

Acts 1:1-8

The Story of God The Church

Introduction: If this is your first time at Refuge Christian Fellowship, Welcome. As a part of our year of Biblical literacy we are doing a series of miniseries on different themes in and from the Bible. We spent all last month looking at the Bible specifically - what it is, what it claims about itself - its authority, its accuracy, its purpose. In our teaching about, What the Bible is - we talked about how it is first of all a story (Not a fairy tale), but a congruent true story that gives meaning and shape to our lives. Everyone has grand narrative that they are living by, a story that they tell themselves about why we are here, how we got here and where this life is going. We call these world views or meta-narratives - A real (Grand) story, that provides a framework of meaning for all people in all times and places, and therefore our own life in the world.

So when we call the Bible a story, we mean the true story of God, his creation of the world, its fall into sin, evil and death, and ultimately God's redemption of the world. Christians believe that this is the true story - that provides us with an understanding of the whole world and our own place in it.

We've been following this story looking at it in different Acts: Act 1 - Creation; Act 2 - The Fall; Act 3 - Redemption starting with Israel; Act 4 - Redemption accomplished through Jesus; Now we've come to Act 5 - The Church

This is the part of the story that we are invited into - as the church to take up God's mission to the world.

"When we read scripture as Christians, we read it precisely as people of the new covenant and the new creation. We do not read it, in other words, as a flat, uniform list of regulations or doctrines. We read it is as the narrative in which we ourselves are now called to take part. We read it to discover "the story so far" and also "how it's supposed to end." To put it another way, we live somewhere between the end of Acts and the closing scene of revelation. If we want to understand scripture and to find it doing

its proper work in and through us, we must learn to read and understand it in light of that overall story.....The Bible as a whole thus does what it does best when we read from the perspective of new creation. And it is designed not only to tell us about that work of new creation, as though from a detached perspective, not only to provide us with true information about God's fresh, resurrection life, but also to foster that work of new creation in the churches, groups, and individuals who read it, who define themselves in terms of the Jesus they meet in it, who allow it to shape their lives. The Bible is thus the story of creation and new creation, and it is itself, through the continuing work of the Spirit who inspired it, and instrument of new creation in human lives and communities." - N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope

As Christians we read, study and discuss the story of God, in order to take it up, or in order to be taken up by it - That our individual stories would find their meaning and purpose, and resolution in the story of God and his mission to the world. - That is in short what it means to be the church, and what it means to be a Christian..

- 1. Jesus Commissions his people - the Church spreads the good news of the rule of Jesus**
 - 1. After his suffering, (Jesus) presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But 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 1:3-8
 1. Not many days after this - the Holy Spirit - the same Holy Spirit who anointed Jesus for the work of redemption he accomplished - came upon all those who believed and trusted in Jesus as

Messiah and that day the New People of God - the church was born.

2. Now I think many of us have different opinions on what the church is and what it is supposed to do - Sometimes more practically - we think a good facility, great encouraging services , passionate worship music, great Sunday school and activities for my family, a wholesome environment to bring up my kids in, or we might think a little more Biblically along the lines of a community of people following Jesus and the teaching of the Bible, but when Jesus taught his people (The Church) about the implications of his work he focused on two things - the Kingdom and the Spirit.
 1. John Stott writes in his commentary on Acts - *"It appears that Jesus' two main topics between his resurrection and his ascension were the kingdom of God and the Spirit of God. It seems probable that he related them to one another - Just as the prophets do. When God establishes the kingdom of the Messiah, they said, he will pour out his Spirit; this generous effusion and universal enjoyment of the Spirit will be one of the major signs and blessings of his rule; and indeed the Spirit of God will make the rule of God a living and present reality to his people."*
 3. As Jesus is continually talking about these two things the disciples ask - "does that mean that you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" The disciples are still thinking nationally. They are thinking politically in terms of overthrowing Rome and a restored kingdom of David.... Jesus doesn't deny that that will come eventually. But he says their concern is with the Kingdom of God which concerns the whole earth and all peoples, not just Israel.
 1. What the disciples still didn't realize at the time was that their scope was too small. Jesus is not simply the king of Israel, he is the King of all and this "good news" of his cosmic reign is to be proclaimed to all, beginning in Jerusalem and spreading from there to the ends of the earth....
 4. This is where you have to step back and see the big thrust of Luke's two volumes - The message of Luke is - God being King through Jesus and that kingdom coming into conflict with the kingdoms of this world - depicted in the world power of Rome...

1. As Luke's Gospel account unfolds we see through the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the overthrowing of the powers behind the powers that rule the world and the establishing of God's kingdom. Then in Acts - we see this Kingdom being proclaimed. The continual message of the early church as seen through Acts is that Jesus is Lord as opposed to Caesar (More than forgiveness of sin and going to heaven - the good news was God's reign and restoration through the work of Jesus Christ death and resurrection.) Whether it is Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost, Paul speaking to philosophers on Mars Hill, or everyday Christians literally "gossiping" in the marketplace, this is their message Jesus is the true ruler of the world.
 1. One of the great things about Acts is that everyone who is a Christian spreads this message.. it doesn't matter who they are or what their credentials might be, A table servant (a waiter), like Stephen or Philip, Priscilla a tent merchant or an Apostle like Peter and Paul.
 2. The book of Acts chronicles how this proclamation of God's rule (The Good news) goes to the ends of the earth and at the end of Acts it is being proclaimed under the nose of the Emperor in Rome, the seat of the Empire - the epicenter of the world and culture at the time. Listen to the closing words of Acts... "**He (Paul) lived there (in Rome) two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance....** The word of the Gospel (God is King, Jesus is Lord) is going forward and it is unhindered.... Nothing can stop the advancement of the Kingdom of God!!
5. The Co-Mission of Jesus - to his people was to take the message of Jesus' Lordship to the ends of the earth until he returns. - "**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**"
 1. Leslie Newbigin says - "*The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move - hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all people to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one...It cannot be understood rightly except in perspective which is at*

once missionary and eschatological.” - Leslie Newbigin, The Household of God

2. The Implication is - we have got to get this message out to people near and far..The closing chapter of Acts is open ended on purpose..implying that it is now our turn (The present Church) to take up this co-mission and get this message out to all people - from our neighbors to the ends of the earth...This wasn't just the call of the early church but the church in every age to spread the Good news of God's kingdom reign - to tell all that God is king again through Jesus.
 3. In Acts the focus of the church - is spreading the Good News of the rule of Jesus
- 2. Jesus Commissions his Church to Disciple - The Church is God's main means of spreading his kingdom rule throughout the world.**
1. If Acts focuses on the spreading of the message of Jesus as Lord and King; Matthew 28:18-20 focuses on bringing people under the reign of Jesus. - **“Then Jesus came to them and 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” - Matthew 28:18-20**
 1. **Between Acts commission and Matthew's** Great commission we have a re-commissioning or renewal of Genesis/creation mandate - to be fruitful and multiply, subdue and fill the earth with just and righteous covenant partner image bearers - Jesus redefines this mission - go into all the world - all nations and proclaim the Authority of Jesus and disciple people in his image - disciple covenant partners who will do righteousness, justice, and bring God's kingdom peace on earth.
 2. In our teaching on Creation I likened the garden of Eden to Normandy in WW2 - Eden was God's plot of land that he claimed for himself and from there, by co-laboring with humanity, his kingdom was to spread to the ends of the earth.. This is of course what God does again with Abraham and Israel. Well here in the book of Acts we see that same idea is here only this time it starts in Jerusalem and spreads from there to the ends of the

earth - God is commissioning his redeemed people to co-labor with him in making the whole world his kingdom, by proclaiming that the true king has come and then by living out that Kingdom on earth, in our cities, in our neighborhoods, in our relationships, the work we do, what we value..etc

1. I love the way Eugene Peterson defines the church. He says, "the Holy Spirit formed it to be a colony of heaven in the country of death. ... Church is the core element in the strategy of the Holy Spirit for providing human witness and physical presence to the Jesus-inaugurated kingdom of God in this world. It is not that kingdom complete, but it is a witness to that kingdom....Church is an appointed gathering of named people in particular places who practice a life of resurrection in a world in which death gets the biggest headlines. ... The practice of resurrection is an intentional, deliberate decision to believe and participate in resurrection life, life out of death, life that trumps death, life that is the last word, Jesus life." - Eugene Peterson, Practice Resurrection

3. Our Mission

1. Of course there are many more things we can say about the Church, important things that the Bible teaches about the church being the body of Jesus Christ, filled with his Holy Spirit, we could talk about the church being a family - the new family of God, we could talk about the church being the temple of the living God.. but it seems to me our fundamental identity is to carry on the mission of Jesus to proclaim the Kingdom of God, and then to live out those kingdom principles and characteristics in every area of daily existence..
2. The Problem is: Many who call themselves Christians and are committed to a local church are simply not engaged with the kingdom mission of Jesus at all - but we are really living for ourselves.
 1. We crave and seek comfort, affirmation - we are simply living our lives in a seemingly moral way - just trying to make our way in this world..we want our sins forgiven and to go to heaven when we die.. but anything more is a bit much..too much responsibility or strain on our lifestyle and goals.. We are not looking at the world the way that Jesus and the early church saw it. Are we forgetting the the world is under the curse of sin? Remember our narrative that we have been following - Humans were created by God for fellowship with him - we were made for him, for his

presence, for his love and life and meaning are only ultimately found in God. We were created to live under his rule and reign, and to co-labor with him to build his kingdom on earth - in this state the world was good, and humanity lived naked and unashamed - this is true flourishing and how life works best. But because of sin - we are separated from God - humans lives are in disarray, the world is a chaotic and dark place filled with so much evil, so much confusion and meaninglessness.

1. *"Because humans are spiritually homeless, We dream of holy spaces, utopias, motherlands, golden ages, and soul mates. We yearn for reconnection to the divine, re-admittance to the sacred and pure space....This wandering, this lostness, is the essence of humanity's essential weakness: detachment from their true home in God, and with that, the curse of mortality." - Mark Sayers, Strange Days*
2. **This is the state of the world we live in - Lost, hopeless, meaningless, darkness**
2. And we have the incredible privilege to proclaim in word and in deed the message of God's rescue to those who are lost, his light to those who sit in darkness, and infinite meaning and purpose to those under the weight of our culture's meaningless and hopeless secular narrative.
 1. **"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." - 2 Corinthians 5:14-15**
 1. See Jesus gave his life blood for us so that our lives would be brought into his kingdom, that they would be lived for him, in his identity, under his mission - He calls us to seek first the kingdom, he calls us to be salt and light to the world..
 2. When I say advancing the Kingdom or taking up the mission of Jesus I know that some of us just automatically go to "spiritual things" - like praying more, reading more, doing more street evangelism or volunteering more at church... that may be true - these are and can be helpful tools in training us to desire and seek the kingdom, and to be more like Jesus in very practical ways - but the Kingdom of Heaven is a healed material universe

therefore doing kingdom work is as vast as the world is wide... But can I just summarize what I think this looks like?

3. You know that line from Joy to the world... No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground... He comes to make his blessings flow - far as the curse is found... Church - Wherever we see the effects of the curse of sin - brokenness, abuse, family breakdown, divorce, loneliness, poor, injustice, meaninglessness and the list goes on.. it is into the lives of these people and these situations that we bring the light and truth, in word and deed, of the glorious good news of the kingdom of God.
 1. Doing righteousness, making peace, bringing joy and hope upon those who are under the weight of depression and meaninglessness, doing justice - sacrificing my time money and resources for the betterment of others..... bringing healing and hope where it is not found... bringing kindness to bear upon others, being human with other humans..
 2. *"Seeking the Kingdom or "Witness will mean embodying God's renewing power in politics and citizenship, economics, and business, education and scholarship, family and neighborhood, media and art, leisure and play. It is not just that we carry out evangelism in these areas of life. This is important but not enough. It means that the way we live as citizens, consumers, students, husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends witnesses to the restoring power of God."* - Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*
3. As followers of Jesus we cannot live lives of insulation and comfort - We cannot live for ourselves - shut off from the suffering and pain of the world. This is in direct opposition and denial of our savior and his sacrificial death. Jesus always moved towards suffering not away from it. He didn't ignore it though he could have - especially he, who of all people has the right to justly overlook the sin and suffering of others -It's God. As we discussed a few weeks - Humans brought sin into the world, we ruined God's creation, we hurt and exploit others... God had every right to ignore our suffering, to let our suffering eat us, destroy us, but he doesn't. Because of his great love for

us, he moved toward us, embraced our self inflicted suffering, and bore our sin and suffering at the cross.

4. Everywhere Jesus went he relieved the suffering of those around him...and when he did he would say things like - the kingdom of God has been brought near you... Jesus' Kingdom people don't avoid suffering and sin - they move toward it - where we see signs of the curse and destruction of sin we bring the signs of the kingdom to bear upon the world.
 1. Example: The early church's love for sufferers during the plague that hit the Roman empire... why did they do it?? This was the way of Jesus. The Jesus story had so shaped their life and purpose
 2. When we realize that Jesus is going to someday destroy hunger, disease, poverty, injustice, and death itself, it makes Christianity what C. S. Lewis called a "fighting religion" whether we are confronted with a city slum or a cancer ward. The things that are now wrong with the material world he wants put right.

4. **Closing:**

1. The Church is to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God. The church is where Jesus Christ is currently reigning on earth, where his people live in subjection and awe of him and live in harmony with one-another. The Church is not the Kingdom of God, but is pictured as an embassy of God's kingdom. It is where God's kingship and reign is realized. Where God's laws and principles are upheld and praised. It is where God's kingdom citizens receive their instruction and from where they are sent out into the world as ambassadors and witnesses of God's kingdom.
2. The Church are Jesus' people who through word and deed testify to the Jesus-story and Kingdom of God, until he comes to reign in a new heaven and a new earth world without end..
 1. If you've lost sight of that, Today the Holy Spirit is inviting you to take up once again the kingdom mission - to center your life on the king and the kingdom of God