

Anticipation of Something New

Acts 1:1-14

Today is what I would consider to be the beginning of the new year for our church family. We basically follow the same cycle as the school calendar, so when school gets underway it's like a fresh, new start for us as well. Because of this, I've been thinking about our church family – where we're at and where we're headed in the upcoming year.

The last few years have been exciting because we've seen over 20 new families join the church and get involved, and in a church our size that's a big deal. If you look around the room this morning, there are a lot of people you don't know because either they're new or you're new and that's a good thing for a church. We're steadily gaining new people.

But there have been tough times over the past few years as well because during that time about the same number of people have left the church. We've lost people because of death or major health problems; several have moved away; and others have quit coming for a number of different reasons. So that's hard. And if you've been around for a few years you know that as you look around the room, there are several people missing – people who used to be familiar faces.

We've experienced a lot of turnover, and the sense I get at this point in the life of East Lincoln is that there's a mixture of excitement about the new things God is doing, along with the feeling that we're a little disconnected and need something to unite us together. We have a lot of good things going on; new people are coming – young families; ministries are healthy; people are finding ways to connect and make friends; but we need to be united together as a whole, so that we're headed in the same direction with growing excitement and momentum.

When a church family experiences that it can be very fun and exciting. People want to come because the excitement is contagious; the Spirit is moving, people come to Christ and lives are changed. But when it's not happening, church can become just part of the routine and it's easy to get caught up with everything else that's going on in life and church can fall by the wayside.

How do we become united together as a whole and headed in the same direction? The answer, I think, is vision – we need God to give us a vision for what he wants us to do and where he wants us to go as a church – something that we can be united behind and moving toward. In the last year I have seen God begin to do that among the elders. He’s begun to show us some ways how we can reach out to our community and be more intentional about making disciples and it’s been exciting to see things begin to take shape. And one of the things he’s brought us to is that we need to do a small group and sermon series this fall about the early church as a way for us to seek God’s vision together as a whole church family.

What does God want our church to be like? There’s no better place to look than the book of Acts where we find the very first church that God established and what he did to begin what has now become a global church movement. There are a lot of books and church leaders that will tell you how a church is supposed to be, but that comes from what God has been telling them about their church, not ours. We need to listen to what God is saying to us about East Lincoln. So we are going to spend about 10 weeks in the first half of the book of Acts this fall and seek God’s vision for East Lincoln together. The book of Acts is 28 chapters long and can be divided into two parts. The first twelve chapters are about the beginning of the church in the city of Jerusalem and the growth of the church in that region of the world. These are the chapters we will be studying. The second part of Acts begins in chapter 13 and primarily records Paul’s 3 missionary journeys.

Acts was written by a man named Luke, a relatively unknown man who was likely from the city of Antioch, which was the location of one of the prominent churches in the New Testament. Luke wrote two books of the Bible – Acts and Luke. He wrote them for a man named Theophilus, who was likely a person with wealth and rank who paid him to write the books. Since Luke wasn’t one of the original disciples and wasn’t from Jerusalem, he wasn’t an eye-witness to most of the things he wrote about. Instead, he gained his information from people who were. But he did travel with Paul on his second and third missionary journeys, so when you get into the second half of Acts it sounds like he was actually there, because he was.

This morning we are going to look at the first 14 verses of this book and as we do we are going to ask the Lord to use them to help us see his vision for us as a church.

Read Acts 1:1-5

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me;⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So Luke begins by giving Theophilus a recap of his first book and what he wrote about in it. He wrote all about Jesus – what he did and what he taught all the way until he ascended to heaven. And Luke emphasized something Jesus told his disciples to do in his final days with them – they were to go back to Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father, which was the Holy Spirit. They would be baptized by the Holy Spirit not many days after they arrived in Jerusalem. So he directed their attention to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

He started teaching them about the Holy Spirit about 40 days earlier, when they were together in the Upper Room on the night before his crucifixion. He told them that the Father would give them another Helper to be with them forever, and that they knew him for he was dwelling with them and would be in them (Jn. 14:16-17). He also told them that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things and bring to their remembrance all that he had said to them (Jn. 14:26). But a lot had happened since that night in the Upper Room, so when they came back together before Jesus' ascension, he brought their attention back to the Holy Spirit again, telling them they were to wait for him in Jerusalem. Luke includes more of that conversation in what he writes next.

Read Acts 1:6-11

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times

or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Now I try to put myself in the shoes of those disciples. They had been on quite a roller coaster ride over the past 6 weeks. They went from the heights of excitement when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people worshipped him as the Messiah, to the lows of despair when 5 days later he was crucified and buried, to the heights of excitement once again as he appeared to them three days later, more alive than he ever was. So they wanted to know: “Is this it? Is this the time we’ve all been waiting for when you’re going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Israel had been under foreign oppression on and off for hundreds of years and at that time were under the rule of the Roman Empire. So now that Jesus was alive again, his disciples were thinking he would bring Israel back to the height of glory.

So, Jesus’ response to them and what happened after, must have really thrown them for a loop once again because he basically told them: “That’s none of your business. That’s totally God’s thing.” And then he redirected their attention back to the Holy Spirit and to something new that he wanted to become the focus of their lives. When they went to Jerusalem and were baptized with the Holy Spirit, they would actually receive power. And in that power they were to go forward and be his witnesses in that city and in the surrounding region – even in Samaria – and ultimately to the ends of the earth. So he gave them a new mission; a new calling; and he promised them that in a few days they would receive the power they needed from the Holy Spirit to do it.

And then he left. All of a sudden, right in front of their eyes he was lifted up into the heavens and taken from their sight. The angels basically told them, “There’s nothing more to see here. He’s going to come back again the same way he left, and you’re not going to miss him, so you can move on and do what he told you to

do.” And that’s what they did. Luke finishes his recap of his first letter in verses 12-14.

Read Acts 1:12-14.

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

The launch of a global church movement was about to begin. His disciples had been with him for 3 years; a time of preparation for something; and this was it. But before they went forward and did anything, they were to wait. They needed something. They needed the power and leading of the Holy Spirit. So they obeyed Jesus, went to Jerusalem and devoted themselves to prayer as they waited for the Spirit to come.

As we seek God’s vision for how we can unite together as a whole church and head in the same direction, there are three things I think we need to see. At the heart of God’s vision for that church, and every church, including East Lincoln, is his calling for us to be witnesses for Christ. There are a lot of other things that can make church wonderful – great worship services, great friends and fellowship, great small group Bible studies – but the heart of what God has called us to do is to be witnesses for Christ. And I think what Jesus had in mind was actively telling people about what Christ has done in our lives. If we just start there and ask ourselves: Are we doing that? We already have something that can unite us together. Because being witnesses for Christ is not easy if you’re doing it alone. We need each other. We need partnership, we need encouragement, and we need support.

Furthermore, we need the Holy Spirit. The second thing I think we need to see in this passage is that the power to become witnesses ultimately comes from the Holy Spirit. The disciples had been trained with what to do. They had been in intense preparation for a period of 3 years. They had the support and encouragement of one another. Yet when it came time to begin to do what Christ

had prepared them to do, the first thing they had to do was wait... Wait for the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was with them, but until the power of the Holy Spirit was in them, they would not be fully equipped to do what Christ had called them to do. And the same is true for us. If we are going to unite together to be witnesses for Christ in our community, we are going to need the power of the Holy Spirit. We need the Holy Spirit to empower and lead us. We need to yield to him and be filled with him in order to do what Christ has called us to do.

And that brings me to the third thing... The filling of the Holy Spirit comes when God's people devote themselves to prayer. I don't know how it all works and I know there isn't a magical formula for how God works. But I do know that the filling and empowering of the Holy Spirit comes when God's people join together in prayer.

Witness, Power, and Prayer – these were three things that united the first church together – and I believe these are part of God's vision for us as well. Let's pray and ask God what this means for each of us...