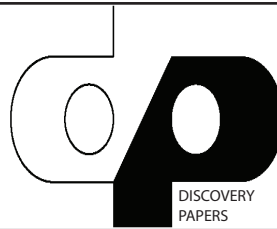


# A DAUNTING TASK

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION  
OF THE CHURCH.**



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I couldn't believe that they let us leave. In fact, they made us. They sent us away. Didn't they know that we were completely inexperienced? Couldn't they tell that we had never been in a situation like this? I felt completely ill-equipped for the task before us.

Despite all of those things, my wife and I left the comfortable confines of the hospital carrying our newborn baby. We got into our car and drove home. No doctors. No nurses. No people checking vital signs every few minutes. All of a sudden, things had gotten very real. We were parents. A new little life depended on us.

This morning we are kicking off a new preaching series at PBC. For the next nine months, we are going to work our way through the book of Acts in the New Testament. This book tells the story of the first church, just as it was starting. It was a difficult time. They faced massive cultural change, political persecution, major questions about theological doctrine, and transitions in leadership. But they didn't huddle together in a defensive posture. They didn't retreat and protect themselves.

Instead, they were sent. They were sent into their communities. They were sent to far off places where they faced dangers they never knew existed. They were sent so that the message that had transformed their lives could continue its work of transforming lives and culture all around the world.

And so this morning, we begin our series called **SENT: Living the Mission of the Church**. We face many of the same challenges as the early church. Our culture is changing at an unprecedented rate. Politics, both here and around the world, seem uncertain and divisive. Theological controversies consume our churches. Transition is everywhere around us.

Will we retreat and protect ourselves in the midst of these challenges? Or will we follow the example of the early church and recognize that we are sent into the world? And if we do, what does being sent look like? How are we sent as individuals? How are we sent as a community?

Nine months may seem like a long time, but spending 30 weeks on a book with 28 dense chapters is a fairly rapid pace. Along the way, we're going to stop at various points and dwell on some topics that are particularly relevant to us in our culture: government, race, evangelism, world religions, and finances. We also have several supplemental events planned throughout the year to help us engage with these issues.

But this morning, we kick off our series by looking at the first chapter of Acts. And as we begin this book, we're going to see a small group of people that felt what my wife and I felt when we left the hospital with our baby girl. This group of people will be given a daunting task.

This group had walked with Jesus for years. They saw some incredible events. We heard some of those stories this summer as we looked through the Gospel of Luke. Then, they saw Jesus arrested, humiliated, crucified, and buried. They must have thought it was over.

Finally, this group of people saw him rise from the dead. They were given a new source of hope that the work Jesus began would actually be accomplished. Today we'll see them surprised one more time when Jesus leaves them again. They are given the responsibility for a new life. It will be up to this group to take care of it. How will they accomplish such a task? Are they ready for it?

Their reaction to being given this task will help us. We will see what they choose to do. We will see their faith and their actions. All of this will help us as individuals, as families, as small groups, and as a church, to figure out how to do what God has called us to do.

What does it look for us to be God's kingdom at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto in the fall of 2016? What purpose does God have for us? What resources are available to us? How do we begin?

## **The Founding Story**

Most people agree that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same person. They are individual books in a two-volume set. They were meant to go together.

And so, the first few verses of the book of Acts are a summary and recap from the book of Luke. They also lead us into the major themes that Acts will unfold.

#### Acts 1:1-5:

**In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.**

**4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”**

Luke’s first book describes “all that Jesus began to do and teach.” After the resurrection, Jesus spent forty days with the disciples speaking about “the kingdom of God.” The story that Acts will tell is the story of the arrival of that kingdom of God on earth, through the church.

The book of Luke describes the proclamation of the Gospel. The book of Acts depicts the creation of a Gospel community. Luke shows Jesus progressively making his way from the outskirts of the land of Israel to the center of Jerusalem. Acts shows the Gospel beginning in Jerusalem and spreading to the ends of the earth. In Luke, Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was near. In Acts, we see the kingdom begin.

A recent article in Fortune magazine argues that the founders of startups need to be storytellers. The most compelling thing about a new startup isn’t the product that it offers: it is the story of how the founders arrived at that product.

*“The organizations who effectively tell their stories are the ones who can recruit the top talent, acquire long-term customers, and build brands that endure.”<sup>1</sup>*

A founding story is critical for companies. The same is true for the church.

The book of Acts was probably written within a few years of AD 80. That’s 45 to 50 years after the resurrection of Jesus. That means that the church had been in existence for over 40 years. An entire generation had passed.

In that time, the church had seen fantastic growth across the Roman Empire. They had also seen incredible persecution. But those times were past. It was a new season for the church. The kingdom of God wasn’t a startup anymore. This was a turning point. The church needed to figure out what its mission and life should look like as it moved into the next chapter.

In order to do that, the church needed to return to its founding story. It was critical to see how the Gospel of Jesus was proclaimed and then took root in different communities. This book—the book of Acts—was written to help the church transition into this new phase. The community, in its second generation, needed to look back to its first generation in order to proceed into the third generation.

The pastors and elders at PBC gather together every January for a one-night retreat to pray for our church and discern where God is leading us next. During our retreat several months ago, there was an overwhelming sense that we needed to study together the book of Acts this coming year. This book had surfaced a few times in the past several years, but this time it was incredibly clear that this is what God has intended for us in this season.

This direction is part of what we have seen God doing among us as a church. It began several years ago when the property next door to us was for sale. That sparked a conversation considering different options for us as a church. We briefly considered whether we should sell this property in residential Palo Alto and find a commercial property that would be much less expensive.

But that idea didn’t last long. We quickly felt united by the conviction that God had put us here on Middlefield Road in Palo Alto for a reason. It wasn’t so that we could cash out and move somewhere cheaper. It was so that we could be a blessing to this place.

That experience got us praying and asking the question of what being a blessing to Palo Alto really means. How do we make a difference in the communities where we worship, work, live, and play?

You can see those themes play out through activities such as Beautiful Day and our recovery ministry; through Harvest Fest and Summerville children’s programs; through youth pastors in Palo Alto collaborating on outreach efforts, and in many other ways. God has been doing new things here at PBC.

That's why it felt so clear to us that we ought to look to the book of Acts to guide us into this next chapter. Just as the church in AD 80 needed to look back to its founding to lead it into the next chapter, we can benefit from doing the same thing. We need to learn how the church began to understand how it must continue.

## Jesus Leaves

Jesus tells this group to wait in Jerusalem until God fulfills some kind of promise to them. But while they are waiting, something significant happens. Jesus does something that no one expects.

### Acts 1:6-11:

**So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 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." 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."**

This moment is pivotal. Everyone has come together. The disciples can tell something important is about to happen. They even have an idea of what it might be. This could be the time. The scene opens with their question, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

There are three parts to this question. They are asking about a "what" that will happen, a "when" that it will happen, and a "who" that will make it happen. The "what" is "the restoring of the kingdom to Israel." The "when" they are asking about is now: "at this time." The "who" they are asking is Jesus himself, "Lord, will you?"

The apostles were asking, "Is now when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus' answer addresses all three parts. He implicitly affirms the fact that the kingdom is going to be restored. This is what Jesus had been talking about for the past forty days. The disciples got the "what" part of the question right.

As to the "when", Jesus tells them not to worry about the timing. In Mark's Gospel, he explains that not even he knows the timing. *When* the kingdom will finally come is not their concern. There are many Christians throughout history who could have benefited from listening to this verse.

Jesus focuses on the "who" of their question. This is where he clearly corrects them. They are asking if Jesus is the "who" that will bring in the kingdom. He makes it clear that they've got the "who" wrong. It isn't Jesus who is going to restore them kingdom.

He tells them, "you will receive power" and "you will be my witnesses." Jesus isn't going to start restoring the kingdom; they are.

Imagine what the disciples must have been feeling. After hearing about the kingdom of God for forty days, they were so eager. They were excited to ask Jesus whether the time had come. He tells them not to worry about the timing. But they can't believe it when he says "it's not me who will restore it. It's you." And then, on top of that, he leaves. The disciples can't believe it. They just stand there, dumb-founded.

One scholar says that Jesus has given them "the key role of ... ushering in the slow-but-sure growth of God's kingdom on earth."<sup>2</sup> You might remember that when they found the empty tomb, the disciples were shocked. At the tomb, they met some angels who asked them in Luke 24:5, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Jesus was alive. They needed to get on with it. They needed to get going.

The same thing happens here. The disciples are standing there, incredulous, until angels appear and ask, "Why do you stand looking up into heaven?" The point is that the action of the story is continuing on earth. Yes, Jesus will return. But until then, your job is not to gaze into heaven. Your job is to get moving on God's purposes on earth. The action is down here, not up there.

Do you know that feeling? Have you been given a task that you have no idea how to accomplish? Are you facing one right now? What daunting task do you face?

I'm quite familiar with this daunting feeling. Lately, it feels like most of my tasks are daunting. For churches, the fall is a time when everything is simultaneously starting up. My wife and I have five children, four of whom are in middle school and high school this year. It's been a big transition to homework and sports schedules. Add to that other responsibilities and interests and organizations that I work with. It's easy to feel overwhelmed. So often I look at the day or the week in front of me and think, "How is this ever going to work?"

Remember that Jesus had promised that these followers would receive power. But they haven't gotten it yet. They've been given a task that's far too big for them, before they have been given the resources to accomplish it. I think that's significant.

I wish I felt completely on top of everything in my life. I wish I weren't overwhelmed. But honestly, I don't think that's what God has for me. I think part of what I give up for the sake of following Jesus is the sense that I can handle my life. I sacrifice my desire to feel competent and in control.

I'm not saying that we ought to feel constantly crushed under the burden of our responsibilities. God commands us to rest so that we can remember that he is in charge, not us. But I don't think following Jesus was ever meant to be easy or simple, and certainly not boring. I believe that part of God's strategy is to put us into situations in which we don't see how we can succeed in order to find out how he's going to provide for us.

Only when we are aware of the magnitude of the task set before us can we really understand how much we need to depend on God.

Jesus has given this group of followers the daunting task of ushering in the "slow-but-sure growth of God's kingdom on earth." They haven't yet received the power to do that. So, what do they do in the meantime?

## Depend and Prepare

Jesus told them to wait. And that's what they do. But they don't wait passively. They begin by praying.

**Acts 1:12-14:**

**Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 And when they had entered, they went up to the upper**

**room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. 14 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.**

In shock, the disciples made the return trip from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem—around two thirds of a mile. They can't believe what has happened. So, they pray. With one accord, approximately 120 people devoted themselves to prayer.

Prayer is a huge theme throughout the book of Acts. The word for prayer shows up more in this book than anywhere else in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit is referenced more in Acts than anywhere else. In situation after situation, you find these early disciples depending on God. They are aware of the magnitude of their task and they know they can't do it alone, so they constantly depend on God.

When you face a daunting task, do you depend on God? How do you need to do that now? How do you need to depend on God?

I've mentioned that as we work our way through Acts, we'll be paying attention to some serious topics: government and politics, race and disunity, evangelism, and finances. All of these topics are too big for us. We've wrestled with how to address them well.

The elders and pastors have spent a lot of time talking about how to address the first topic of faith and politics. Should we bring in a guest speaker for a theological roundtable? Should we assemble a panel of people from the body to talk about their ideas? Should one of us lead an in-depth discussion? Each of these ideas had some merit, but they all seemed to fall short.

Finally, we landed on what we probably should have started with. The best thing we can do is to come together and pray. Pray for our government. Pray for the election. Pray for our world. So just like the disciples, we're going to gather together and just pray. We'll host several times throughout the year when we can do this. Keep your eyes out for these events.

The apostles began by praying. Their first act was to depend. But out of that comes an idea—something that had been bothering them for a while. Several times toward the end of Luke, we hear about the eleven. The

eleven returned from the empty tomb to share the good news of Jesus' resurrection. The travelers on the road to Emmaus found the eleven to tell them about encountering Jesus. And here we have the list of apostles: eleven of them.

What do you feel when I play out this rhythm: bum-bum-ba-dum-bum? It's the first part of a rhythm that has to be completed. It screams out to everyone who hears it that it's missing two beats.

This is what the apostles would have felt hearing the repeated references to eleven...eleven...eleven. Eleven isn't an okay number. Eleven is incomplete. After all, Jesus had told his followers in Luke 22:30 that when he gave them the kingdom, he would assign them portions to "sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." They weren't prepared to do that.

Their lack of preparedness became clear to them as they prayed. Finally, Peter stands up to do something about it. After demonstrating that even the Old Testament suggests that Judas has to be replaced, Peter explains how they should pick the twelfth disciple who will complete their number.

#### Acts 1:21-26:

**So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” 23 And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.**

This is a fascinating process. The fellowship of the 12 apostles had become 11. That fellowship had to be repaired. The issue wasn't that they needed more help. Most of the book of Acts features people who aren't numbered among the 12. The issue wasn't that the group needed Matthias. We never hear about him again anywhere in the New Testament.

The problem was simply that they were incomplete. The group wasn't ready. They weren't ready for the Holy Spirit. They weren't even ready for God to give them power. They were 11, not 12. First, they needed to depend. But then they realized that there was some action they needed to take as well. They needed to prepare.

Is there some way that you are eleven when you need to be twelve? How do you need to prepare for God to use you? How do you need to prepare?

In our Sent mini-interview this morning, Tammy talked about being prepared to be sent. Is there some kind of preparation that you need to do? Are there issues that you need to examine? Theological issues? Personal issues? Emotional issues? Relationships that need to be repaired?

A few years after my wife and I were sent away from the hospital, we had a second little one and a third on the way. But our marriage was in terrible shape. We had built up and repeated conflict that we just didn't know how to work through. We had personal issues that were making things worse.

We spent almost two years in marriage counseling. It seemed crazy and it was expensive. We had to find childcare. I was in school full-time and working part-time. There was no time. But we realized that we needed some help in the midst of things. Sometimes you prepare as you go. We knew that any time and money we spent investing in our marriage would serve our children in the future. We needed to learn to love each other before we had any chance of loving our kids.

Is there some way that you need to be made complete in order to be sent?

There is a great biblical paradox here in the disciples' actions. They depended on God and they prepared themselves. Depend and prepare. God's work. Our effort. It all works together in some mysterious fashion that we can't quite understand. But it is the beautiful and mysterious way that God has chosen to usher in his kingdom on earth. This is what we'll see throughout this book of Acts.

## Conclusion

Leaving the hospital with that newborn baby almost fourteen years ago, I had no idea how to fulfill the responsibility I was left with. I'm still not sure a lot of the time. But I've seen God come around me through friends, mentors, support, and this community. We have not faced being a family alone.

And these disciples will discover the same thing. That's what we're looking forward to next week. Next week we'll see God surprise them with a resource more powerful than anything they ever imagined. Today we saw God give them an incredible task. Next week we'll see God give them an incredible resource.

But there's one last thing to notice. We've seen this big task. We've seen the disciples pray. We've seen them prepare. But notice what lies at the center of this task. Jesus told them they going to be witnesses of his resurrection. The one requirement to complete their number was someone who had seen Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

We'll talk about a lot of different topics in this book. But there's one big idea - one historical event - that lies at the heart of it. Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. If we are sent, then we are sent with one ultimate purpose: to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We will do this through words and deeds, sacrifices and celebrations. But all that we do comes back to Jesus. All of our dependence, all of our preparation. All of our lives point back to the Son of God, who was humiliated and executed, but who rose from the dead. At the center of the kingdom of God is resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So, my last encouragement to you is to think about that daunting task you're facing right now. Think about depending on God. Think about preparing well. And remember that ultimately, all that we do has the potential to point back to Jesus, risen from the dead. Anything worthwhile that God gives us to do, whether it's our family, our career, our hobbies, our efforts in the community—all of it eventually plays a part in proclaiming that we have witnessed Jesus rise from the dead.

We may have a daunting task, but nothing as daunting as death itself being overcome. We have witnessed the impossible. May we proclaim it to the world.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Schreiber, Elisa. "How founders can tell a great startup story" Fortune. Fortune, 9 February 2015. Web. 1 September 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Borgman, Paul. *The Way According to Luke*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2006. 254