

Preparing for God's Next Step

Pastor Casey Dwyer February 23, 2020

February 15th marked the five-year anniversary of the beheading of 20 Coptic Christian men and one Ghanan Christian. Soon after they were killed, an artist created this icon to commemorate these twenty-one men. On the shores of Libya these migrant workers were taken by ISIS and a video was recorded of their martyrdom. The video was even edited to make the Christians look small and the ISIS executioners look like giants. These men were killed simply because they were “people of the cross”; they were not missionaries or preachers, but construction workers traveling to find work by which they could support their families. They were held for a long period of time before their death, pressured to recant their faith and become part of the Islamic state. But it was for Jesus' sake they refused, and it was for Jesus' sake they died.

This tragic event shocked many of us five years ago. But it didn't shock the Coptic (that is, a specific type of Egyptian Christianity) church. Archbishop Angaelos, who lives in London, spoke to Christianity Today this week about what went through Egyptian Christian's mind:

“We're a church that is very rooted in its martyrdom. You know, we start our Coptic calendar in 284 A.D., which was the reign of Diocletian, under whom we suffered the worst wave of martyrdom in Egypt. And so it's not something that's new to us. But this was a very visible, contemporary manifestation before the eyes of the whole world.”

And he goes on to explain how they understand this:

“But we realize that [persecution and martyrdom] is the cross of Christ, we are carrying it. It's not the end of the road because there is a resurrection that comes after the cross and the empty tomb. And so it is in that hope that we continue to live. And it's in that hope that we continue to carry that cross, knowing that it will be removed from us.”

We find ourselves in awe of this kind of perspective; it is so foreign to us. Archbishop Angaelos, however, could look back to the promise that Jesus gave to his followers: **that they would be persecuted, that they would have to take up the cross and follow him daily, even if it cost them their lives.** By looking back to Jesus's promises in the past, he gained **clarity** as to how God was going to act today. What began as a confusing tragedy became clearly part of God's plan.

Today we will find the first Christians in a similar situation. As they live between Jesus' ascension and the descend of the Holy Spirit, these first believers **will have to look back to what Jesus had promised them in order to know what the next step is.** Once they realized how God had always promised to work, what to do next became clear to them.

For us, in this somewhat gruesome and strange text, the message is this:

When we look to God's promises in the past, we gain clarity for how he will use us today.

And once we know how God's promise includes us, we **must answer the call**.

[Part One: The Problem and the Promise]

Turn to Acts 1:12-26 [repeat]. As you do so, let me read it to you:

¹² Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) ¹⁶ and said, "Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ He was one of our number and shared in our ministry."

¹⁸ (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. ¹⁹ Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

²⁰ "For," said Peter, "it is written in the Book of Psalms:

 "May his place be deserted;
 let there be no one to dwell in it,'
 and,
 "May another take his place of leadership.'

²¹ Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²² beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

²³ So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. ²⁴ Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." ²⁶ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so, he was added to the eleven apostles.

Now you see what I mean about gruesome and obscure. Thanks Pastor Kenny for assigning me the passage about intestinal explosion.

But, if I am honest, I love obscure passages, and here's why: it means that you and I can't just "play" Christian if we want to read it well. We've got to meditate on it, dig into it, catch onto the hints, ask God for wisdom, see the connections. And as we do so, I think it becomes abundantly clear what Luke (who wrote Acts) is trying to say.

This is the first story of the early Church, and it is the *only* story of the Church between Jesus' ascension (that has just happened) and the descent of the Holy Spirit (what we call *Pentecost*).

These baby-believers have just seen the Lord Jesus go up into heaven and have been promised that the Holy Spirit will come to them and give them the power to be witnesses. Talk about a mountain-top experience!

So, they come down from the Mount of Olives, where all this stuff took place, and hang out in an upper room. These guys like upper rooms; throughout the book of Luke and Acts upper rooms are waiting rooms, pondering locations, prayer-houses. So, they get to the upper-room, and Luke wants us to know how many of them there are: Eleven apostles, Jesus' brothers and Mary his mother, and other women-disciples.

And they wait. Notice that verse 15 states that "days" have passed. By this point there is 120 members of this little group, and I can imagine they are getting antsy. Like a sixth grader waiting for game time, they are starting to ask themselves, "how long is this going to take?" Jesus had said that it would be "not many days from now," but nothing had happened yet. They are starting to ask themselves, *what is taking so long? What is missing?*

And That is what you should be asking yourself too. *What is missing here? What's going on?* Can't come up with it? Well, if you look at verse 13, Luke actually given you a huge hint. Let's compare this verse with another verse from Luke's first volume:

"One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and **Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.**"

Okay, now as you look at Acts 1:13, what's missing? That's right, **Judas Iscariot, the twelfth apostle.** Luke lists the eleven apostles in an almost identical way as in Luke 6 to get you thinking *Judas is what's missing here.*

That seems to be what Peter is thinking, too, because he stands up and starts talking about who? **Judas.** At this point your supposed to be catching on to his logic. Notice what he says in verse 16:

"Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the **Holy Spirit spoke long ago spoke through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.**"

Peter begins to see that Judas' betrayal was actually part of the Holy Spirit's plan: that Judas was the ultimate example of those people who betray God and seek their own fortunes. But the Holy Spirit also said that Judas would be replaced. Look at verse 20:

"For," said Peter, "it is written in the Book of Psalms,"

"May his place be deserted;

Let there be no one to dwell in it,”
And

“May another take his place of leadership.”

“Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us...”

Peter is cluing into something here. He’s beginning to get some clarity about what to do next. In waiting for the Holy Spirit, Peter went and searched the Scriptures and saw that the eleven had to become twelve again; the hole that Judas left by choosing a field of blood over a portion in Jesus’ kingdom could not be left unfilled. **This first community needed to be restored to Jesus’ original intention: *twelve apostles*.**

Okay, so we get kind of makes sense but there’s still something lurking in our minds, right? **Why twelve?** Is there something inherently better about twelve than eleven? Couldn’t they make-due with eleven disciples and just get on with it? Why is the Holy Spirit so picky about there being twelve?

But wait; let the number *twelve* sink in for a second. Can you think of any other “twelves” that are important in the Bible? Anything God’s ever done that included the number “twelve”? There you go! You’re catching on! ***The twelve tribes of Israel*.**

Look way back to the book of Genesis, when Old Israel is blessing his twelve sons in the land of Egypt, along with Joseph’s boys. Here’s what it says after he’s blessed them all:

All these are the **twelve tribes of Israel**.

After this point, throughout the entire Bible, God’s covenant promise is first to *these twelve tribes*, and then through them to the ends of the earth. After God delivers the people from Egypt and takes them to Mount Sinai, he makes a covenant with these *twelve tribes*. Moses seals it by building an altar to God with *twelve pillars*, one pillar for each tribe. What’s the whole book of Numbers about? *counting the twelve tribes*. And Moses warns *every tribe* to be faithful to God:

¹⁶ You yourselves know how we lived in Egypt and how we passed through the countries on the way here. ¹⁷ You saw among them their detestable images and idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold. ¹⁸ Make sure there is no man or woman, clan **or tribe** among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.

I encourage you, as you go through the Bible, keep an eye out for the number *twelve* and the word *tribe*. As you do so, you realize that God’s promise **was first to these twelve tribes of Israel, then to the ends of the earth**, to use these twelve tribes to bless the world. But something has gone really wrong. What Moses warned against here in Deuteronomy happened. Not just one, but *all* of the tribes of Israel turned from the living God to idols; chose death over life. The land of Canaan was divided, broken, and hostile. Brother rose up against brother, children against their parents, tribe against tribe, and the land was filled with blood and violence.

The nation of Israel became, then, a *field of Blood*, a land marked by rebellion and destruction. A whole group of people, called the Samaritans, lived in Israel as separated brethren, half-Israelite and half-not.

And so, Isaiah, when talking about the work of the Messiah who is to come, records these words of God:

“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)

Now, let that promise sink in. The Messiah will bring salvation to the ends of the earth. But what comes first? *Restoring the twelve tribes of Israel*. These twelve tribes needed to be brought back to God, restored from their wandering, made whole again. When Jesus shows up on the scene, his first goal is to bring restoration to the people of Israel, he is *their Messiah*, he is the one who is supposed to make them whole again.

And so when these first disciples in Acts decide to become whole again, from eleven to twelve, they are saying loud and clear:

Look! God is restoring his twelve tribes in Jesus!

They’ve caught onto something that is the next step in God’s plan: *to witness to Israel that Jesus is their Messiah*. And funny thing, this is what Jesus had just said to them:

“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 1:8)

Look at how similar those two promises are! God’s next step is Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, all part of Israel that needs restoration and reunion. The first apostles see that they must replace Judas so that they can be a witness to the twelve tribes of Israel. When they stand up as the twelve apostles in Acts 2, they are powerfully witnessing the promise to Israel.

[**Illustration**]: A news headline a couple of years ago began this way:

“Man, 91, dies waiting for the will of God.”

Walter Houston, described by family members as a devoted Christian, died Monday after waiting 70 years for God to give him clear direction about what to do with his life.

“He hung around the house and prayed a lot, but just never got that confirmation,” his wife Ruby said. “Sometimes he thought he heard God’s voice, but then he wouldn’t be sure, and he’d start the process all over again.”

The article goes on to say,

“Walter had a number of skills he never got around to using,” says longtime friend Timothy Burns. “He worked very well with wood and had a storyteller side to him, too. I always told him, ‘Take a risk. Try something new if you’re not happy,’ but he was too afraid of letting the Lord down.”

Okay, so it’s satire, but it could be true, couldn’t it? I think we often wonder how God’s big-picture promise to bring salvation to the ends of the earth actually includes *us*. So, we are kind of like Walter, just wandering around, not wanting to let God down.

[**Application**]: Peter saw a problem in their first community. It was fuzzy what they were supposed to do next, and why the Holy Spirit hadn’t showed up yet. But when he looked to the promises of God, it became clear what they must do to prepare for his next step.

I wonder, if we were to do the same, what might we find? Look at that promise of Jesus:

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

What clarity can we find by looking to that promise?

Well, first off, when we look to our part in God’s promise, we see that our calling as the church is as *witnesses to the ends of the earth*. We have a missionary task, a world-wide vision, to be concerned with. As the church we are to be the hands and feet and mouth of Jesus to the watching, broken world. When you look at how God has promised to work, *it includes you!* **You** are how God is working out this promise! You’re part of that *ends of the earth* part!

This fights against **complacency** when it comes to mission, and re-orientes our hearts to that mission. Village Church of Lincolnshire exists to be a community of witnesses, to be a vessel by which God’s message of salvation is communicated, *not just within these walls but in our communities*. Daily people around us sink deeper into death, and we wonder what is happening to our world. But, look to God’s promise! *You* are supposed to be in that world, bringing God’s light and mercy and salvation by your witness to the risen Lord. We are supposed to be about the tearing down of the enemy’s kingdom and the building of God’s kingdom, the cutting down of every tree not planted by our heavenly Father.

What does this mean for us? Well, it means that we will care more about the souls in our neighborhoods than the style of our music. It means that we will spend more time engaged with unbelievers and prepare our hearts for them to come in here. It means that we will refuse to hate and vilify our enemies, even if they are across the political aisle. It means we will take risks, even when they make us uncomfortable. It means that we will be *obedient to God’s call to witness*. That’s what it means to be the church.

[Part Two: The Response]

We gain clarity for how God will use us by looking back to his promises. But there is one last thing in this passage that we can't miss: *How we respond to Jesus' call matters.*

As you meditate on this passage, you get a really clear contrast between two guys: *Matthias and Judas*. Poor Matthias's only mention in the whole Bible is here, and he doesn't even have the cooler name of the two (the other guy has *three names!*).

But notice how they choose him: *they cast lots*. This seems a bit strange to us, mainly because it's the only time in the New Testament that this happens. But the point is not the method by which they chose Matthias (after the Holy Spirit comes, this kind of thing is no longer needed), but rather the **reason they chose Matthias**. Matthias replaces Judas, and he takes up his portion in the ministry of witness. The eleven are now twelve, a clear image of restoration for Israel.

But Luke is also being a bit ironic here. The Greek word for "lot" and "share" are the same word, and Luke draws attention to this in verse 17 and verse 26:

Verse 17 states that "Judas was one of our number and shared, [literally, *had a lot in*] our ministry"

And then verse 26 states that they "cast lots [same word] and the lot [same word] fell to Matthias, so he was added to the eleven apostles."

When you read this, again stop and think: *what's the connection here?* And you quickly see that the contrast is in the portions, the shares, the kingdoms. The idea of "lot" means fate, it means inheritance, it means what you end up with. When you read what happens to Judas, you are supposed to be thinking of passages in the Old Testament like Job 20, where Zophar describes the "lot", or fate, of the wicked:

In order to fill his belly,
God will vent his burning anger against him
and rain down his blows on him.
Though he flees from an iron weapon,
a bronze-tipped arrow pierces him.
He pulls it out of his back,
the gleaming point out of his liver.
Terrors will come over him;
total darkness lies in wait for his treasures.
A fire unfanned will consume him
and devour what is left in his tent.
The heavens will expose his guilt;
the earth will rise up against him.
A flood will carry off his house,
rushing waters on the day of God's wrath.

Such is the fate God allots the wicked,
the heritage appointed for them by God.” (Job 20:23-29)

When you hear these scary words, you are supposed to be thinking, *that sounds like what happened to Judas!* The whole intestines-blowing up thing is a direct link back to the Old Testament image of what happens to those who reject God’s way, reject the message of salvation and chose rather to be God’s enemy. In an amazing and clever way, **Luke gives us two contrasting “lots” with contrasting fates: those who share in the work of Jesus’ kingdom, and those who reject him.**

Judas and Matthias become two models for us, that get replayed throughout the book of Acts: *rejecting God’s call and facing destruction and accepting God’s call and being Jesus’ witness.* Now that Jesus has come, the choice is clear: we take our share in Jesus’ ministry, to be about his work, or we become his enemy.

When we look at the choice Judas made, to betray the Lord of life and buy a field, we find ourselves with a similar decision: *how will we respond to God’s kingdom call?* In moments of hardship, loss, confusion, doubt, derision, persecution, temptation, antagonism, lethargy, affluence, need, anguish, and even threat of death, *choose the portion that leads to life, choose the Way of Jesus!*

[**Conclusion**]: That is the choice those Coptic Christians made on that beach in Libya in 2015. When they refused to recant their faith, they chose the kingdom of heaven over a plot on this earth, they chose the cross of Jesus over the deceitfulness of sin. They followed Matthias’ example, not Judas’s. They looked to God’s promise and they saw that this was their witness. God give us strength to be like them.