

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

Plan “Be”

(Acts 1:1-14)

Introduction: The best laid plans...

On March 5th, in a game against the Memphis Grizzlies, San Antonio Spurs All-Star point guard, Tony Parker, broke a bone in his right hand.

Doctors immediately reported that Tony would be out of action for four to six weeks, news that Spurs fans considered devastating. Tony is the starting point guard for the Spurs, and if there was going to be any chance at a good run in the playoffs, Tony had to be in the lineup, right?

Well, with one of his star players out for much of the end of the regular season, Coach Greg Popovich was forced to go with a Plan B.

Whenever a sports team loses a key player, the coach has to resort to Plan B.

When the economy takes a nose dive, a company may have to alter its business plan and opt for a Plan B.

You may be able to think back to times in your own life when you have planned and dreamed and plotted out something to a “T” - only to have that plan fall apart because of some detail or other that didn’t fall in place. If so, you know what it is to have to resort to Plan B.

In a poem he dedicated to a mouse, the 18th century Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote, “*the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.*”

Amen. Life happens. Plans get disrupted. Plan B’s follow.

Well, Jesus’ first disciples tasted the truth of Burns’ famous line. Their expectations of an earthly Kingdom, with Jesus as King, were disrupted by a Roman cross. Their “Plan A” was crushed.

But God had another plan in mind for them. A Plan B. As you are well aware, Plan B’s can sometimes be pretty exciting.

For instance, the four weeks of Tony Parker’s absence made for a thrilling run (it was the best four weeks of the Spurs season) with George Hill at point and Manu Ginobili channeling Superman!

This morning, as we begin to look into the New Testament book of Acts we watch as these disciples are introduced to what was, from their perspective, a “Plan B (more properly, ‘BE’).” And this Plan B takes them and anyone else who follows on the most exciting ride imaginable!

Before we turn to the book of Acts, though, let’s take a minute to review the immediate history prior to Acts 1:1.

Following Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, His disciples experiencing a month and a half of almost unimaginable turmoil, disruption and change.

The disciples’ (former) great expectations

We know these disciples from the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They all hail from the land of Galilee, the northern part of Palestine. And they are all disciples of Jesus.

They had been with Jesus for three years. After watching Him perform miracle after miracle, they came to believe that His claims were true. He was the SAVIOR. He was the Master of nature’s forces. He was the long-expected MESSIAH.

On one magic Sunday He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to the cheers of crowds. He was the KING!

Jesus and His disciples walked through what proved to be Jesus' final week with confidence. They believed that, at Passover, Jesus would present Himself to the nation as its King and would overthrow Roman rule.

But, things turned out very differently than they had imagined...

Broken dreams!

On Thursday evening, Roman soldiers and Jewish Chief Priests arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, a garden located near the base of the Mount of Olives. Fear won the night and the disciples all fled.

Throughout that long night, most of Jesus' followers were nowhere to be found.

Judas Iscariot had betrayed Him. Simon Peter denied ever having known Him. And Jesus was taken from the Jewish trials to the Roman governor where He was sentenced to die by crucifixion.

With their Master dead, the disciples' own lives were in grave danger, and they knew it. They were known as the good friends of a man who had been put to death for blasphemy and treason!

We can only imagine that the day and a half after Jesus died was filled with:

- **fear** of whatever the future might hold,
- **despair** at the loss of a Friend/Savior,
- **confusion**, and even
- **self-doubt** for having allowed themselves to be so deceived.

Then came Sunday.

Out of the ashes...

Sunday morning brought reports of an empty tomb and "Jesus sightings."

By late on that first Sunday evening, if there was confusion, it was of the, "*Too good to be true!*" variety.

They found out that the death of Jesus was not at all the end of the story and the Gospels conclude with both a living Jesus AND exuberant, joy-filled disciples.¹

But the resurrection of Jesus is not the end of the story, either. The story of Jesus continues in the book of Acts!²

Here is how Luke begins the companion volume to his account of Jesus' life.

Intro to the Book of Acts (1:1-3)

Dear Theophilus... (v. 1)

[1:1] The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach

By those words, "*the first account*," we understand that Luke, the author of Acts, was referring to his Gospel. That Gospel record was written to Theophilus, too, and we are certainly indebted to Theophilus for sharing his mail with us!³

Now, why are we going to look into Acts together on Sunday mornings? There are actually several reasons behind my decision to focus, as a congregation, on the Acts of the Apostles.

¹ The exception to this cheery ending is the Gospel of Mark, who ends his book at 16:8 with "*for they were afraid*." However, later generations of Christians gave their own joyful ending (vv. 9-20). Mark's final words invite all Christians to add their own joy-filled, faith-filled ending!

² Luke, an eyewitness to many of the events he records in Acts, probably wrote this book sometime in the 70's of the first century. According to Everett Harrison, early to mid-sixties. As late as the latter 70's says F.F. Bruce.

³ It has been suggested by many that Luke wrote his first account to inform Theophilus, as a way of bringing him to faith. "Theophilus" means "dear to God" and some have suggested that this name indicates that he was a Greek who had come to faith and had his name changed to reflect his Christian status. Others, aware that Theophilus was a common name, are of the opinion that this man was converted between the writing of the two books, which explains the less formal address in Acts "Theophilus" as opposed to "most excellent Theophilus" in Luke. Sadly, we don't have any idea who Theophilus was.

The Historical Importance of Acts

For one thing, without a working knowledge of Acts (early church history), it's hard to make much sense of much of the rest of the New Testament.

Acts is the New Testament's only history book and it provides an invaluable historical framework for understanding the issues addressed in so many of the letters.⁴

Another reason for wanting to move through Acts with you has to do with the importance of theology.

The Theological Importance of Acts

In the book of Acts we are introduced to some of the critical themes of the Christian faith.

In Acts, Luke clarifies who Jesus is and how someone is saved. He describes what the church is to be all about. He tells us who the Holy Spirit is and what He does. He shows the power of the Gospel to overcome racial, social, ethnic, and political differences. He shows how the early church thought through many of the thorny theological issues they had to confront.

Helpfully, Luke does all of this through story, in the context of narrative. In Acts, we get to *see* theology!

But there is another reason - one that is more personal and that is more pastoral - for choosing to study Acts with you.

The Personal and Congregational Importance of Acts

The purpose for which Luke wrote his gospel was clearly set out in the introduction. He wanted to give his friend, Theophilus, a well-ordered account of what Jesus did during His lifetime.⁵

⁴ Archaeology and corroborating literary evidence assures us that Luke was an excellent historian. We know that he accompanied the apostle Paul on some of his travels and had access to primary sources as he compiled the rest of the record.

⁵ He says that he wanted Theophilus (and us) to know the exact truth about the things which he had been taught.

As he begins this second work, he tells us that in the first book he had wanted to give an account about all that Jesus *began* to do and teach.

The implication is that this second volume is all about what Jesus *continues* to do and teach. The only difference is that now He is doing what He does through His church. Acts recounts what Jesus is still doing through His Holy Spirit-empowered followers.

In the first century, Jesus' hands and feet were Peter and Paul and Barnabas and Priscilla. Today, you and I are the Body through which Jesus Christ continues to do His work.

Few things excite me like the idea that we, the church, are involved in the continuing work of the Lord Jesus Christ!

This year, I am fifty four years old. I've been a Christian since 1971. I've served as a pastor since 1982 - all of those years here at Northwest. And I'm hungry.

I'm not hungry to be invited to speak at the chapel service of my alma mater (Dallas Theological Seminary). Distinguished alumni are often invited to speak there.

I'm not hungry to have my name up in lights or to have international recognition or a multi-site ministry (not that I resent those pastors who do, of course...)

I'm not hungry to pastor a church that is famous for being a well-oiled machine of organizational efficiency.

But, after thirty nine years of following Jesus, I'm hungry. And I'm not turning to Acts out of sense of dissatisfaction or anger or frustration, but out of eagerness.

On the last night of His life, Jesus said to His disciples, [*John 14:12*] **"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and GREATER WORKS than these he will do; because I go to the Father."**

The book of Acts shows Jesus' disciples doing these greater works and I'm hungry to see those works performed through the power of the Holy Spirit, by us, here and now.

I'm hungry to see powerful works of the Spirit of God - eternal souls saved, lives changed, addictions broken, fractured families put back together, answers to prayers for healing of broken bodies and minds.

I'm hungry to see each one of us here embrace the idea, "*The Great Commandment is mine. The New Commandment is mine. The Great Commission is mine.*"

I don't want any of this so that we get famous or so that we get honored. It is all for the glory and honor of God.

But if the power of God is unleashed in our church in new and fresh ways (and if He is unleashed in new and fresh ways it will certainly mean that He is getting more of us, not that we are getting more of Him!), won't it be fun! Won't it be an absolute blast to see biblical diversity increase, ministry to the poor explode, service to the least and the lost on all of our radars. Won't it be wonderful when we are a church that is always talking TO Jesus and always talking ABOUT Jesus!⁶

That's what Acts is all about. And that is our "NEXT." So, without further delay, let's turn to Acts now!

Following the shock of Jesus' resurrection, the disciples enjoyed forty days with their alive-again Savior.

Get Ready - Power Is Coming! (vv. 4-8)

Forty Amazing Days (vv. 1-3)

[1:1] The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, [2] until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.

⁶ As Pastor and author Ray Stedman wrote years ago, "*The carnal church talks about itself all the time. The healthy church talks about Jesus all the time.*"

[3] To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

Some details about those forty days emerge from various places in the New Testament. We know that Jesus:

- appeared to a few of His disciples - both men and women - on Easter Sunday;
- appeared to several of the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee;⁷
- appeared to his half brother, James (1 Corinthians 15:7);
- appeared to a crowd of over 500 people at one time in Galilee;⁸

We also know that near the end of those forty days, the disciples traveled back to Jerusalem.

They got there about a week and a half ahead of one of the most important of the Jewish annual festivals, the Feast of Pentecost, a week-long festival which all Jews were to make an effort to attend.

As we open to Acts, the disciples are about a half mile outside the city of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, with Jesus.

He was preparing for His home going. We know, but the disciples didn't know, that they were listening to His final words to them.

Anticipating a Baptism (vv. 4-5)

Don't leave Jerusalem! (v. 4a)

[1:4a] Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem...

Think for a minute about what might have been the thoughts of the disciples, now that they are back in Jerusalem.

⁷ This is where Peter was singled out for special attention, challenge and restoration.

⁸ A. T. Robertson, a brilliant New Testament scholar, believed that this occurred when Jesus gave the Great Commission, recorded at Matthew 28:18-20.

Would they have been remembering, mostly, that wonderful Sunday morning when they discovered that Jesus was alive?

Or would their thoughts have turned to the darker memories of Jesus' arrest, His crucifixion, His death, the horror of Friday, the terror of Saturday?

As wonderful as that first Sunday was, the ugliness of what they had experienced prior to Jesus' resurrection might have made Jerusalem a place that made their skin crawl, the one place they would have wanted to flee.

Jesus told them to stay put.

The Father's promise (vv. 4b-5)

[1:4] Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; [5] for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Note this.

As of Acts, chapter 1, the Holy Spirit had not been "poured out" on Jesus' followers. Sure, they had received a whiff of the Holy Spirit when Jesus breathed on them in the Upper Room following His resurrection.¹⁰ And they had gotten tastes of the Holy Spirit's power when they watched Jesus perform miracles.

But they had yet to receive Him in fullness and in power. That's coming soon. These disciples were to be *immersed* (that's what *baptism* means!) with the Holy Spirit - and soon!¹¹

Isn't that fascinating? For three years, these men had received personal training from Jesus. He had given them constant supervision. He had taught them, overseen them, mentored them, reproved and admonished and encouraged them.

And He knew that all of that was not enough for the task ahead. With what they were going to face as His apostles, three years of face-to-face training under Jesus was not enough.

They needed the wisdom and the courage that only the abiding presence of God could provide. That abiding presence was what the gift of the Holy Spirit would bring.¹²

You can see the wheels turning in their minds. Excitement is building. Stay in Jerusalem. Something is coming. You don't think...

Not a Kingdom, but Power (vv. 6-8)

"Is NOW the time, Lord?" (v. 6)

[1:6] So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"

"We found out forty days ago, at Passover, that it definitely was NOT the time for the Kingdom to come. But is that time NOW? Now that Jesus has been raised from the dead, might the Kingdom be just around the corner?"

The Lord's response to their question came in two parts. Let's paraphrase the first part. Jesus said, essentially, "*None of your business!*"

Jesus: "None of your business" (v. 7)

[1:7] He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority

⁹ See Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16.

¹⁰ John 20:22.

¹¹ Jesus had previously spoken to them about this promised gift from the Father. In fact, He had discussed the Spirit's ministry in detail on the night before His death (especially John 14 and 16).

¹² The term "baptism" is significant here. When John the Baptist was baptizing in the Jordan River, those he baptized got **completely** wet. The gift Jesus pictures here will be a full dunking, an immersion into the constant presence of God by the Holy Spirit.

Who wouldn't love to know the future - immediate or long-term?! It would be great in so many ways to know what the future holds. Give me a memo that tells me the political future, my future health (or lack of), the weather or the Spurs playoff future. It'll just make it so much easier to plan.

But, to the disciples' very understandable request to know the future of the Kingdom of God, Jesus says, *"Sorry. You're not on the 'need to know' list. The subjects of a kingdom don't need such information."*

So, to the disciples' explicit question Jesus gave a non-answer. But He then goes on to answer the question they didn't ask.

"You shall be My witnesses!" (v. 8)

[1:8] but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

The disciples of Jesus may or may not be a part of a physical Kingdom over which Jesus will reign here on earth. But, He guarantees that they will receive power, power from God the Holy Spirit!

Now, let's look at this verse carefully. Jesus' words are both a profound promise to us and they are prophetic.

A geographical progression

Acts 1:8 actually lays out the course the Gospel will take following the Day of Pentecost.

Jesus mentions four geographic areas, four areas which describe movement from a center to a circumference. The movement is from here to there; from "us" to "them."

These guys will be Jesus' witnesses beginning in **Jerusalem**, the city over which Jesus wept. Note the grace of God here. The place where Jesus was killed will be the launch pad for the spread of the Good News that Jesus saves. (Acts 2-7)

Next, the disciples will move out from Jerusalem to be witnesses to the whole region of **Judea**. Judea is the land of full-blooded Jews. It is the land through which Jesus traveled - teaching, preaching, healing. Judea is the land in which He was rejected. Despite that rejection, though, Judea will receive the Good News of the Gospel. (Acts 8)

Next, the disciples' ministry will branch out to **Samaria**, the home of the enemies of the Jews, the hated Samaritans. Samaria was honored by having Jesus pass through on a couple of occasions.¹³ And Jesus' followers will go back there, bringing with them the message of the Gospel. (Acts 8:2-25)

Next, Jesus' disciples will be His witnesses beyond Samaria to **the remotest part of the earth**. And, sure enough, the last half of the book of Acts tells of how the disciples took the Gospel far from Palestine, as far as Rome and beyond. Throughout His ministry, Jesus had a vision for the whole world, not just for Israel. (Acts 13-28)

Acts 1:8 is actually a summary of the whole book. And now, having observed the geographical progression of the Gospel ministry, we need to make one more observation about Acts 1:8.

A promise, not a challenge

It is an observation that I believe is frequently missed, but one which is critical to understanding the verse and the book of Acts and the Christian life.

That observation has to do with a grammatical subtlety in the phrase that contains the word "witness." You will notice that Jesus did NOT say, *"and you shall do My witnessing."*

I have read a lot of English versions of the Bible, and I haven't found one of them that translates the Lord's thought in this way.

No. What Jesus says is, ***"You shall BE My witnesses."*** By those words, Jesus is making a promise. He is not issuing marching orders. He is giving a prophecy.

¹³ See Luke 17 and John 4.

Unlike Matthew 28:18-20, which is a Great Commission, Acts 1:8 is a Great Promise. Rather than give us something to do, Jesus describes what His followers are going to BE - ***“You shall BE My witnesses.”***¹⁴

Plan A in their minds had been, *“We’ll serve as Cabinet-level executives in Jesus’ Kingdom.”* Jesus gives them a Plan B. More properly, a Plan “BE” - ***“BE My witnesses.”***

The emphasis of the phrase is on the word **BE**.

When the Holy Spirit is poured out on these disciples, He will change them into something different from what they have been. He will make them to **BE** powerful, attractive, enticing, credible witnesses.

In our study of Acts, we will see several places that show us that the power of the Holy Spirit can be resisted. The disciples sometimes quenched and sometimes grieved Him. Sometimes that was by out and out rebellion and sometimes by spiritual insensitivity.

BUT, when they cooperated with Him, when they made themselves available for His free-flowing power, when they kept their focus on the eternal, they were exactly what He promised they would be: HIS *Holy Spirit power-filled* WITNESSES.

Jesus concluded His earthly mission with the words of verse eight. And then, like that, He left the scene and returned to Heaven.

Ready? Jesus Is Coming Back! (vv. 9-11)

The Great Departure (v. 9)

[1:9] And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

It is easy to envision the eleven disciples, standing open-mouthed at the top of Mt. Olivet, gazing into the sky as He was enveloped by a cloud.

¹⁴ Check out Eugene Peterson’s translation in The Message, *“When the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be My witnesses...”*

And we might well ask, *“Why such a dramatic departure?”* Why not just vanish? Why not go to the Father secretly and invisibly?

But the reason for a public and visible ascension must be that He wanted them to know that this was His permanent departure.

During the just ended forty days He appeared, disappeared and then reappeared a few days later. But, the message of the Ascension is that this interim period of a physical presence is over. He’s really gone. They won’t see Him again until they die and go to Heaven.

And as soon as Jesus left, angels showed up! The angels spoke to the open-mouthed eleven.

The Promise of a Great Return (vv. 10-11)

[1:10] And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. [11] They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”¹⁵

And the message of the two angels is the Blessed Hope that the church of Jesus has held onto for 2,000 years. Jesus will come again - and His return will be just as public and as visible as was His departure!

Jesus is coming back!! Really!!!

Now, the final scene we will note this morning concerns the activity of the disciples after Jesus’ departure, and after they had returned to Jerusalem.

¹⁵ In the Gospel of Luke, we read that Jesus led them out to Bethany, having told them not to leave the city (Jerusalem) until they were clothed with power from on high, and that from there He was lifted from them and went to Heaven. After this, the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Evidently, this passage (Luke 24:44-53) records words and events paralleled to Acts, which makes sense, because Luke would just be picking up where he left off.

Get Ready - Get Set - PRAY! (vv. 12-14)

[1:12] Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.¹⁶ [13] When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying...

The reference to “the” upper room where they were staying suggests a well-known place.

It may be that this was the same upper room where they had celebrated the Passover with Jesus. Maybe it was the same room to which they had retreated after the crucifixion. If so, what a story those walls could have told!

- The sense of impending calamity on the night of Jesus’ Passover.
- The fear of crucifixion Saturday
- The sheer joy at the unannounced Presence of a resurrected Lord on Easter evening.
- Now, zeal, fervor, and hope in light of the promise of the Holy Spirit.

With the exception of Judas (his story is told in 1:15-26), the apostolic band was all present and accounted for, as Luke listed them by name.

[1:13b]...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.

Besides the remaining eleven, there were a few women present¹⁷ (including Jesus’ mother). Jesus’ half-brothers were in the room as well.¹⁸

And, as they had gathered together, what were they doing? They were praying.

¹⁶ A Sabbath’s day journey was 2,000 cubits, or about 3/5 of a mile.

¹⁷ For the women who had supported Jesus during His ministry, see Mk. 15:40-41; 16:1.

¹⁸ The brothers “Simon and Andrew” and “James and John” are now separated and listed in order of their prominence in Acts “Peter and John and James and Andrew.”

[Acts 1:14] THESE ALL WITH ONE MIND WERE CONTINUALLY DEVOTING THEMSELVES TO PRAYER, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

None of us are surprised that the disciples of Jesus would meet for prayer. But Luke literally says, not just “prayer” but that they “*all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to [THE] prayer.*”

And I am confident that the prayer to which they were devoting themselves was THE PRAYER for the coming of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus had promised them before He ascended into heaven.

Did they have a clue as to what the coming of the Holy Spirit would be like? Could they have envisioned a scene like the one we will encounter next week when we open to Acts, chapter 2? I don’t think they had any idea as to what was in store for them, only that something/ Someone who would empower them was going to arrive soon. And with Jesus gone, it couldn’t be soon enough. So, with desperate eagerness, they prayed.

Conclusion:

What the disciples prayed for in Acts 1, the coming of the Holy Spirit, we DON’T pray for. HE HAS COME. Praise God, we’ve got all of Him we’re going to get!

If we’ve got all of Him we’re going to get, it is possible that He does not yet have all of us we have to give. He wants you and me to live as sold-out disciples, fully committed to Him. When we live as sold-out disciples -

- we are removing hindrances to the full and free flow of the Holy Spirit’s power; and
- the Spirit of God changes us so that we will BECOME the kinds of people we were redeemed to become.

Let’s join in praying that God will unleash His power in us as He changes us - core-to-crust - and we BECOME Jesus’ credible, powerful witnesses.