

## **Devotion to the Primary Work of the Church-- Waiting and Praying**

**based on Acts 1:1-20, David Jake, 9/17/17**

I am starting a sermon series on the book of Acts and I want to start with a little background on the author Luke who also wrote the gospel. Some say he was a physician but that is supposition. He is, however, very much interested in history, obviously, from his writing this book about the Spirit-inspired history of the early church and he is also interested in the science of his day. He speaks in a scientific manner of the convincing proofs of Jesus' resurrection because of his many post-resurrection appearances.

So history and science matter tremendously to Luke and they should to all people of faith. God, in fact, is inspiring all historians and scientists who are seeking the truth, all of which is from and toward God. And there are plenty of historians and scientists who believe in historical validity of the resurrection in some form or another.

I mention these secular disciplines because our minds are gifts from God so we cannot shut them off as we interpret this book and scripture, in general. Doing so rejects the Holy Spirit whose creativity was alive in Luke when he wrote, just as the Spirit comes alive in us as we use reason and scholarly wisdom and imagination in our interpreting and applying the Bible to our lives.

We have a concrete example of my point from today's passage. Luke has one account of Judas' death. And there is another account in Matthew 27 which has some similarities but much variance. Instead of trying to reconcile the narratives as one perfect history, we should instead honor the Spirit of God speaking to Matthew and Luke, inspiring to shape their sources in different ways to speak to their communities with different purpose in mind, just as pastors do the same with our sources to speak to our community.

The Fathers of the early church understood that the Spirit was inspiring both accounts and honored both, instead of making them one clean story which they could have done. They could have done the same with the four gospels but they did not.

Luke and the other authors were interested in much more than just recording historical events. They interpret history theologically, knowing that God is the primary agent in history. They discerned God's presence in history and testified to it.

We are called to the same. And that means having eyes that see and ears that hear more than just the visible, audible world around us. It means seeing an invisible God and hearing his inaudible Word.

And we see and hear God by first 1. believing in His active presence calling people to where He is-- to love, justice, truth, beauty and peace; and 2. then opening up our hearts to feel them and 3. opening up our minds to consider and give thanks for them 4. opening up our wills to do and further these things.

In other words we do what the early church devoted themselves to-- pray. I love that the first thing Christ Jesus called the church to do-- the very first thing was to wait...to wait and pray. We are so idolatrous to think that everything is up to us. If we did more waiting, praying, trusting and listening, we would have so much more peace in ourselves, homes and world. Amen? We would do so much less harm to others if we could learn to wait and pray before responding in anger. Amen?

I read an example of what the early church's devotion to prayer probably looked like. Our elder stateswoman Louise Meyler gave me a book about Bishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama getting together for a week and having a conversation about how they have become joyful. They started where it all starts-- with prayer. The interviewer mentioned the Dalai Lama's practice of meditating five hours a day, beginning as soon as he wakes up at 3 a.m. Bishop Tutu laughed and said, "Five hours! That is just too much! I don't know how you do it." And then the interviewer pointed out that Tutu himself prays for four hours a day, starting at 4 in the morning! [from The Book of Joy, Douglas Abrams]

Now we are not Bishop Tutu or the Dalai Lama but we want their joy and peace. So we should start to follow their example and that of our Korean Christian brothers and sisters who wake up at 5 a.m. to go to a dawn prayer service. But I will not be starting one. Sorry if you are disappointed. But we can stop rolling out of bed with a frown and frumpiness. Let's sit up tall and strong and stretch out and give thanks to God for rest and the promise of a good day before us.

And if you wake up too early, begin your prayers while lying down and trying to back to sleep like I do. Continue your prayers from the previous night in which you gave thanks for the good things in your day and entrusted the challenging things to the Lord. In all these ways, the joy of a relationship with God seeps into our being.

Now if prayer is the primary work of the church and increased joy is the result of prayer, we can work backwards and understand that all of the things that bring joy and peace and fulfillment-- that they are a kind of prayer. They are a communion with God and the joy and peace of His Kingdom. So give yourself plenty of time for these things and do not get overly bogged down by work.

But it's not just about doing things we like. We also have to cultivate attention to God. We have to get quiet in order to hear...and enter the darkness of closed eyes in order to see; we have to get still in order to be moved by the Spirit.

I remembered a conversation with my Christian Church History professor from seminary. I was talking to her about the joy of prayer and the religious experience I had had through prayer. And she confessed that she was so busy that she had to think of her regular daily life as a kind of prayer. I think she cited Paul who talked about praying ceaselessly. So our good work is prayer when done with the right state of mind.

But I told her that it was hugely important for my own well-being-- actually my own lack of irritability to actually take time each day to close my eyes, get quiet and just listen and lift my joys and concerns to God.

You see...God and the things of His Kingdom are invisible. You cannot see or touch joy or love or peace. You can see and touch the things they are in but not the things themselves, amen? So closing our physical eyes while remembering that love and peace pervade everything; this brings those Kingdom things into our consciousness. The more we close our eyes in prayer, the more we will see God in the world. The more we quiet ourselves and close our ears off from noise, the more we will hear God in the world.

This is what we see in the early church. Luke and all of the early apostles-- just like the prophets before them-- looked at their experience, past and present, and they saw and heard God therein and they spoke about Him. For them God was ever-present and ever-powerful. We see this in the manner in which they chose the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle after Judas' death. They had such trust in God's sovereignty that they could cast lots --which is like throwing dice-- to choose their next leader.

Friends, we are now in that upper room. We have lifted up some prayers. So many other apostles have come before us, filling these halls and now they have passed away. Who will God call to fill their shoes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Who will pray? Who will serve the hungry? Who will govern? Who will speak? Who will teach? Who will visit the elderly?

What a blessing it is to carry on the same mission of the early church-- what power and purpose and joy there is in embodying and making known God's love and mercy and the gift of eternal life. Thank you for your consideration and service; all through the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine. To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forevermore. And God's people say...

