

The Acts of the Apostles – a daily Bible guide

Week One

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February 17, 2013

Around this time of year, it's been our tradition to spend some time in the Bible together, by way of a Daily Bible Guide--sort of a guided tour of a book of the Bible or a Bible theme. It's become one of the most prominent features of our annual Leap of Faith, our version of the traditional church season of Lent (for more on this year's Leap of Faith, check out the *Users' Manual*, which can usually be found somewhere near this guide), and many people tell me that our yearly Daily Bible Guides are their favorite times in the Bible all year. While it may seem immodest of me to say so, I happen to agree. Of course, I hope that my writing plays a helpful role in the experience, but that's not exactly what I'm talking about. For me, what's especially great about these communal walks through the Bible is that so many of us are reading, thinking about, and talking about the same Bible passages together. You're a thoughtful and enjoyable group of people to discuss the Bible with, and I look forward to another round with all of you.

For a handful of you, this year's guide might seem vaguely familiar. It was originally written nine years ago by Andrew Snekvik and me for that year's 40 Days of Faith, as we called Leaps of Faith back then. As I was thinking about this season in our church's life, with our founding senior pastors Dave and Grace stepping out on a new adventure soon and the rest of us entering a new phase of pursuing our mission here in Boston, I thought that perhaps this would be a good time to revisit the themes of the book of Acts. For those of you who have read it before, I hope it strikes you fresh after a nine year gap. And don't worry; I imagine we'll return to completely new material next year. For those of you who missed it the first time, forget I mentioned anything about this guide being a repeat; I hope you enjoy this new-to-you guide.

The Acts of the Apostles, to give the book its full title, is sort of a sequel. It's written by Luke, who is also the author of one of the four gospel accounts--the stories of Jesus' life and ministry. In Acts, Luke tells us what happens in the thirty years after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Luke was a close companion of Paul, one of the main characters of our story. Luke was probably an eye witness to much of what he writes in Acts, and he had direct, personal access to the main actors in these stories. He's also a very talented writer of history. So, what we have in Acts is a gripping, well-written, contemporary account of what happened once Jesus left the scene. Luke is also the only non-Jewish author in the New Testament (the Bible's second act, covering the period after Jesus' birth). So, a matter of particular interest to him is how the phenomenon of following Jesus spreads beyond its original Palestinian Jewish context. I imagine that's an interest most of us would share with Luke. 'How did people like us end up in this story?' is a question we'll focus on a lot over the next six weeks.

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Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

- **The story for the day.** Each day, we'll read a portion of Acts, between a half-page and two pages depending on logical breaking points. For your convenience, I've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). I've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped to do what we most want to do: enter into the story ourselves. What is it like to go through this experience with these early followers of Jesus?
- **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions addressed, and gives suggestions of ways to look at the story and what it might mean for us.
- **Taking it home.** This section offers some suggestions for how the day's reading apply practically to your life and the life of our church. Each day, we will ask 3 questions:
 - **What does Jesus want to do through you?**—If you've done one of these Bible guides before, you may notice a subtle shift in this question. Usually, we ask ourselves what we want Jesus to do for us. This time, we'll consider what Jesus might want to do through us. We'll see pretty early on in Acts that Jesus has big plans for the world, and that he has a pretty big part in mind for people who want to follow him. Each day, we'll look at implications the story of the day has for each of us, and how we might feel about that.
 - **What does Jesus want to do through your six?**— Think of six local people you know-- friends, family, roommates, workmates, or just passing acquaintances--who don't seem to have much of a direct relationship with God, whom you like, and whose lives you hope would become ever more satisfying. We call this group 'Your Six,' and during the Leap of Faith it's our custom to pray everyday that God would do good things for them. As we go through Acts, we'll explore the idea that Jesus hopes to sweep your six up into the grand, good plans he has for the world.
 - **What does Jesus want to do through our church?**—God not only has big purposes he wants to pursue through each of us, he also has big purposes for us a church. We'll pray each day that these dreams God has given us as a community will be fulfilled.

In addition, each week begins with a special bonus section:

- **Optional Family Activities**— At the beginning of each week's study guide you'll find a section suggesting themes and ideas you can explore with your children at home. The ideas apply to the entire week's bible text, so to make the most of these suggestions you'll want to read them at the beginning of each week.

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Week 1 Optional Families Activities

At home: The explosion of Jesus' followers in sheer numbers and regional impact is an exciting story for your family to track this week! Remember, Jesus left it in his disciples' hands to stay faithful to him after he left earth and to do everything he told them...and it actually ended up working! Also, the amount of love, power, and excitement among Jesus' followers due to the Holy Spirit's baptism on Pentecost is noteworthy. Highlight and trace the growth of the church within the following passages with your family: Acts 1:1-15, Acts 2:1-13, Acts 2:36-47, Acts 4:1-4, Acts 4:21-35.

- **With all kids:** Draw pictures of one or two of the main events from this week's readings and begin to keep a pictorial timeline of the action by taping your drawings around the room where you eat together. Everyone in the family could try their hand at this one. There's a lot of exciting action to track.
- **With younger kids:** Read Acts 1:3-5. Tell your kids that these are among Jesus' last words on earth to his followers. The Holy Spirit was so important to wait for that Jesus told them to stay in one place until the Spirit came! Talk with your kids about what is hard for each of you to wait for (lines, birthdays, Christmas, school's end, etc.). Wonder together about what would happen if you didn't wait for these things. Pray as a family asking, "God, send your Holy Spirit to our family this week – we want more of your love and power!" and see what happens.
- **With older kids:** Begin to create a huge wall map on butcher paper or poster board that shows the Mediterranean region. (We've provided an outline map for you to use as a guide at the back of this packet.) As you read the following passages together, label each location named and its significance (example: Jerusalem – 120 believers praying on Pentecost): Acts 1:1-15, Acts 2:1-13, Acts 2:36-47, Acts 4:1-4, Acts 4:21-35. Keep this map throughout the 40 Days as a way to track the miraculous stories recorded in this book!

Monday, February 18th

Acts 1

¹Dear Theophilus: In my first book I told you about everything Jesus began to do and teach ²until the day he ascended to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions from the Holy Spirit. ³During the forty days after his crucifixion, he appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.

⁴In one of these meetings as he was eating a meal with them, he told them, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he promised. Remember, I have told you about this before. ⁵John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶When the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, are you going to free Israel now and restore our kingdom?"

⁷"The Father sets those dates," he replied, "and they are not for you to know. ⁸But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere--in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

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⁹It was not long after he said this that he was taken up into the sky while they were watching, and he disappeared into a cloud. ¹⁰As they were straining their eyes to see him, two white-robed men suddenly stood there among them. ¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!"

¹²The apostles were at the Mount of Olives when this happened, so they walked the half mile back to Jerusalem. ¹³Then they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying. Here is the list of those who were present: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the Zealot), and Judas (son of James).

¹⁴They all met together continually for prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus. ¹⁵During this time, on a day when about 120 believers were present,

Peter stood up and addressed them as follows:¹⁶"Brothers, it was necessary for the Scriptures to be fulfilled concerning Judas, who guided the Temple police to arrest Jesus. This was predicted long ago by the Holy Spirit, speaking through King David. ¹⁷Judas was one of us, chosen to share in the ministry with us."

¹⁸(Judas bought a field with the money he received for his treachery, and falling there, he burst open, spilling out his intestines. ¹⁹The news of his death spread rapidly among all the people of Jerusalem, and they gave the place the Aramaic name *Akeldama*, which means "Field of Blood.")

²⁰Peter continued, "This was predicted in the book of Psalms, where it says, 'Let his home become desolate, with no one living in it.' And again, 'Let his position be given to someone else.' ²¹So now we must choose another man to take Judas's place. It must be someone who has been with us all the time that we were with the Lord Jesus--

²²from the time he was baptized by John until the day he was taken from us into heaven. Whoever is chosen will join us as a witness of Jesus' resurrection."

²³So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. ²⁴Then they all prayed for the right man to be chosen. "O Lord," they said, "you know every heart. Show us which of these men you have chosen

²⁵as an apostle to replace Judas the traitor in this ministry, for he has deserted us and gone where he belongs." ²⁶Then they cast lots, and in this way Matthias was chosen and became an apostle with the other eleven.

Points of Interest:

- 'Do not leave Jerusalem'—there would be good reason to leave Jerusalem. First of all, the disciples aren't actually from Jerusalem; their home is in Galilee. They had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover at the Jerusalem Temple, and the circumstances of Jesus' arrest, death, and resurrection had kept them there for an extra 40 days; but it would have been natural on their parts to assume that eventually, and soon, they would go home. Secondly, they would be in some danger as followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. The same people who killed Jesus would undoubtedly have some interest in squashing whatever following he has as well. In Jerusalem, they are within easy reach of these people; back home in Galilee, they would be at a comfortable distance. Nonetheless, Jesus commands them to wait here. God has a great gift to give them: his very presence in the form of the Holy Spirit. They had been promised this gift quite a while ago, on the very first day that Jesus began to gather followers. Now, it is finally going to be delivered, but they have to wait a little bit longer, in this uneasy place of potential trouble far from home. Often, we find that we have to go through a period of uncomfortable waiting before we see God's promises fulfilled. Are there any promises for which you are

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waiting? How does it feel to wait? The apostles and the 120 respond to their period of waiting in prayer. Take your promises to God in prayer. Ask God for the endurance to wait, and ask for God's promises to come true

- 'Are you going to free Israel now?'—the apostles must have spent much of these 40 days wondering what would happen next. They'd watched their lord get killed and then rise again from the dead. It is now undeniably certain to them that this person they had been following is in fact the Son of God and the long-expected Savior. They would probably be asking themselves, 'Now that he has overcome death, what new and amazing thing will Jesus do next?' Everything that they had been taught from the prophets led them to think that what would come next would be the freedom of Israel from foreign oppression and its restoration to a glorious golden age. Nothing less than a 'happily ever after' future for Israel would be expected as Jesus' next feat. Jesus has a very surprising answer for them: what's next has more to do with them than him. Jesus lets them know that the Father does indeed have plans for a glorious end to history, but that right now his death and resurrection have more to do with equipping them for a mission. On the night before his death, Jesus had told his followers that it is actually better for them that he goes away (John 16:7), and that they would end up doing even greater things than him (John 14:12). The key to it all is the Holy Spirit. Jesus' next big feat will be to 'baptize' his followers with the Holy Spirit. That is, he will actually dunk them in the presence of God. And that immersion in the Holy Spirit will give them the power they need for their new mission, a mission to spread the story of Jesus. It might not be going too far to say that God's major purpose for Jesus' death and resurrection is to make possible the sending of the Holy Spirit, who would empower Jesus' followers to fulfill the task to which they are called.
- 'and to the ends of the earth'—it's hard for us to understand what a new and surprising thing this would be for them. As we can tell from their question about the restoration of Israel, they probably regard Jesus' ministry as having to do almost entirely with the Jews; and during Jesus' earthly ministry, he actually had very little contact with non-Jews. But that is not the way it is to remain. Long ago, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant . . . to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Is. 49:6). Jesus sees that this prophecy is finally going to be fulfilled. His death and resurrection would do more than just restore Israel; they would rescue the whole world from darkness. And this would happen through Jesus' followers. Perhaps bringing the good news about Jesus to the nations was what Jesus had in mind when he said that they would do even greater things than him.
- 'and he disappeared into a cloud'—The prophet Daniel (7:13-14) saw a vision in which a human being ascends on a cloud to the Father, who gives him lordship over all people. Here we see this vision fulfilled.
- 'now we must choose another man to take Judas's place'—We don't know exactly why Simon feels it necessary to replace Judas. Perhaps it is so that the 12 apostles can represent the 12 tribes of Israel. Perhaps it's simply in order to have enough leaders to effectively care for the 120 followers who are gathered. Regardless of the reason, what is clear is that Simon and the

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other apostles finally understand that they have work to do: they are going to need fellow workers to accomplish what Jesus has in store for them.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Jesus' followers are all from Galilee, but he tells them to stay in Jerusalem and to begin their work of spreading the message from there. Perhaps you aren't from Boston; you might be here in school or for a short-term or temporary job. It could be tempting to wait until you are home or you've reached your permanent destination before you start taking up your part in Jesus' mission. Take a moment this morning to commit yourself to participating in Jesus' story in Boston as long as you are here.
- *Through your six:* Jesus' followers had a very particular idea of what he should do now that he had risen from the dead: he should restore the fortunes of Israel. It wasn't a bad thing to hope for; their nation had been under foreign domination for hundreds of years now, and it was natural and right that they would want freedom—it was even something that God had led the Jews to expect. However, it wasn't the next step in God's plan. Jesus asks his disciples to trust the Father with their hopes for Israel, and in the meantime to dedicate themselves to his mission. Each one of your six probably has some way in which they are looking for justice to come about in this world. Pray that they would be able to trust God with these hopes. Pray that the fact that these hopes are unrealized would not get in the way of them responding to anything God might be offering them right now.
- *Through our church:* Telling Jesus' story requires more than mere words; it requires spiritual power. Ask God to immerse us in the Holy Spirit, giving us the power to show others the reality of God's presence.

Tuesday, February 19th

Acts 2:1-13

¹On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. ²Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. ³Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. ⁴And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

⁵Godly Jews from many nations were living in Jerusalem at that time. ⁶When they heard this sound, they came running to see what it was all about, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers. ⁷They were beside themselves with wonder. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, ⁸and yet we hear them speaking the languages of the lands where we were born! ⁹Here we are--Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya toward Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), ¹¹Cretans, and Arabians. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!"

¹²They stood there amazed and perplexed. "What can this mean?" they asked each other. ¹³But others in the crowd were mocking. "They're drunk, that's all!" they said.

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Points of Interest:

- ‘and it filled the house where they were meeting’—something like this windstorm filling the house happens a couple of times earlier in the Bible. When Moses dedicates a special tent as the place to meet God, and when Solomon builds a temple for the same purpose, the new sacred building is filled with a fiery, windy cloud of God’s glory. This time it’s not happening to a holy building, but simply to the house where the believers happen to be—and, in fact, the people themselves. God now lives not in some special locale but wherever his followers are.
- ‘seven weeks after Jesus’ resurrection’—that would be about ten days after he ascended in the cloud.
- ‘speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability’—the first result of the filling of the Holy Spirit is the ability to speak about God in other languages. Despite the mockery of some people in the crowd, the believers are not merely babbling: they are miraculously speaking in actual languages. From the very beginning, a clear sign of the Holy Spirit’s primary purpose is given: the Holy Spirit wants to enable Jesus’ followers to spread Jesus’ message. When Jesus told his followers to talk about him to the ends of the earth, it could be asked, ‘How exactly are 120 Galileans going to be able to spread this message all over the world?’ Here is the answer; the Holy Spirit will make them able. In fact, on the very first day that they are filled with the Spirit, without even leaving the house where they are staying, they get a picture of the fulfillment of their mission; they do, in fact, tell Jesus’ story to people from all over the world—or, at least, from all over the part of the world they know about.
- ‘Jews from many nations were living in Jerusalem at that time’—there were probably millions of Jews spread throughout the Roman Empire and surrounding nations. Significant numbers of them would travel to Jerusalem for the Passover, the biggest of the Jewish holidays. Every pious Jew would want to celebrate the holiday in Jerusalem at least once in his or her life. Those who had traveled a long way or those for whom this was a once-in-a-lifetime trip might very well stay around for the 50 extra days to celebrate Pentecost, the next feast in the calendar, as long as they were already in Jerusalem.
- ‘Godly Jews from many nations’—although these people come from all over the world, they are all of Jewish descent. This day’s preaching brings Jesus’ story past language barriers, but it hasn’t yet crossed beyond ethnic barriers. Following Jesus is still overwhelmingly a Jewish affair.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* on this day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave Jesus’ followers the ability to speak in other languages so that everyone could hear about the wonders of God. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the ability to speak in other languages, whether literally or figuratively, so that you can pass along the stories of the wonders of God.
- *Through your six:* In this passage, God demonstrates to everyone listening to the believers that God specifically knows them. They all would have been able to understand Greek or Aramaic, but instead of speaking to them in these common languages, God spoke in their own home

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languages. Pray that God would draw your six into what God is doing in the world by speaking to them in their unique heart languages.

- *Through our church:* just like Jerusalem, Boston is an international place. People from every state of the U.S. and many nations of the world gather here: Haitians, Brazilians, Vietnamese, Irish, Chinese, Bengalis, Indians, Pakistanis, Somalis, Ethiopians, Iraqis, and on and on. Pray that God would always be increasing our ability to share about God's goodwill toward the world to all the residents of Boston in ways they specifically can understand.

Wednesday, February 20th

Acts 2:14-41

¹⁴Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, "Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this. ¹⁵Some of you are saying these people are drunk. It isn't true! It's much too early for that. People don't get drunk by nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, what you see this morning was predicted centuries ago by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ `In the last days, God said,

I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
and your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸In those days I will pour out my Spirit
upon all my servants, men and women alike,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹And I will cause wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below--
blood and fire and clouds of smoke.

²⁰The sun will be turned into darkness,
and the moon will turn bloodred,
before that great and glorious day of the Lord arrives.

²¹And anyone who calls on the name of the Lord
will be saved.

²²"People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. ²³But you followed God's prearranged plan. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to the cross and murdered him. ²⁴However, God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life again, for death could not keep him in its grip.

²⁵King David said this about him:

`I know the Lord is always with me.

I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.

²⁶ No wonder my heart is filled with joy,
and my mouth shouts his praises!
My body rests in hope.

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²⁷For you will not leave my soul among the dead
or allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.

²⁸You have shown me the way of life,
and you will give me wonderful joy in your presence.

²⁹"Dear brothers, think about this! David wasn't referring to himself when he spoke these words I have quoted, for he died and was buried, and his tomb is still here among us. ³⁰But he was a prophet, and he knew God had promised with an oath that one of David's own descendants would sit on David's throne as the Messiah. ³¹David was looking into the future and predicting the Messiah's resurrection. He was saying that the Messiah would not be left among the dead and that his body would not rot in the grave.

³²This prophecy was speaking of Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, and we all are witnesses of this.

³³Now he sits on the throne of highest honor in heaven, at God's right hand. And the Father, as he had promised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today. ³⁴For David himself never ascended into heaven, yet he said,

‘The LORD said to my Lord,
Sit in honor at my right hand

³⁵until I humble your enemies,

making them a footstool under your feet.

³⁶So let it be clearly known by everyone in Israel that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified to be both Lord and Messiah!"

³⁷Peter's words convicted them deeply, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

³⁸Peter replied, "Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹This promise is to you and to your children, and even to the Gentiles--all who have been called by the Lord our God." ⁴⁰Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!"

⁴¹Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church--about three thousand in all.

Points of Interest:

- ‘Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles’—besides bringing the power to speak in other languages, the Holy Spirit gives the apostles new boldness. Until now, the apostles have been hiding in a locked room (John 20:26), but now they are standing up in front of a crowd testifying to Jesus.
- ‘predicted centuries ago by the prophet Joel’—Joel 2:28-32. Peter is telling the listeners that they have just participated in a history-making moment. They have just seen before their very eyes a centuries-old prophecy fulfilled. And it is a prophecy of major importance. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, world history has just entered a new era, called the Last Days.
- ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people’—the major hallmark of this new era of history is the availability of the Holy Spirit for everyone: young and old, men and women. Before this time, the Holy Spirit’s power was available only to a few prophets and kings. Now, starting at the very

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moment of Pentecost, everything is different. Everyone could be filled with the Holy Spirit. Everyone could hear from God. Everyone could be filled with God's presence and power. Peter knows that when Jesus told the apostles to wait for the Holy Spirit, he wasn't saying that the Spirit was coming just for the 12, or even for the 120. The Holy Spirit was coming to inaugurate a new way of life, in which the presence and power of the Holy Spirit were accessible to all. The call that Jesus gave to the apostles, the call to go everywhere and tell his story, is a call for everyone; and the power that he promised the apostles, the power of the Holy Spirit, is available to everyone. Peter understands from this prophecy from Joel that the whole way in which humanity interacts with God has been changed forever.

- 'you nailed him to the cross and murdered him'—it is possible that some of the people listening were actually directly involved in the crucifixion of Jesus; most likely not everyone was. Nonetheless, Peter holds them all guilty as the community who allowed this person clearly blessed by God to be killed.
- 'David was looking into the future and predicting the Messiah's resurrection'—Peter proves from the Psalms (16 and 110) that David was expecting a resurrection and an ascension, and that they were not his own. David was foreseeing someone greater than he who would come. The apostles, who spent 40 days with the risen Jesus, are witnesses to the fact that Jesus is this greater one. The title given to this greater one was the Messiah, which means, 'the anointed one,' or, 'the one who is set apart.' From Joel, among other places, we can see that one of the primary roles of the Messiah is to save people from trouble.
- 'God has made this Jesus whom you crucified to be both Lord and Messiah!'—the good news is that the long-awaited Messiah, the savior of the world, has come; and he brings with him the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to pour on everyone. The bad news is that you killed him.
- 'Brothers, what should we do?'—they've seen a miracle. They've heard how the miracle fits in with God's plan for history, pointing to Jesus as the Savior and marking the beginning of a whole new relationship between God and humans. And they've discovered that apparently they are on the wrong side. It must be sobering news. Yet, somehow they don't despair, as Judas did. They hold out hope that these people who have just been telling them of the wonders of God will know something that they can do.
- 'This promise is to you'—Peter tells them that it is indeed still possible for them to turn to God; there is still a chance for them to be saved and to avoid being humbled as Jesus' enemies. But he goes even further than that: he tells them that the Holy Spirit is meant for them. Jesus submitted himself to death, rose again, and ascended into heaven so that the very people who killed him could have access to the Holy Spirit. This great gift of the Holy Spirit has their name on it. And Jesus went through death to heaven to save them from their guilt so that he could give this gift to them. What an amazing thing! This is a truth that Peter must have known very deeply himself: he denied even knowing Jesus three times in order to keep his distance from Jesus as he was dying; yet here he is, Jesus' primary spokesperson at this turning point in history.

Taking it home:

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- *Through you:* Peter boldly steps forward and explains to others what he sees God doing. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you the same boldness.
- *Through your six:* Peter says that now is the time when the Holy Spirit is available to everyone. Where do you see a need for the Holy Spirit in the life of your six? Pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work in their lives, in ways that they can see and appreciate.
- *Through our church:* Pray that God would use our church to bring the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit to Boston in a new way. Ask God to fill us up more and more with God's presence and power, and ask God to use us to offer this same spirit to thousands and thousands of others.

Thursday, February 21st

Acts 2:42-3:10

⁴²They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer. ⁴³A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need. ⁴⁶They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity-- ⁴⁷all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved. ¹Peter and John went to the Temple one afternoon to take part in the three o'clock prayer service. ²As they approached the Temple, a man lame from birth was being carried in. Each day he was put beside the Temple gate, the one called the Beautiful Gate, so he could beg from the people going into the Temple. ³When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for some money. ⁴Peter and John looked at him intently, and Peter said, "Look at us!" ⁵The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting a gift. ⁶But Peter said, "I don't have any money for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!" ⁷Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and anklebones were healed and strengthened. ⁸He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk! Then, walking, leaping, and praising God, he went into the Temple with them. ⁹All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. ¹⁰When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded!

Points of Interest:

- 'a deep sense of awe came over them all'—the community of believers know that what they are experiencing is special. Normal life has ceased to be for them, and they live with a sense of gratitude and of awe at the new life available. They are experiencing a whole new way of living, a life filled by the Holy Spirit. It affects their attitude toward life, and the way they live. Their

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lives are characterized by joy and praising God. And their awe and joy at the privilege of living this new life with God overflow into a generosity toward one another.

- ‘they worshiped together at the Temple each day [and] met in homes for the Lord's Supper’—the new community of believers have a rich and full life together, which seems to include both large group and small group experiences: they all meet together for worship and prayer in the temple, and they eat together in smaller groups in homes.
- ‘they worshiped together at the Temple’—eating the Lord’s Supper together in homes is a distinct new element to their faith which would distinguish them as followers of Jesus, but in other ways they continue to live like the people around them. When they worship together, it is at the Temple where all Jews worship. Some of their new experience of faith is completely new; some of it just revitalizes their already existing spiritual practices.
- ‘I’ll give you what I have’—Peter may not have any money to give the man. But he does have the power of the Holy Spirit, and he knows that there is enough of the Spirit for everyone. This is what he shares with the beggar.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you eyes to see what’s amazing about the life you’ve been given. Ask God to increase your sense of awe and joy at the blessings and promises within your grasp. Ask God to give you a life that overflows in praise to him and generosity toward others.
- *Through your six:* God wants to astound people by the change God brings to the life of your six. Pray that they would be healed, strengthened, and transformed in such ways that it causes others to do a double-take.
- *Through our church:* Pray that the Holy Spirit would empower us to be a church which brings healing to others. Pray for more physical healing in our midst during prayer ministry times on Sunday, small groups, and other times we pray for physical healing. Pray also for emotional healing, that more people would receive the joyful release that the beggar in today’s story experienced.

Friday, February 22nd

Acts 3:11-26

¹¹They all rushed out to Solomon's Colonnade, where he was holding tightly to Peter and John. Everyone stood there in awe of the wonderful thing that had happened. ¹²Peter saw his opportunity and addressed the crowd. "People of Israel," he said, "what is so astounding about this? And why look at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power and godliness? ¹³For it is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of all our ancestors who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this. This is the same Jesus whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate, despite Pilate's decision to release him. ¹⁴You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer. ¹⁵You killed the author of life, but God raised him to life. And we are witnesses of

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this fact! ⁶The name of Jesus has healed this man--and you know how lame he was before. Faith in Jesus' name has caused this healing before your very eyes. ¹⁷Friends, I realize that what you did to Jesus was done in ignorance; and the same can be said of your leaders. ¹⁸But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had declared about the Messiah beforehand--that he must suffer all these things. ¹⁹Now turn from your sins and turn to God, so you can be cleansed of your sins. ²⁰Then wonderful times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will send Jesus your Messiah to you again. ²¹For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his prophets. ²²Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you.' ²³Then Moses said, 'Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be cut off from God's people and utterly destroyed.' ²⁴Starting with Samuel, every prophet spoke about what is happening today. ²⁵You are the children of those prophets, and you are included in the covenant God promised to your ancestors. For God said to Abraham, 'Through your descendants all the families on earth will be blessed.' ²⁶When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you people of Israel, to bless you by turning each of you back from your sinful ways."

Points of Interest:

- 'You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer'—again, Peter points out that the people of Jerusalem ignored all of the evidence that Jesus was sent from God. They were so far off in their perceptions that they preferred a murderer to the author of life.
- 'Then Moses said . . . '—found in Deuteronomy 18:15,18,19. In the last sermon, Peter focused on what David had to say in the Psalms about Jesus as the Messiah. Here, he mentions the prophets, and he focuses on what he finds about Jesus in the writings of Moses. The promise to Abraham is also found in one of the books of Moses, in Genesis 12:3. The combination of the two sermons amounts to a claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the promises of the Jewish scriptures, what we know as the Old Testament.
- 'Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be cut off'—of course, they had not listened to the Prophet; they'd killed him. However, Peter chooses to focus instead on the fact that they are the heirs of the prophets, and the heirs of the promise to Abraham, that all the families of earth would be blessed through him. God's intention toward them is to bless them, forgive them, fulfill promises to them, and fulfill promises through them; it is not to punish them for their sinful rejection of Jesus. If they choose, they can turn their back on punishment and turn their face toward God's promises.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Peter asks his listeners, 'And why look at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power and godliness?' It's clear that what happened to the beggar is not something that Peter and John could have done themselves. Their action necessarily points toward Jesus. Often, people will respond to our acts of kindness or generosity by saying, 'You're such a nice

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person,' or 'You're so amazing.' But we don't want to bring acclaim to ourselves. We want to connect people to a source of forgiveness and power far beyond us. Ask God to work through you in such a way that it is clear it is God's power, and not your own goodness, that is responsible.

- *Through your six:* One of the benefits of the Holy Spirit mentioned here is 'wonderful times of refreshment.' Pray that your six would experience this sort of refreshment from God. However much they have been able to experience the sweetness of God's presence, ask that God would bring them one step further this week.
- *Through our church:* Peter tells his listeners that they are heirs to the promise that all of the families of the earth will be blessed. We too, as we've turned from our sins and toward God, have been incorporated into this promise. Ask God that we would experience God's forgiveness profoundly, and that we would be a source of blessing to the world.

Saturday, February 23rd

Acts 4:1-22

¹While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the leading priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees came over to them. ²They were very disturbed that Peter and John were claiming, on the authority of Jesus, that there is a resurrection of the dead. ³They arrested them and, since it was already evening, jailed them until morning. ⁴But many of the people who heard their message believed it, so that the number of believers totaled about five thousand men, not counting women and children. ⁵The next day the council of all the rulers and elders and teachers of religious law met in Jerusalem. ⁶Annas the high priest was there, along with Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and other relatives of the high priest. ⁷They brought in the two disciples and demanded, "By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?"

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Leaders and elders of our nation, ⁹are we being questioned because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? ¹⁰Let me clearly state to you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, the man you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, 'The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.' ¹²There is salvation in no one else! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them."

¹³The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men who had had no special training. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. ¹⁴But since the man who had been healed was standing right there among them, the council had nothing to say. ¹⁵So they sent Peter and John out of the council chamber and conferred among themselves. ¹⁶"What should we do with these men?" they asked each other. "We can't deny they have done a miraculous sign, and everybody in Jerusalem knows about it. ¹⁷But perhaps we can stop them from spreading their propaganda. We'll warn them not to speak to anyone in Jesus' name again." ¹⁸So they called the apostles back in and told them never again to speak or teach about Jesus.

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¹⁹But Peter and John replied, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? ²⁰We cannot stop telling about the wonderful things we have seen and heard."

²¹The council then threatened them further, but they finally let them go because they didn't know how to punish them without starting a riot. For everyone was praising God ²²for this miraculous sign--the healing of a man who had been lame for more than forty years.

Points of Interest:

- 'They were very disturbed that Peter and John were claiming, on the authority of Jesus, that there is a resurrection of the dead'—There were two main parties among the religious leaders in Jerusalem: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The more numerous Pharisees dominated among the religious teachers at the synagogues; the smaller party of the Sadducees controlled the higher priestly offices at the Temple. The council, mentioned in verse 5, was the religious government of the Jews and the government of region of Judea; it was headed by the high priest, who was a Sadducee, but both Sadducees and Pharisees were represented. One of the major differences between the Sadducees and Pharisees was that the Sadducees didn't believe in life after death. These people who overhear Peter and John are Sadducees.
- 'By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?'—A very similar question (Luke 20:2), from the exact same group of people, is what eventually led to Jesus' death. But the Holy Spirit fills Peter, giving him the boldness and the words he needs to face them.
- 'are we being questioned because we've done a good deed for a crippled man?'—Peter points out that they are being interrogated because they've healed someone who was crippled. It's not exactly a scandalous crime, and it's not usually the kind of thing one gets told not to do.
- 'he was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ'—after pointing out that they haven't actually done anything wrong, they go on to answer the questions of the council: Jesus gave them the power and authority to do what they did. Perhaps the council wishes at this point that they hadn't asked the question; they gave Peter and John a perfect opportunity to use the miracle that they have just performed as proof that Jesus, whom they had condemned to death as a blasphemer, is risen from the dead, the source of salvation and power, and honored by God above everyone else.
- 'Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him?'—the council thinks of itself as the only legitimate authority over what happened in the Temple, but Peter appeals to a higher authority. Jesus, the one they rejected, is the cornerstone of the Temple (Psalm 118); he has commanded them to tell people of his wonderful deeds.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Peter and John know that their consciences are clear. Though they are being accused, they've done nothing wrong. This confidence that they've done nothing wrong means that the council has no leverage on them. Ask God to help you live according to your conscience, so that you too can stand without fear in the face of any accusations.

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- *Through your six:* Even though they are ordinary men with no special training, Peter and John are able to say exactly the right words in their trial in front of the Jewish governing council. Pray for the words of your six, that they would have the right words to say at the right time.
- *Through our church:* Ask God to give us the clarity and courage to pursue the mission God has given us as a church, without being distracted or dissuaded by other influences.

Sunday, February 24th

Acts 4:23-5:11

²³As soon as they were freed, Peter and John found the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. ²⁴Then all the believers were united as they lifted their voices in prayer: "O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them-- ²⁵you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor King David, your servant, saying,

'Why did the nations rage? Why did the people waste their time with futile plans?

²⁶The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.'

²⁷"That is what has happened here in this city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed.

²⁸In fact, everything they did occurred according to your eternal will and plan. ²⁹And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give your servants great boldness in their preaching. ³⁰Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And they preached God's message with boldness.

³²All the believers were of one heart and mind, and they felt that what they owned was not their own; they shared everything they had. ³³And the apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great favor was upon them all. ³⁴There was no poverty among them, because people who owned land or houses sold them ³⁵and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need.

³⁶For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. ³⁷He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles for those in need.

¹There was also a man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. ²He brought part of the money to the apostles, but he claimed it was the full amount. His wife had agreed to this deception.

³Then Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself. ⁴The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren't lying to us but to God."

⁵As soon as Ananias heard these words, he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified. ⁶Then some young men wrapped him in a sheet and took him out and buried him.

⁷About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, "Was this the price you and your husband received for your land?"

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"Yes," she replied, "that was the price."

⁹And Peter said, "How could the two of you even think of doing a thing like this--conspiring together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Just outside that door are the young men who buried your husband, and they will carry you out, too." ¹⁰Instantly, she fell to the floor and died. When the young men came in and saw that she was dead, they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹Great fear gripped the entire church and all others who heard what had happened.

Points of Interest:

- 'give your servants great boldness in their preaching. Send your healing power'—the believers have just faced their first trouble with the ruling council. While Peter and John make it clear that they don't intend to disobey God, you could imagine that they might be tempted to tone things down a bit for a while, or that they might pray that God would protect them from the attacks of the council. But they pray no such thing. Instead, they basically pray, 'More!—do more of what got us into trouble. Make us more bold and do more miracles through us.' One thing that gives them confidence that they have nothing to fear from the council is the example of Jesus: the council tried to stop Jesus, but all they did was further his purposes and lead to his resurrection and his glory. The believers see from the example of Jesus that the safest thing they can do is follow Jesus' example and remain firm in pursuing God's purposes.
- 'the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit'—being filled with the Holy Spirit is not a once-and-for-all event. The Spirit's power and presence can be renewed and increased. Here, the believers receive a new dose of the Holy Spirit which sends them into a new phase of teaching, healing, and inviting people into the community.
- 'people who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need'—the believers in this early Jerusalem community seem to be especially good at valuing people over possessions. They are unwilling to allow someone else in the community to suffer, merely for the sake of holding on to their property. Their very deep awareness of Jesus' mercy for them gives them a clear-headed compassion toward others.
- 'He brought part of the money to the apostles, but he claimed it was the full amount'—Ananias and Sapphira are looking for a way to manipulate the system to take care of themselves. They want whatever affirmation or reputation would come from giving all of their property, but they don't want to give it all up—the proverbial having your cake and eating it too. Ananias and Sapphira want to be known as people of faith and generosity, but their scheme shows that they are limited in both. They're trying to grab for themselves a reputation for something they are not.
- 'The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished'—Peter makes it clear that the community is not operating under an enforced, communist system. People are making voluntary choices to sell and to give. Ananias and Sapphira could have not sold their property, or only given part to the community, and remained accepted members of the community.

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- ‘You lied to the Holy Spirit’—Ananias and Sapphira seem to have left God out of the picture. They had decided to try to deceive the apostles and the rest of the community, but this community is the place where the Holy Spirit was dwelling. They lied to the presence of God.
- ‘he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified’—it’s a bit shocking to read that Ananias and Sapphira immediately fall down dead. We know that Jesus offers forgiveness even to the people who crucified him; why would he not be willing to forgive Ananias and Sapphira? And if these two fell down dead, why doesn’t everyone who lies to the church or manipulates it for their own end? It’s worth recognizing that we don’t know ultimately what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in an eternal sense; nonetheless it’s clear that being struck dead is not a good thing. One reason why they might have been judged so harshly and immediately is as a warning to us; in this early example, God shows us clearly just how big the stakes are when we lie to God or try to manipulate God’s people for dishonest gain. Even if not all of us are immediately struck dead, we can be sure that we will not ultimately be able to get away with lying to God. Another reason Ananias and Sapphira might have immediately died is because the presence of the Holy Spirit was so strong on the community: in chapter 2, everyone is in awe at the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst to bring salvation, miracles, and wonders; here in chapter 4, everyone is in awe at the fact that the Holy Spirit causes two people to die. Perhaps the strong presence of the Holy Spirit brought more immediate judgment just as it brought more immediate power for healing. The Holy Spirit is nothing to trifle with.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* The community of the believers here showed a great value on people over possessions. That is often a difficult priority to remember and act according to. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you a deep compassion for the people around you, and that the Spirit would give you the faith and provision you need to be generous with them. Pray that God would give you a deeper love for people and a lighter hold on possessions.
- *Through your six:* The community of believers was able to be so bold in their preaching because many of them had actually witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. They knew that they could have complete confidence that not even death has the final say. Pray for you six that they would be protected from any fear of death and that Jesus would give them hope for life beyond death.
- *Through our church:* Pray on behalf of our entire church that God would keep giving us more: more of the Holy Spirit, more boldness, and more miracles.

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