

Sunday January 5th, 2025

Acts 3:12-26

Series: Lessons from the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Jerusalem"

Well today begins our little journey of looking at the early church, and when I say early church, I mean as close to the beginning as we might possibly get. Most of our stops along the way are dated between approximately 35AD to 80AD. It is my hope as we meet our ancient brothers and sisters, their experiences might prove instructive to us as we wrestle with a lot of the same issues they did. I cannot be as detailed in our exploration of each stop on our tour as we may like, but if you wish to explore any of these places in more detail, there are several good websites on church history that can prove helpful.

On our first stop, I wanted to do something a little different this morning. I want us to imagine that we have decided to undertake a scientific experiment. So, I ask you to listen carefully as I describe our experiment and unpack its meaning. Consider if you will, that we take a large cage, in which we place five monkeys of the same species. Again, this is imaginary, and no monkeys will be harmed. Inside the cage, in the very center, we hang a banana, from a string.

The banana cannot be reached, except by a set of stairs which we conveniently place underneath the hanging banana. Follow me so far. Good. Now imagine that as we watch the monkeys, one of them heads for the stairs, and begins to climb up to get the tasty banana. We are ready for this, for as soon as the monkey steps on the first step, we spray all the other monkeys with cold water. Frightened by the distress of the water, the first monkey retreats from the banana.

After a while, a second monkey tries for the banana with the same result; wet fur. After a few times of this, soon whenever a monkey heads for the stairs and the banana, the other monkeys will try and prevent its attempt. Now, let's put away the hose, and replace one of the original monkeys with a new one that has no knowledge of the water spray. The new monkey immediately sees the banana, and immediately heads for the stairs.

To its horror and surprise, all the other monkeys attack him. After another attempt and attack, the new monkey realizes that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be assaulted. Next, remove another original monkey and replace it with another new one. Just as with the previous newcomer, the new monkey goes for the banana and is assaulted by the others including the other newcomer, who has learned from the others.

Over time, and one at a time, we replace all the original monkeys with new ones, and every time the new monkey gets assaulted for trying to get that banana. By the time all the monkeys are replaced by new ones, we have five monkeys that have no idea why they are assaulted for trying to climb the stairs and take the banana, nor why they join the assault team whenever another monkey tries to get the banana.

By the time the fifth monkey is replaced you have not one single monkey who has been sprayed with water. Nevertheless, no monkey ever tries to approach the stairs to try for the banana. Why not? Because as far as they know that's the way it's always been done around here.

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I am not advocating tormenting monkeys, nor do I know if such an experiment was ever conducted, but it does raise a very good point. How much of what we do, and believe, is not because it is well thought out, or even logical, or helpful, but rather because we have simply always done it that way? Like those monkeys, we humans can be a rather stubborn bunch when someone new comes into our well-ordered world and upsets the applecart.

We may not know the reason for the way things are, but we are sure determined to keep them the way they are. Perhaps no phrase is more damaging to the church's ministry than the oft heard, "Because we've always done it that way." This brings me to the situation facing the early church. The Christian church as it exists today, even in our post-modern world, and for all its struggles and issues, is for the most part mainstream.

Although the attendance numbers in the western world are continuing to fall, (In Africa and Asia the church is exploding with growth) the historical influence of the church is ingrained in our society. We are, for a lack of better words, not the new kids on the block, or the new monkey in the cage. This wasn't the case for the early church. The mission and ministry of Jesus really shook the status quo, and the longer the church persisted and grew, the more unsettled the elder brothers, as they are called in the parable of the prodigal son, became.

Every time a miracle was performed, or the gospel was preached, someone wasn't happy. This was particularly true in the environment in which the first gathering of believers met, namely in Jerusalem. We forget, or too quickly dismiss as irrelevant, that the first "people of the way" as Christians were originally called, were almost exclusively Jewish. Jesus was, after all, a first century Jew, as were all the disciples, and almost all the first followers of Jesus.

On the Day of Pentecost, the gathering of people from assorted countries, described as being together in one place, would have consisted of Jews from all over the Mediterranean area. The first believers, including the disciples, continued to practice the Jewish faith. They still revered the Torah, went to the temple or synagogue to pray, fasted, celebrated Jewish holy days like Pentecost, and followed Jewish food rules. The only difference, albeit a very significant one, from other Jews was they believed Jesus was the Messiah and he had risen from the dead.

It is important to note that at the time of Jesus, and the early church, there were several other Jewish groups, that claimed to know the truth, and who sought to gather followers. Some we know about like the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the Essenes, but others are lost to history. These groups readily engaged in debates on significant matters of faith and practice, and we even read in the Gospels that Jesus took part in this interchange; like when he debated whether there really was a resurrection with some Sadducees, who believed there wasn't.

In fact, we should remember that the gospel message of Jesus was first preached not in church buildings, which did not appear until the year 200AD, but in synagogues and in the temple courts and in the homes of believers. My point is this, the very first expression of the early church, was at its inception, much like just another break off sect from Judaism. It is why Saul, who becomes Paul the Apostle, persecuted them so greatly. If the early church had been all Gentile, Saul would not have cared one whit about them. Before his conversion Saul simply didn't care what, Gentiles believed, but to him, Jews were another matter entirely.

Mainline religious leaders, namely those that made up the Jewish religious court called The Sanhedrin, thought the “people of the way” would fade away, and they tried to undermine their mission, even taking to killing its leader, Jesus, and martyring many early followers.

It is quite conceivable that the church could have died in its early years, like so many other Jewish sects, except something happened that changed the course of history, and separated the Christians from other Jewish groups. It is an event that we must always remember, and reflect on, because it is an event that makes First Baptist possible, as well as every other community of faith. Can you guess what happened as a significant event in the Jerusalem church?

The event I am referring to is of course Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit that indwelt in believers. The Holy Spirit was, and still is, the critical presence of God we need to minister in Christ’s name.

The presence and power of the Holy Spirit set the “people of the way” apart from every other Jewish sect, and frankly every other religion. The church was no longer just about the apostles’ teaching; it was about the active, life-giving spirit of God dwelling in his people. “O what a difference a day can make” as we say. I chose the passage from Acts 3, so you can see the point I am trying to make.

In Acts 3, Peter and John are going to the temple for the three o’clock prayer service. Again, these were Jewish men, albeit followers of Jesus. We read that a man, lame from birth, was being carried in through the “Beautiful Gate” to set up shop as a beggar asking people for alms. The irony of a crippled beggar sitting by a gate called “Beautiful” is intentional here. Please note that Luke tells us that this man came every day, brought by his friends or relatives.

He was a fixture of the temple as much as the gate itself. Peter and John would have seen him before, maybe even given him money. Before Pentecost, Peter and John passed by that man every time they went to the prayer service. The man’s situation never changed, no matter how much he received in alms. Day after day, his meager existence lingered, but it was all about to change.

In Acts 2 we read about the tongues of fire that fell on the believers, signifying the presence of God dwelling fully in his people. Now watch and see why the church became something different, something special. Peter and John are off to prayers in Acts 3 and see that same lame man as they have probably seen several times before.

It says when lame man saw Peter and John, he asked for some money. Maybe because these two men had given him money before, or maybe he just simply asked everyone. Peter and John were broke, not a shekel between them, and they could have simply left the man empty handed, but that is not what happened is it? Remember something has changed, something is different in the world and in the church.

Peter said, “Look at us!” and the man grew expectant of getting some money. But Peter went on to say, ‘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!’

Then Peter took the man's hand and helped him to his feet and he was healed. We read that he immediately begins to jump and dance and praise God. People who had seen him sitting day after day asking for alms, recognized him and demanded to know how he was walking. When they learned of Peter and John, they rushed to them believing they had special powers, and the bible says Peter saw his opportunity. He told them that it wasn't they who healed the man, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The same God they had come to the temple to worship. Then they retold the events of what happened to Jesus, and how it was faith in God's Messiah Jesus that healed the man. Peter clearly tied the events of Jesus crucifixion, and resurrection, to what happened in the temple to the lame man. The Jews may have killed Jesus, but his death and resurrection were God's plan to redeem them from sin and bless them.

Can you see the difference between before Pentecost and after? If we remember nothing else in this whole series, we must remember this. The first and most important lesson from the early church is that our: authority, power and mission, come from Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit, we can accomplish nothing and may very well fade into oblivion. Read on in chapter four, when Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin or Jewish religious council.

The very same council that called for Jesus' death. Before the council, Peter explains himself and how the man born lame came to be healed. But the most telling verse in the chapter, for our purposes today, is verse 13 which reads, "The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see they were ordinary men who had no special training. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus."

The difference between before and after Pentecost, is stark, and it is supposed to be, that's the point. The body of Christ is no different than any other religious group, without the Holy Spirit. We are powerless to initiate change, and lead others to redemption without the Holy Spirit. We will never be bold for the Lord without the Holy Spirit.

Without the Holy Spirit active in our midst, we are irrelevant to the world and will fade off into oblivion. The church would have died in Jerusalem without the Holy Spirit. You and I would not be worshipping here today without the Holy Spirit. It is important to state, as Peter did in his sermons, that our authority to heal, preach, or do whatever we do in Christ's name, comes from the Holy Spirit.

We do not, nor have we ever had our authority: because of tradition, or our education, or because we have been around for hundreds of years. In the book of Hebrews, we are told that "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen". Our hopes and faith when strengthened and fueled by the Holy Spirit, take us to places and help us to accomplish things beyond our wildest dreams, just ask Peter and John.

God has always, it seems, worked the impossible to accomplish great blessing. Remember Abraham when in his late nineties he has a vision. Imagine him waking Sarah his wife up during the night and saying, "I've just had a vision."

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“What kind of vision?” Sarah asks. “I just had a vision of a new world! A new humanity! A new people! Sarah, you and I are going to create a whole new era of human history!” Sarah asks, “How does this new humanity start?” “Glad you asked!” smirks Abraham. Imagine the next scene: it’s a ninety-four-year-old elderly man, probably leaning on a cane, standing beside his ninety-two-year-old pregnant wife.

(If you don’t think God has a sense of humour, this should change your mind.) Later Abraham sets off for a new land people ask, “Where are you going Abe?” “I don’t know,” the old man says. “Well then, why are you leaving? They yell back. “Because God has given me a vision!” shouts Abraham. (Let Me Tell you a Story-Tony Campolo) The church is the recipient of God’s vision, the vessel of his blessing to a hurting and lost world.

But we are wasting our time and our resources, if we do not learn from our Jerusalem brothers and sisters that if we want: vitality, and relevance, and opportunity to win people to Jesus, we need the Holy Spirit and must trust the Holy Spirit. For if we do that, amazing things will happen in our midst, even a man lame for over 40 years getting up and walking.

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