



Acts and the Easter Season*

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Considering its length, Acts is perhaps the most neglected New Testament book in the lectionary cycle. A great exception is the season of Easter in Series B. Seven texts from Acts replace selections from the Old Testament as the first lessons; the addition of the familiar story of Pentecost from Acts 2 for the festival of Pentecost makes eight. The season provides a rare opportunity for those who want to preach or teach from Acts and remain within the lectionary cycle.

Following any progression through the selections will prove difficult, as any glimpse at the lessons will show. The selections are not chronological. Acts 2 falls on Pentecost, which marks the end of the Easter season. Five of the pericopes from Acts which precede Pentecost, however, fall later in the narrative. The rhythm of the selections is obviously not determined by the narrative but by other factors. Preparation for the season, however, may include a serial reading of at least Acts 1-15 in order to understand the logic of the narrative. We will review the pericopes in the order set by the lectionary, but first some general comments are in order.

I. SOME PREFATORY OBSERVATIONS

An overview of the assigned pericopes suggests the following points:

1. A number of the pericopes are taken from speeches. Our exegesis must respect the form of the material, which means that one of our tasks will be to understand the function of speeches.
2. Most of the speeches are built around certain Old Testament passages. If we are to appreciate what is happening in the story, we shall have to understand the scriptural interpretation that is so much apart of the addresses.
3. Most of the speeches are addressed to Jews. Before we determine that they are for us as well, we must take seriously their historical and theological particularity.

*This essay is based in part on a discussion in which the following participated along with the author: Sheldon Tostengard and David Tiede of the faculty of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, Morris Wee, a student at the Seminary, and Andrew Overman, pastor of Colonial Church of Edina, Minnesota.

4. All of the material is part of the second volume of a two-volume work known conveniently as Luke-Acts. We cannot pretend to have understood any of the selections until we have glanced at their place in the whole narrative-and in this case, that means the narrative beginning with the parents of John the Baptist in Jerusalem and ending with Paul in Rome.

Interpreting the whole two-volume work every time we try to exegete one pericope is impossible. There is not enough time to do major work each week, and in any case proposals about the whole must take account of the parts which must be studied independently. There are some things helpful for piece-meal exegesis, however, that are worth a few sentences.

Luke set out to write a history. By that is meant a work of a particular sort. No one in the ancient world would have misunderstood Mark or Matthew as histories; Luke's writings, perhaps. Luke begins by speaking about predecessors and about his reasons for writing. Theophilus, for whom he writes, has "been instructed" (Lk 1:4), probably meaning he was already a Christian. Luke wrote so that Theo could "know how well-founded are the things you have been taught" (the Jerusalem Bible and the New International Version give the best sense of the Greek here). His work is a pastoral exercise rather than evangelical; it intends to upbuild and enlighten rather than to convert. Selections from Acts are appropriate for preaching to Christian congregations, where the principal task of preaching is not to seek new converts from among the already baptized but to warn, encourage, and build up. Paul wrote letters for such purposes. Luke wrote history.

It may strike some as surprising that history-writing should be a pastoral exercise. It is more common, perhaps, to conceive of pastoral ministry in terms of smaller arenas of human experience. People need help with the personal things, like caring for fellow members of a family or living with a disability. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he spoke about matters that had to do with the everyday life of the little congregation—like what people ought to buy at the meat market, what women ought to wear at worship, and how church suppers were to be organized. There may seem little time for such matters as broad as history in the normal routines that make up our lives.

Yet the nature of the world we inhabit and the possibilities the future holds for us are as relevant as the little things. In fact, the way we locate ourselves in the world, the way we understand our prospects, and the manner in which we anticipate the future color everything we do. What does faith in the risen Christ have to do with the world and history and the future? Those are the kinds of questions the author of Luke-Acts wanted to answer for people who were interested. They are good questions for those of us who have celebrated the resurrection and now can think about who we are and what God has in store for us.

Differences among New Testament writings in this regard are striking. Selections from Acts are paired with pieces from John's Gospel for five of the seven Sundays in the Easter season (six Sundays counting Pentecost). For John, the world is a grim place where the faithful can expect little but trouble. The darkness is a reality of such enormous proportions that there is little point in speaking about history and the future, except to emphasize that God's will has

always been hidden from the faithless and that vindication of the faithful will come only at the end. The life of faith to which Jesus calls his followers in John has little content. They are to love one another. That is about all that is open to them. John wrote to a community of believers for whom that was a precious word. They had no prospects. In such cases, the gospel is a reminder that God offers hope beyond hope. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. That is as much as one can hope for.

That is not our situation. Christians are not a persecuted minority in this society. The

church has money, property, influence; it is free to make its voice heard. John's Gospel may not speak words that are sufficient to our situation. It may be that in Acts we can hear a word for our time—a word that takes seriously the openness of the future in spite of the risks and threats. If history offers threats and temptation, it also offers promise. It does so, of course, only because God is the Lord of history who makes promises and keeps his word, whose will can be accomplished in spite of us. There is no promise in our ability to shape our own futures and destinies; we know too well our susceptibility to temptation and our vulnerability to forces we cannot control. There is promise in the history of God's graciousness, however, and in his commitment to the creation of which we are a part. The God who has touched each of us in the preached and sacramental word is involved in larger enterprises as well.

Luke wrote for people who had suffered the shock of the Temple's destruction—the loss of the symbol of God's presence among his people. They had suffered from the general disillusionment in the Roman Empire as the promise of the great peace under Augustus dissolved into dynastic wars in Rome and corruption and mismanagement in the provinces. They had suffered the breakup of families over the issue of Jesus' Messiahship. Some were certainly tempted to abandon the world of history and to cultivate their private piety—if not to abandon the whole religious enterprise altogether in the belief that God had abandoned the world. Luke set out to speak a pastoral word to such people—not just to offer a sense of comfort, but to suggest that history is still the arena in which God's will is worked out and not simply the domain of the devil. His story was to provide Theophilus and other readers with the “certainty” (Lk 1:4) necessary to live in the world with a sense of purpose and confidence. If faith is not an excuse to withdraw from life, we must be willing to take Luke's arguments seriously and to be prepared to make such arguments ourselves.

The story Luke tells does not ignore pain and hostility and conflict. He traces the early days of the new religious movement that later comes to be known as “Christian.” His task is to show how God's purpose is accomplished in the drama of events and what that purpose is. If his story is successful, we should learn something about what it means to speak of God as the Lord of history and what are the hopes and challenges that are part of our call. Jesus' resurrection is not the end of the story, but a new beginning. It is to some of the specifics that we now turn.

II. THE LESSONS

A. Second Sunday of Easter: Acts 3:13-26

The verses comprise most of Peter's second speech in Acts. The speech follows the account of a miracle in which Peter heals a cripple at Solomon's portico in the temple. Though the opening verses in the chapter need not be read, the speech makes no sense apart from the specific setting. It is not presented as a general sermon but as an explanation to the astonished crowd of the miracle that has occurred. In the previous chapter Peter quotes the prophet Joel, who says that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” The salvation promised in Jesus' name is now exemplified as the lame man is healed. The second speech heads off a possible misunderstanding: We have not done this by our own power, Peter tells the audience, but by the power of the “name.” The reference to Jesus' name unifies the story for the next several chapters. There is salvation in no other name.

The speech ties the specific act of deliverance to the past and to the future. It is not a raw display of power but a sign of God's fidelity to his promises. The somewhat awkward transition from the miracle to news about Jesus in 3:13-15 should not obscure the real connection: the concrete instance of healing is part of a larger program of salvation which God has promised in the prophets. The present is a time of fulfilled promises. God has kept his word. Perhaps because it is somewhat awkward, verse 16 has been omitted from the verses appointed to be read. It should not be omitted, for it emphasizes how important the name of Jesus is to the saving act that has occurred.

Like most of the other speeches in Acts, Peter's oration makes use of scriptural quotations. Verse 13 alludes to Isaiah 52:13; Deuteronomy 18:19-20 is quoted in verses 22-24. The concluding lines make use of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:18. Note that Peter's interpretation is concealed by the English translation, "And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth bless themselves." The word for "posterity" is "seed" in Greek. Peter takes the singular as a reference to Jesus and not to all of Abraham's posterity: "God, having raised up his servant [i.e., his seed]...." The methods of scriptural interpretation are those of the first century, not of our own time.

The quotation of Deuteronomy 18 is particularly important. Jesus is identified as the "prophet like Moses" whom God has raised up. Salvation is offered in his name. But those who do not listen to Jesus are cut off from "the people."

There is opposition to Jesus that will have tragic consequences. The warning is simply the other side of the blessing, however. Jesus has come to be a blessing for all the families of the earth, among whom Israel, God's chosen, are first. In Peter's speech, as in his healing touch, that salvation becomes concrete for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

It is important that so many of the texts during this season are taken from speeches. It is the word that makes the offer of God's love concrete. It is also the word that provides some clue to the shape and direction of God's history of blessing. It is here that we learn what Luke-Acts is about; and it is in the speeches that arguments are offered that seek to hold up the promise of history.

B. Third Sunday of Easter: Acts 4:8-12

The few verses in our lesson serve as Peter's defense before the Sanhedrin. Opposition to his preaching, according to Luke, comes from Sadducees, who believe in neither spirit nor angel nor the resurrection (Acts 23:8). They are irritated that the apostles are preaching "in Jesus resurrection from the dead." It is the implications of Jesus' career that they fear, not just Jesus himself.

Peter's fearless speech in the presence of the authorities contrasts sharply with his performance at Jesus' trial, where he denied him three times. Like the rest of the apostles who have received the Spirit, Peter is a new person. Jesus' promised salvation has been realized in the apostles no less than in the lame man. As Jesus promised, Peter is given a mouth of wisdom which his adversaries are unable to withstand. The timid apostles now offer bold testimony to the gospel when given an opportunity.

The "name" of Jesus is prominent in the few verses. No one in the court doubted that God would save his people. What they did not know was where that redemption could be expected.

Peter testifies it is in the concrete ministry of Jesus that God reveals his grace, and that it is in the specific offer of salvation in his name that grace can be obtained. The religious leaders are amazed at the boldness of Peter and John. They presume that confidence comes from education and breeding. The story tells us that real confidence is to be located “in the name of the Lord”; it is there we can find something to rely on.

C. Fourth Sunday of Easter: Acts 4:23-33

The largest portion of this pericope is a prayer of thanks offered by Peter after his release by the authorities. It is more than a prayer of thanks, however. Though addressed to God, the prayer also provides testimony to the plan of God now revealed as scriptural: the alliance of Herod and Pilate against Jesus, an unusual feature of Luke’s account of the passion, is shown to be fulfillment of prophecy. The verses quoted are from Psalm 2, a psalm that many Jews in the first century regarded as a messianic oracle (i.e. predicting the coming of a Messiah-King). The Psalm furnished Christians with important imagery with which to speak about Jesus, notably verse 7, where God calls the Christ his “son.” Events are shown to be “predestined to take place” by relating them to the scriptures (4:28).

Many people are uncomfortable with the idea of predestination. It seems to deny human freedom and the importance of history. The author of our story does not for a moment minimize the importance of testimony offered by the apostles or the reaction of audiences; salvation is accomplished in Jesus’ name, as forgiveness and life are offered to real people. The prayer serves as a confession that the events that have transpired are not accidental or controlled by some blind, disinterested fate. God is Lord of history. He is involved in making his love available, even in the face of opposition. Peter prays for God’s strength in the mission of witness and healing—and in recalling God’s deliverance of Jesus from the threat posed by his enemies, there is an implied promise that God will not abandon his witnesses now. Jesus is God’s predestined deliverer; he represents not a momentary decision by God but his eternal will to show mercy. Jesus’ death and resurrection were “necessary,” a familiar refrain in Luke-Acts.

The coming of the Spirit in the narrative is a sign of God’s continuing care and involvement in the program of salvation. He will not abandon those who call on the name of the Lord.

D. Fifth Sunday of Easter: Acts 8:26-40

Our text is another example of testimony that results in salvation. It comes after the Jewish court has tried to silence Christian witnesses. Stephen has been executed and hellenistic believers (probably Greek-speaking Jewish Christians) have been driven out of Jerusalem. The expulsion, far from destroying the movement, serves only to expand testimony to the gospel outside the narrow confines of Jerusalem. Gamaliel’s “prophecy” comes true: “for if his plan or undertaking is...of God, you will not be able to overthrow them” (Acts 5:39). It is the actions of the court that moves the mission to its next stage, in line with Jesus’ commission in Acts 1:8. The gospel, born in Jerusalem, is now to be carried to the ends of the earth. Samaria is first.

Philip’s success in Samaria is now matched by his success with a genuine foreigner. The “eunuch” is a court official of some sort and thus a man of importance. The Spirit has prepared

for Philip's testimony. The Ethiopian is already interested in the scriptures, but he requires enlightenment. Philip provides that enlightenment, using the eunuch's question as an occasion to speak about Jesus. The result is a new convert with the potential of sharing the message with a large body of foreigners who would otherwise never have heard the gospel. Note again that the scriptures provide a focal point for the story: Jesus is the servant who refuses to be served, who is rejected by humans but vindicated by God and taken up from the earth. The eunuch is not identified as a Gentile, but his conversion certainly anticipates the radical broadening of the story of salvation that will take place in the next chapters. Notice too the importance of baptism in the process of making disciples. The Ethiopian is touched by God's grace in both water and word.

E. Sixth Sunday of Easter: Acts 11:19-30

The fate of the scattered Jerusalem Christians, interrupted by the story of Paul's conversion and by Peter's crucial visit to the home of the Gentile Cornelius, is once again resumed. The mission to non-Jews now begins in earnest. All the problems have not yet been solved; the matter will be taken up formally in Jerusalem in chapter 15 and decided, once again by appeal to the scriptures. The major breakthrough occurs, however, and the next major chapter in the history of God's graciousness begins. It is here in Antioch that believers are first called "Christians"—a term that would have meant "messianists," a group within the Jewish community. Only after the tragic break with an emerging official Jewish community would the term come to designate a religious alternative distinct from "Judaism." At this point in Acts, those who confess Jesus as Lord and Christ do not understand themselves as anything but Jews for whom God's ancient promises have been fulfilled. It is an additional sign of God's extraordinary graciousness that there is room for Gentiles as well. Notice that in the book of Acts there is no suggestion that Gentiles have the right to be included among God's elect. God is not obligated. The inclusion of Gentiles—of people like us—is due to his unmerited grace.

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Antioch becomes a center for Christian mission, eventually commissioning Paul and Barnabas for their work that was to alter the face of the Roman Empire. Note too that the community of believers does not regard itself as the sole expression of "Christianity." At the news there is need in Judea, believers in Antioch send help. Believers are noted by their concern for one another, which extends to very concrete expressions in the form of material aid.

F. Seventh Sunday of Easter: Acts 1:15-26 (1:1-26)

There is little to distinguish the assigned verses, except that they are a necessary introduction to Pentecost. The opening verses in Acts 1 tie the story to the preceding volume and make the transition to a new phase in the story: the mission of the apostles will take them from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (1:8). What is required to begin the mission is "power from on high"—the Spirit promised at the beginning of Luke's Gospel by John the Baptist (1:5; Luke 3:1.6).

The replacement of Judas is necessary to bring the number of the apostles to twelve—obviously symbolic of the twelve tribes over whom the apostles will preside (Luke 22:28-30). The candidates for selection must have been with Jesus from the baptism of John. Most important, they are to be enlisted as "witnesses to the resurrection" (1:22). That era of

testimony will begin with the day of Pentecost.

G. The Day of Pentecost: Acts 2:1-21 (22-41)

Space permits only the briefest summary of the chapter that announces the program for Acts. For those interested in careful study of Luke-Acts as a whole, this chapter deserves special attention.

1. The outpouring of the Spirit, the fulfillment of John the Baptist's and Jesus' predictions, results in this case in the ability to speak in foreign tongues. Those who are able to hear the testimony to the "mighty works of God" are Jews from every nation. The story tells of the gathering of the Diaspora and the restoration of a faithful remnant in Israel. Gentiles will be of interest only later. The point here is that with the outpouring of the Spirit and the offer of salvation in Jesus' name, God is keeping his word to his people, Israel.

2. The interpretation of Pentecost is provided in Peter's speech, a carefully crafted oration built around several major scriptural texts. The most important text is from Joel. The biblical passage tells us what Pentecost is about: it is the outpouring of the prophetic Spirit, which marks the beginning of the "last days" and an offer of salvation in Jesus' name. "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," says Joel. The remainder of Peter's speech (not included in the lectionary selection) proves that Jesus is that "lord" in whose name salvation is offered, the crucified one whom God raised from the dead and seated at his right hand.

3. Those who are moved by Peter's preaching—thousands—are baptized "in the name of" Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38-42). The "name" of Jesus appears frequently throughout the following chapters, as we have already seen, as a reminder of the particularity of the good news and as a link with the prophetic word in Joel. The gospel is a confirmation of God's fidelity to his promises.

4. The program announced here in Acts 2 extends through the rest of the

story. Pentecost marks the beginning of an age of testimony, repentance, and salvation for Israel. The gathering of the scattered family of Israel will involve reconciliation with Gentiles who are included within the family. The breakdown of the human family depicted in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is reversed. And the agent of reconciliation is the Spirit who, as Luther reminded us, "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

The story of Acts is the story of the Spirit who opens the future to us and bids us share in the promise of history. The God who created the heavens and the earth, who raised Jesus from the dead, and poured out his Spirit, can be trusted to bring to completion the good work he has begun. The history of promise Luke wrote for his contemporaries is appropriate for us as well.