is the Message of Acts? What will we see again and again as we walk through this book, written for the one who loves God, as we ourselves are trying to do?

In Jesus, God's promises came true for Jew and Gentile both. God's making good on all the promises that were

made to Israel, as the Holy Spirit works in and among the Church, a Church that is unifying people in a way no other institution or community ever has. God has made a way for all people to be saved, to participate in the life of God and experience God's redemptive purposes. We'll hear about Jesus, see what repentance looks like, discover the costs that come when Jesus is trusted as one's Lord and one's Savior, as well as the blessings such trust brings.

And as we read, we'll have to continually ask why did this matter then, and why does this matter now? Why did this matter then and why does it matter now?

Why did Luke give us this, when he could have given us something else? Because we believe, as Paul himself writes, "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." So what we read here matters. It matters in the story Luke is telling, it matters for the people he was writing about, it matters for us, the Church today, and it may personally matter for each of us in a unique way. We have to make sense of all these things, and I hope we'll hit at least a few with each bit Acts we walk through.

In the end, in some real ways, the Church is still right where Luke leaves it in Acts. We're waiting for Jesus' return, trying to make sense of what it means to be faithful to God together, with the Spirit and Scripture informing us. I think our walk through Acts will help us in making sense of what faithfulness looks like now, even as we reflect on what it looked like then. It will inspire us, challenge us, reform us if that's what we need. I'm looking forward to it. Pray for it if you can!