

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC
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THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
FOUNDING FATHERS: 1. "ROOTS AND WINGS"
Acts 1:1-14; Exodus 20:1-18; 24:3-4

As I was preparing this sermon, I was reminded that it was ten years and one week ago that I took the oath of allegiance and became a United States' citizen. And that's really what the people of Israel were doing as the Ten Commandments were given (as we read in our first reading). The Commandments formed the initial constitution of the people of God, and having received them, they took an oath of allegiance to be God's People, God's Nation, through that constitution. In our second reading, we're going back to the early days -- not this time to the early days of the people of ancient Israel -- but to the early days of the Christian church, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles the first fourteen verses of the first chapter. The Acts of the Apostles is the sequel to the gospel according to St. Luke which speaks of the life of Jesus--his life, his death and his resurrection and the book of Acts tells us what happens next . . .

This morning, we begin a new series of sermons, taking us through the Fall, in which we're going to be looking together at the first half of a book in the Bible that we've just read from: The Acts of the Apostles. We'll be following that story week by week through Christmas time at least. This is the story of the founding of the church, the story of our founding fathers and mothers. It's the story of what happens next, after Jesus life, after his death, and after his resurrection. And it's a story which should have a place within our hearts and within our lives as Christians which is just as deep if not deeper that the story of the founding of our nation. It's a story which is just as unlikely. It's a story which is just as exciting. And it's a story which is just as significant. Let me draw out the parallel and significance by thinking for just for a moment about the significance of the story of the founding of our nation for our lives together as a nation.

Who would have thought, for example, looking back in history a few hundred years now, who would have thought that a group of colonists from all kinds of different backgrounds could have been brought together to fight a successful war against the most powerful nation in the world at the time, *and win*? And not only that, but having won, who would have thought that they could have developed a constitution, a foundation for living together, that would be strong enough for over two hundred years to bring together immigrants from diverse places, radically different from one another, as year gave way to year, bringing them together and shaping them into the most powerful and influential nation on earth? How unlikely a story is that? And who can doubt that that will continue to be the case unless, of course, our history becomes forgotten, our story becomes twisted, and our Constitution becomes pushed to the side? And this, I think, as we're all well aware, is a real danger, a real possibility, about which we need to be on guard at every moment of our lives. Think, for example, just of one example of how things get twisted with regard to Christian faith, *in both directions, liberal and conservative*, not just one but in both directions.

- Go back twenty or thirty years ago (and this may still be the case now but I remember it coming up about that period of time ago) looking at history textbooks that our children were given, looking at the descriptions of the pilgrim fathers -- which apparently made no reference at all to their Christian background. Seeking political freedom? Yes! But the driving force in their life, their Christian faith, was completely forgotten or ignored. This is

the twisting of history.

- Or on the other hand, think of the commonly heard claim that those involved in the writing of our Constitution, those who were there in the 1700's, were all devout evangelical orthodox Christians. Some of them no doubt were, but not all of them by any stretch of the imagination. They were influenced by all kinds of philosophies at the time, and Christianity was one of them, but not the only one! You only need to think of Adams or Jefferson to make the point. I don't know how many of you have seen what's called The Jefferson Bible. I have it right here (and you can get this at any bookstore). Now Jefferson happens to be one of my heroes, but Jefferson took the Bible, cut out all the miracles of Jesus that were in it, pasted it together and made it into what he wanted it to be. All of the divine or miraculous parts were taken out. This was the basis of his faith: the moral teaching of Jesus was remarkably important . . . but the supernatural part? No time for that at all!

Matters like these get twisted, Lost in the shuffle. They get mixed up so that we either ignore or overemphasize the Christian background of our nation!

And this is true at every kind of level and it's dangerous when we do that. When we forget or twist the stories that lay at the foundation of our nation, we tend also to forget or twist the essential principles, that guide us -- the very Constitution, that has kept us together to this very day. Now, of course, it may be true that no Constitution or history can absolutely guarantee that a nation will stay together forever, or that we'll all think alike on everything (and even if it did, wouldn't life be rather boring?). But, on the other hand, what is absolutely true is this: that if you forget the Constitution, if you forget the history, or if you twist it, if it goes from our hearts and minds, then we will certainly lose the common base on which to hold civil discussion. We will find that we cannot speak with one another. In a sense, we will be find different groups speaking different languages, passing one another in their conversations like ships in the night. With a constitution, you can agree and you can also disagree; but when you disagree, you will do it with civility, you will do it with respect, and you will do it without fear of intimidation – all of which are essential to our common life together as a civilized people. Nothing but remembering the foundation will enable us to be the best nation that we can be, working together

“so that justice is established, that domestic tranquility is ensured, that the common defense is provided, that the general welfare is promoted and that the blessings of liberty are secured not only for ourselves but for our prosperity.”

We know this to be true in our nation! *And what is true of our nation is surely just as true of the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ.*

You or I may have plenty of ideas based on our experiences about “what the church ought to be,” what it should be, what it should be doing; but unless we know what our church's constitution is (and I'm not talking here about First Presbyterian Church or the Presbyterian Church. I'm talking about the church of Jesus Christ in general as a whole), unless we know what our church's constitution is, unless we know what our history is, then our opinions will sail passed each other like ships in the night. We may become a religious organization. We may be *the best* religious organization that there, is but we may end up not being the church that Jesus came to establish.

One of the pieces of marvelous good news is that we as Christians do have a constitution, and we do have a history – and we find these in the pages of the Book, in the Bible; and though there are laws in the Bible (and we have read some of those laws, the Ten Commandments, today), the vast majority of the Bible is far more history and constitution, stories that bind us together, just as stories and principles bind us together as a nation (and, indeed, as families). It's the common stories that we share and we tell to one another which makes us into a people; into the people

whom God has blessed.

We have these stories and we have these principles here before us *and this is the good news*. *The bad news*, however, is this: ***that all the evidence indicates that the story of Jesus, of God's work in Israel and the founding of the church, is the greatest story ever told that has not been, or is not being read . . . at least in recent years.***

About ten years ago, a whole slew of reports came out about biblical illiteracy, not just in our nation as a whole but among 'believers' in the church in particular. One of the most prolific researchers of the church in the last twenty-five years has been a man called George Barna.

George Barna wrote this. He said:

The Christian body in America is immersed in a crisis of biblical illiteracy. The most widely-known Bible verse among adult and teen believers is?? . . . (Do you know what it is? I would guess John 3:16. "For God so loved the world . . .") Well apparently this survey discovered that it was this verse: "God helps those who help themselves."

Do you know where that is in the Bible? Well, it's not there. But the vast majority of people think that it is biblical and that it *is* there, and that it is the most important biblical principle of all! It's not in the Book and this is from folks within the church.

When given thirteen basic teachings from the Bible, only one percent of adult believers firmly embraced all thirteen as being biblical perspectives.

It wasn't a question of 'do you believe it or not' but 'is this what the Bible teaches?' Only one percent of adult believers could get that list right.

Professor Gary Burge at about the same time echoed this in an article which is called The Greatest Story Never Read (hence my phrase above!) which focused on research that he conducted at Wheaton College in Illinois. Now Wheaton College is the flagship evangelical Christian college in the nation; the flagship Bible-believing Christian college in the nation. He studied the students who came as freshman, almost all of whom grew up in churches which would claim to hold the Bible as their absolute authority. He said:

- One third of them could not put the following in order: Abraham, the Old Testament prophets, the death of Christ and Pentecost.
- One third could not identify Matthew as an apostle from a list of New Testament names.
- When asked to locate biblical books supplying a given story, one third could not find Paul's travels in Acts.
- Half did not know that the Christmas story was in Matthew.
- Half did not know that the Passover story was in Exodus.

And then perhaps most damning of all, retired Yale professor and theologian, George Lindbeck, wrote this comment in 1989. He said,

"When I first arrived at Yale even those who came from nonreligious backgrounds knew the Bible better than most of those who now come from churchgoing backgrounds."

Did you hear that? Even those who came from nonreligious backgrounds knew the Bible better than most of those who now come from churchgoing families! Week after week in church? Learning what? Way less than those who never use to go to church thirty, forty years ago.

My friends, this is a very serious situation in which we find ourselves. Indeed, it spells the doom for the positive impact of Christian faith on our lives and on our children's lives, and on our world and on our nation. Now, let's be clear, this situation has nothing to do with what other people outside the faith might do to destroy Christian faith; for example, secularists attacking us, or people of other faith attacking us. This speaks of corruption from within -- and this is our

business, and our fault, and it is up to us and nobody else, to reverse this trend.

And the way to reverse it is really very simple.

It's a four-letter word: R-E-A-D! Read! It's as simple as that: read!

This is why Scotland in the 1600's became one of the most literate nations on earth, as poor as it was: because people were taught to read in order to read the Bible. It was one of the great benefits of the Reformation of that time, the democratic notion that everyone was capable of drawing close to God through reading God's book. And the only way that this 'bad news' can be reversed is to commit ourselves to read . . . bit by bit, day by day, alone or with others.

I learned the Bible not by going to seminary. That's a copout. I learned the Book by being challenged to read it, and then making a commitment to do so, saying, "Yes" to reading the Bible every day: from the age of thirteen. And this I did. A tiny chunk, day by day, bit by bit, year by year, and before I got to seminary, I knew the Book as a living document, God's Word to me. And this remains true to this very day.

It must be constantly in our hearts and our minds until the stories become as familiar to us as the stories of the founding of our nation, and as important to us as those stories, as well.

And if that's too hard, I simply suggest (and I know that in a sense this is preaching to the choir because you are here . . . but you can challenge your friends who are not here!!) that if you don't want to read, then at least, make a commitment to *simply come and listen Sunday by Sunday* as the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, and as we pray together. Once or twice a month (and the evidence from our attendance is that there are many folks in our church who are only here once or twice a month if that) *once or twice a month won't do it!*

The forces around about us spreading their messages are constant but once or twice a month won't do it. Only a regular diet, as the Ten Commandments say "Sabbath by Sabbath," will feed us with the principles of God, the constitution, the history, the stories that we need in order to stay focused on what God has called us to do and be within the life of the church of Jesus Christ. Staying rooted on the foundation, on the basic principles that God has given to us in order to be the people of God.

This is part of our calling and this is what I want us to pursue in the next weeks together: to think again about that foundation – the foundation, at least of the early church, that we find in the Acts of the Apostles. It's one of the easiest books in the Bible to read. I challenge you to read it, whether it's here or at home, and to think through those stories together and how they apply to our life. This is what we'll be doing Sunday by Sunday, and though our time is short this morning, I want to conclude by taking us back to the very beginning; to the beginning of the beginning – to those opening verses of chapter one that we read earlier. And let me share with you what I would count to be three basic principles established right from the get-go, at the very beginning of the story; principles which lie at the heart of our lives and our understanding of Christian faith and of the church if. Principles we need to share in common if we are to be the people of God.

The three basic principles (and I will not expand on them this morning: we've got plenty of time to do that in the weeks that lie ahead) are these. One word for each of them.

- The first is resurrection.
- The second is mission.
- And the third is powerlessness.

Resurrection, mission and powerlessness.

1. Resurrection. What is very clear from the story of the original disciples, Jesus' closest

followers, is that without the resurrection, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, they would never have regrouped after his crucifixion. They fled when he was arrested and crucified, and they would have stayed far away unless something concrete had occurred in their lives to change them. These were hardened blue collar guys; they were down to earth Hebrew believers, not Greek sophisticates, and it had to be something concrete to change them and bring them back together. There were plenty of failed messianic movements in ancient Judaism at that time, and this one was different, surprisingly different, because the Messiah claimant had been crucified, punished, tortured and died, but then, as Acts says to us (1:3), this messianic figure Jesus “presented himself, to the disciples alive with many proofs” and it is the theme of the resurrection which carries its way through the opening chapters of this story. Jesus, alive not dead. Jesus, not just an ancient teacher (as Jefferson would have it in his Bible) – that at least, but far more. Jesus, alive. Resurrection. And then mission.

2. Mission. This Jesus, alive, still speaks to us telling us what to do, as he did to his early disciples and he says to us as to them: “You have a job to do! You are to be my witnesses to the whole wide world. I’m counting on you, on each of you, on all of you together. You are my team. I’m depending on you.” This is stunning. Like the origin of our nation: how unlikely that anything should continue to happen, and yet it did because they trusted in this Risen One, that he had given them a mission that they were committed to fulfill, even with their imperfect lives: to be his witnesses everywhere. They were not just to play church in Jerusalem, but in Judea, Samaria, the and the ends of the earth.

That is, in every realm of life we are to be witnesses: in my place of work, in my family, when I’m at play to be a witness of Jesus Christ in some way or another by what I do, by what I say, by how I live. What a powerful calling to every single one of us.

Resurrection. Mission. Ah, and then powerlessness—the common belief that there is no possible way that we can fulfill this mission in our own strength.

3. Powerlessness. We simply can’t do it. We’re by nature hypocrites. We’re by nature weak. We cannot be the bearers of Jesus’ life and message unless God empowers us. And it is this sense of weakness and utter dependence which must lie at the foundation of the church: not strength, not the claim that we have it all together, but that we *do not* have it together . . . only God does! And the good news is that God longs to pour his power on us, more than we could imagine, to accomplish whatever he commands us to do. So God’s messenger says:

“Wait. Don’t do a stitch. Stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes and then open your hearts and your lives for the Holy Spirit to enter with God’s presence with you intimately day by day and in the community and then you will be my witnesses where you live in Jerusalem, close by Judea, a little bit further away Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

What a powerful, powerful witness. Even if Acts was written toward the end of the first century which most liberal scholars would say is the latest date, this is still the most remarkable, unforeseeable claim: that this message would go to the ends of the earth. By that time, there were a smattering of Christians as far as Rome, and perhaps a few in Spain, but that it should have the impact that Luke indicates? Inconceivable! And yet that was the mission and that was the promise empowered by God which came in time to be fulfilled.

Resurrection. Mission. Powerlessness. And I suppose I should add ‘*The Power of God.*’ These things lie at the foundation at the beginning of the story of our founding fathers and mothers and they need to remain at the foundation of our story. These are the roots of who we are, and if these are and remain our roots, then surely God will ensure that we are given whatever gifts we need, whatever wings we need, in order to fly as his people: and not merely to fly but,

remarkably, to soar.