**Confirmation at Zion Lutheran Church**

**Acts**

**Background Information**

The book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, both books being written by the same author, Luke. Once again, the book is addressed to Theophilus-a name which means *lover of God*-and the two books are further linked by similar stories. Where Luke’s Gospel opens with the witness of the shepherds who meet the infant Savior and closes with the witness of the two disciples who meet the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, the book of Acts opens with the disciples witnessing Jesus’ Ascension. However, here the witnessing theme also ascends to a new dimension. The disciples are compelled by the Holy Spirit not to just witness to one another, but to spread their testimony to the ends of the earth. Jesus sends his disciples out into the world, often despite their own “wisdom,” religious views, and narrow understandings of God’s work.

This is the story of the beginning of the church. It is also the story of the roots of the church today. While there are some idealized versions of the church in Acts, mainly we see that the spread of the Gospel was a hard and tumultuous process. One of the hardest things, it seems, was for these early believers to let go of their assumptions about what it means to follow Jesus, what God was up to in the world, and who was welcome in the church.

In Acts, we are introduced to Paul, whose story of a dramatic change in belief becomes a symbol for the early church, just as it can be a symbol for the church today. Paul’s story and the book of Acts are about upending assumptions about God’s work in the world established by Judaism and realizing that God’s story is far bigger and more inclusive than we think.

So while it’s tempting to feel disillusioned with the church today as compared to the early church, we will see that even the early church had diverse manifestations and expressions. Even the early church had its share of hypocrisy, controversy, and divisions. However, for the early church, as for today, God’s gift of the Holy Spirit is a consistent unifying companion, ensuring Christ’s presence with us despite our failings.

**What you need to know**

Acts is a continuation of Luke’s Gospel; the same author wrote them both. Acts is unique in that it is the only book that tells the story of the small band of trembling and bumbling disciples emboldened by the Holy Spirit after Jesus’ Ascension to spread his good news to the ends of the earth.

Acts also tells the story of the beginning of the church, including its successes (mass conversions, communities of equality, and shared possessions) and its struggles (controversy, disagreement, and divisions).

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he promised his disciples that he will send the Holy Spirit. Throughout Acts, the Holy Spirit guides and empowers followers of the risen Christ as they share the good news, struggle to live in community as the church, and face persecution.

Peter and Paul became the main characters of this book, and their stories-from Paul's conversion to faith in Christ, to Peter’s conversion to God’s surprising and inclusive embrace-highlight the controversies and transformation of the early church.

From Acts, we learn that being the church means expanding our sense of who belongs and continually being surprised by the Holy Spirit in unexpected places. We also see that the early church didn’t look just one way-it took a variety of forms and expressions. Amid diversity, the Holy Spirit is a consistent and unifying presence.

**About the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)**

The introduction to Acts begins on page 1794.

Please read the articles entitled “Background File,” “What’s the Story?” and “What’s the Message.” These articles can be found at the beginning of every book of the Bible and are very helpful in getting a basic understanding of each book’s content.

**Into the Story**

Luke set out to provide an “orderly account” of the story of Jesus Christ. But we would be mistaken if we thought his story ended with his Ascension. Jesus’ primary mission was to save his heavenly Father’s creation from its sin, and he accomplished that on the cross and through the grave. But having accomplished that, he wanted his hand-selected disciples, now apostles, to continue his ministry of telling the Good News to all the world. To do that, he gave them his Holy Spirit that inspired them to continue and gave them many powers that Jesus himself had-this is the Pentecost story. After Pentecost, the apostles began their separate ministries going and telling others about their Lord Jesus. Some of them like Peter, James, and John left letters that tell us what they did and where they went after Jesus’ Ascension. Sadly, several of the other, lesser-known, and apostles are only remembered through the oral history and traditions of the church.

Luke also tells the story of the overly zealous Christian-persecuting Jew by the name of Saul. Saul was admittedly zealous for the Law and the Jewish way and saw Christians as a threat to Judaism. He sought and received permission to round up Christians and bring them up on trial. If a few of them got stoned to death along the way, no big loss.

Stephen was the first martyr of the new Christian movement and Saul was there to oversee his death. But the resurrected Lord Jesus saw a use for the energy and intensity of a man like Saul and planned for his conversion. His story is fun to read. Essentially, he was struck by lightning and blinded, and rendered helpless. The resurrected Lord Jesus revealed himself in a disembodied voice and redirected Saul to a servant of the Lord, a Christian, who nursed Saul back to health and taught him the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Peter was a law-abiding Jew, and the Jews had many laws about behavior and cleanliness and purity, etc. Initially, Christianity, as the original apostles understood it, was an extension of, the fulfillment of Judaism. Therefore, one had to first convert to Judaism to become Christian. And along with one’s conversion to Judaism came all the Jewish purity laws and customs. About this time, Peter had a vision that taught him that nothing that the LORD God had created was unclean. Peter interpreted the dream to mean that the Gospel was for everyone.

Back to Saul, having been confronted about the error of his path in such a powerful way, Saul was told by the Lord to change his name to Paul. Just because Paul, formerly known as Saul the persecutor of the Jews, changed his name and claimed to be Christian didn’t mean that Christians were believers in Paul, especially the Jerusalem Council made up of some of the original apostles. Paul had to convince them of his conversion. Eventually, Paul won them over and feeling that his mission was to Gentiles, the apostles authorized his ministry. From about Chapter 13 and following, Acts is the record of Paul and his friends traveling the known world, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, including his arrest and travels to Rome to be put on trial.

**Essay Questions**

*In your own words, answer all three questions below in 100-150 words each and return them to Pastor Jesse by email at* *pastor@zionohio.org* *no later than next Sunday.*

1 Read Acts 2:1-13 and select three of the components of the story and write about what seems surprising, what seems normal, what is most unusual, and if it inspires you and why.

* The tongues of fire.
* The rush of wind through the house.
* The disciples speaking in foreign languages they did not know.
* The people hearing in their native language.
* The people who thought the speakers were drunk in the morning.

2 Before Acts, the church didn't exist. Throughout Acts, the apostles try to put it together. The church takes on different styles and shapes and has fits and starts, obedience and malfeasance. Regarding this, what are your thoughts about the church (not Zion specifically, the one holy and apostolic church) and how it has done to be the body of Christ in the world?

3 For the first 1800 years (or so) of the church's existence, it seems that women only played support roles in the church. Read the following texts and write your thoughts on the role of women in the church, then and now. Why would their involvement be radical for the people in the stories?

* Lydia – Acts 16:14-15
* Tabitha aka Dorcas – Acts 9:36-42
* Priscilla - Acts 18:1-3, 24-26