

Scripture: Acts 28:16-31

Text: Acts 28:31

Message: The Ongoing Story

June 24, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

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I invite you to open your Bibles this morning for our Scripture reading and turn to Acts 29. We'll start reading at v. 1. Or you can look this up on your phone, Acts 29.

You can't find it? Maybe you have the wrong Bible or the wrong translation. Can anyone find Acts 29? Maybe I was mistaken. Well, then we'll just have to read from the end of Acts chapter 28.

Read Acts 28:17-31

And then what? What's happening here in the book of Acts? The story has been going strong. The Word of God has gone from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and to the end of the known earth. The apostle Paul has arrived in Rome. The Gospel has reached the centre of civilization in that day....

And that's it. We don't know any more of what happened. It's like the story is not finished. And that's true; it's *not* finished. The story of the book of Acts continues beyond the first century and is continued even today. God's Grand Story will continue till the time Jesus comes again.

We have been looking at God's Grand Story over the past 10 months. We began with the message of God's blessing to Abraham, as an early part of God's Grand Story to bless the world through his people. We were reminded that God sometimes works behind the scenes, as we saw in the story of Joseph. God is present even in times of pain when we cry out "how long?!" The people of Israel were gathered at Mount Sinai and identified as God's special treasure; through his people God shows his presence in the world.

Stories about kings in Israel reminded us of how God calls his people to faithfulness and obedience, to walk humbly with God, loving mercy and doing justice. God's Grand Story in Ezra and Nehemiah reminded us of how God is continually renewing and building his people, his Church.

Stories about Jesus from the gospel of Mark invited us to see the joy and power and sacrifice that is part of the life of Jesus and of the lives of those who follow Jesus. God's Grand Story points to the coming of the promised Messiah who would set people free from sin. Jesus fulfills the promises in his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

Just before he ascended to heaven, Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I

have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:16-20.)

Consider this picture of what Jesus is saying here. It's as if Jesus says, "I am going to be waiting for you at the finish line. In fact, I'm going to be running with you through the whole race. I'm also going to be your cheerleader to motivate you, to encourage you. You're going to do great and wonderful things. I'm going to give you my Spirit to empower you, to enable you to make disciples and teach and baptize."

That is the promise Jesus speaks to his disciples as recorded in the first chapter of Acts: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."(Acts 1:8)

The book of Acts is the story of the early church fulfilling this commission and command. The followers of Jesus continue to tell God's story of forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The followers of Jesus continue the work of proclaiming and establishing the kingdom rule of God for all people all over the world.

Not everyone welcomed their message and their work. They faced the opposition of the religious establishment of Judaism involving trials and even persecution. They faced ridicule and physical abuse. They faced the injustice of the Roman courts. People refused to believe in Jesus.

In their ministry of making disciples they knew full well that they were involved in a spiritual battle. They have surrendered to the Lord of the army. "Lord, this is *your* battle. Sort it all out, Lord. I am one of your servants. Here, Lord, use me. Here I am, Lord, use me to represent your love in the same way you sent someone to reach out to me. Here I am, Lord, use me to feed the hungry, those physically hungry and spiritually hungry. Here I am, Lord, use me as a vessel of your love, to be a witness to your deeds and a teacher of your words. Let me be a light in the darkness of pain and suffering and loneliness and sin."

While a large part of the book of Acts deals with the Apostle Paul and his work, this is not a book about the acts of the Apostles or of Paul. God's Grand Story is not about the individual people. It is a Story about the work of God in his relationship with his people. It is God's Story of making things right in a world that experiences the brokenness of disobedience. This one book, Acts, is a book about the acts or work of Jesus Christ through his Spirit working in his followers. Paul, as one of those followers, was faithful to his calling right to the end.

The end of the book is unique in that it is really not an end at all. We don't know what happened to Paul. There are lots of legends and theories about what happened to him. But the fate of Paul is secondary to that of the gospel.

The final picture is of Paul preaching to the Gentiles. He is sharing the same message

which he had preached throughout Acts with boldness and without hindrance. Paul was under guard, yet he had much freedom. The last word in Acts is not the Jewish leaders, not the Roman authorities. The last word is that Paul is still preaching. The last word is the Word of God being proclaimed.

That makes this a story without an ending. At least the ending cannot be written yet, because it hasn't happened. The church of Jesus Christ continues to be a witness. We continue to proclaim the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ boldly, overcoming any hindrances which may come our way.

We tell the good news that Jesus Christ is King. He is the Lord of this world who brings hope and comfort and healing to everyone. We invite people to know God as a loving and caring Father who wants us to be his children.

Every day we are called to represent God as a witness not only in what we say but also in who we are and in what we do. Every day of our lives the Spirit calls us to become more like Christ and to live the presence of Jesus into the lives of those we meet.

This is the ongoing mission of the church, including this church. Eight years ago, we completed a Community Opportunity Scan, looking at our larger neighbourhood and the place of our church in it. One of the recommendations that came out of that exercise was that we must become more deliberate in identifying the mission of our church as being outward focussed. With our beginning as an immigrant church, much emphasis over the years has been on support and fellowship with one another. While this has been valuable and necessary, it is no longer the first priority. We can name this past purpose and build on that foundation as we identify the direction/emphasis God is calling us to take, to connect with our neighbours and our community.

We are doing this. We welcome groups into our church. We volunteer and serve in various community organizations. Check out the July *Bethel News* to see pictures of blessing our community through The Big Give and through giving quilts to Ronald McDonald House in Ottawa. We bless students as we welcome the Connections program in our church. Check out their greenhouse and gardens. We know our neighbours. We build relationships for the sake of relationships (not results). Our lives testify to the hope within us. When we have the opportunity, we share the story of God's grace and love. Praise God!

This ongoing mission is not just about words. There are people who can quote scripture a whole lot better than you or I can. But everyday we must pray, "Lord, help me to apply what I do know; help me to be a doer of your word; help me to live what I believe; help me to represent you in my community."

It means seeing the needs of the poor in our community and working for justice for proper support to meet their physical needs. It means seeing the needs of the mentally

challenged, who are facing greater challenges with limited hospital services. It means welcoming the refugee and helping them to find safety in a new home.

The truth is, we cannot do everything. We listen to where God is calling us. For some of us, it is the call to provide financial support for ministries of our church locally and around the world. For others of us, it is to get involved in offering time and energy. For others, it might be both.

God's promise to each of us is: "I give you my Spirit to give you the power to be my witnesses." Every one of us has been called to be a witness. The Spirit may empower you in many different areas, but the Spirit always empowers us to be a witness, no matter where we are.

The best way to be a witness for Jesus Christ is to be convinced in your own life that Jesus is exciting enough to share with other people. It is being convinced that you love the Lord and are living for him. People don't want to hear a lecture about Jesus. They don't want to hear some facts about the doctrines of this church. They want to see and know how believing in Jesus makes a difference in your life. They want to see and hear how faith is living in you.

This is all part of God's Grand Story as it continues to be told, continues to be lived out. We are part of his Story, his work of restoring this world to what it was meant to be. We are part of his Story, bringing good news to a hurting world.

In that sense, there *is* an Acts 29. It's us. We are Acts 29. Luke doesn't finish the story because the story of the church is not yet finished. We form part of that continuing story.

Someday there will be a completed volume of God's Grand Story, telling of all that God has been doing from the beginning of time to the end, telling the story of the ascended Jesus Christ and his work in this world, through the Apostles, through you and me, by the power of his Holy Spirit. So along with the names of Abraham, Joseph, David, Hezekiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Mary, Peter, Philip, Dorcas, and Paul, we will read your own name, as we are involved in the work of God in Jesus Christ.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit God calls us to be his church, carrying out his ongoing mission, living and telling his Grand Story.

Amen.