

The Coming of the Realm of God: The Main Theme of the Book of Acts

Acts 1:1—2:13

Acts 1:8 sets out the basic movement of the plot of the Book of Acts (and the overarching structure of this commentary): the story will move from Jerusalem and Judea through Samaria to the ends of the earth. While Acts 1:1—2:13 takes place in Jerusalem, this commentary discusses this section because of its distinctive functions in the Book of Acts. Acts 1:1—2:13 reminds the reader that the story in Acts continues the story told in the Gospel of Luke. The main theme of the Gospel of Luke is that God is using the ministry of Jesus to signal that the transition is underway from the present Roman world to the Realm of God—a new cosmos of love, peace, justice, and abundance—is underway. In addition to inviting people to repent and to join the movement toward the Realm, the ministry of Jesus embodied the qualities of the Realm. Acts 1:1—2:13 reminds the reading community not only that the coming of the Realm of God is the main theme of the Book of Acts. Furthermore, God not only restored the community of Jesus' followers but filled them with the Holy Spirit to empower them to continue the ministry of Jesus but also promises to empower the congregation to whom Luke wrote so continue Jesus in their own time and place.

THE COMING OF THE REALM OF GOD: THE ASCENSION CONFIRMS THE COMING OF THE REALM (ACTS 1:1-11)

In many writings in antiquity the first and last scenes involving a major character are often keys to understanding the identity of that character, as well as the purpose of the story. That phenomenon is true of Jesus (and other

characters) in the Gospel and Acts. From this point of view the narrative of the words and events leading to the ascension and the ascension itself are important because the ascension is both the last scene in which Jesus appears in the Gospel and the first scene in Acts. The birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus climax in the Gospel in the ascension. In Acts, the ascension is the defining moment out of which comes the story of the church.

Acts 1:1-5 introduces the reader to the Book of Acts and prepares the reader for the story of the ascension in 1:6-11. Luke addresses Acts to Theophilus. As noted in the Introduction, the name Theophilus may refer to an individual, or it may refer to all who love God or who are beloved by God. Whatever that case, Luke assumes the community was familiar with the story although Luke wants them to understand it from the perspective of Acts.

Today's congregation may be in a similar position to that of the people to whom Luke wrote. Multiple interpretations of the story of Jesus are afloat in the Bible, in the church and in today's culture. Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John offer their own renditions of Jesus, as do historical figures such as Augustine, Anselm and Abelard, not to mention contemporary preachers as diverse as Howard Thurman, Paul Tillich, John Howard Yoder, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the Jesus Seminar, Jacqueline Grant, John Dominic Crossan, Joel Olsteen, and Creflo Dollar. Many congregations today are familiar with such representations of Jesus and the church, but do not understand the sacred stories from Luke's point of view, nor with how Luke's perception might compare, contrast, and contribute to the congregation's own systematic understanding of Jesus and the church. A sermon on Christology might bring Luke's perception into dialogue with others while helping the congregation with theological integration.

Acts 1:3 summarizes the purpose of Jesus: to alert people to the presence and final (and complete) coming of the Realm of God. The church is to continue the ministry of Jesus by announcing the Realm and inviting people to repent and to become a part of the church—a community living toward the Realm in the present while anticipating its final consummation.

The Lukan Jesus intended for the church to invite gentiles into the community awaiting the Realm (Luke 24:47). Luke writes Acts not simply to report the history of an institution but to imply a program for the church. This mission has the double foci of embodying the Realm in the church's internal life and witnessing to the Realm in the external world.

According to Acts 1:4-5, Jesus promised the disciples they would receive the Holy Spirit in a special way to empower them in the end-time (Luke 3:15-17). Acts 1:4-5 indicates that one purpose of the Book of Acts is to give a

narrative picture of Spirit-filled life and witness, a notion of the Spirit developed more fully in Acts 2:1-36. The Spirit enables the church in Acts to continue the spirit-filled, Realm-witnessing ministry of Jesus, and to extend it into the gentile world.

CONNECTION TO THE LECTIONARY

The Revised Common Lectionary assigns both Acts 1:6-11 and Luke 24:44-53 on Ascension Day in all three years of the lectionary. While Ascension Day does not fall on Sunday, the lectionary offers the ascension readings as alternatives for the Seventh Sunday after Easter. Since the ascension has a key place in Christian faith, the minister should occasionally preach on the readings for Ascension Day on the Seventh Sunday after Easter. However, preaching on the ascension only from Luke's perspective may leave the church with the impression that Luke's interpretation is normative whereas other writers in the Second Testament picture the ascended Jesus with their own theological nuances (for example, Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; 14:62; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 1:20; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22; cf. Luke 20:42; 22:69). From time to time, a pastor could help the church recognize the diversity of interpretations by departing from the lectionary and preaching from one of these other texts, or by bringing other passages into dialogue with Acts.

ACTS 1:6-11. THE ASCENSION CONFIRMS THAT GOD RULES

While Luke often uses the figures of the apostles to represent authority in community, Luke sometimes portrays these figures as imperceptive and in need of instruction, as when they ask in Acts 1:6. "Is this the time when you will restore the Realm to Israel?" The apostles want to know when God will restore Israel's political independence. This question indicates their understanding of the Realm is too limited. Jesus announces the Realm—social and cosmic restoration—not simply a restoration of Israel's political fortunes. Does the congregation today perceive God's aims in similarly limited ways?

While Luke may not know exactly when the final consummation will take place (Acts 1:7), Luke is confident that God gives the disciples a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit to witness, beginning in Jerusalem and Judea, moving through Samaria to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The geographical references in Acts 1:8 are important theological symbols with three levels of meaning. (1) These references articulate the broad narrative

structure of Acts: the story moves from Jerusalem and Judea (Acts 2:1-8:30) through Samaria (Acts 8:4-25) to the ends of the earth (Acts 8:26-28:31). (2) When the narrative of Acts unfolds geographically as Jesus predicts, the reader has confidence in Luke's interpretation of the story. If we can believe Jesus (and Luke) about this geographical sequence, then we can be confident of the broader movement of history toward the final consummation. (3) The movement from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth shows the nature of the Realm. That witness is to become ever more inclusive: initially it includes Jewish people (in Jerusalem and Judea), Samaritans (people who are Jewish in origin but who distance themselves from Judaism) and gentiles (to the ends of the earth).

The core of this passage is Acts 1:9-10. God lifted Jesus into heaven at God's right hand (Acts 2:33-35, 5:31; 7:55-56). Jesus is thus God's representative who ultimately has power over all other rulers, including Satan, the demons, Caesar, and the Roman Empire. The ascension shows not only that God approves of the ministry of Jesus but that God wills for this ministry to continue through those who repent, embrace Jesus's message about the Realm, and receive the Spirit. Here, as in the Gospel, the focus is not upon the person of Jesus but upon the Realm. Jesus is God's representative in confirming and extending the Realm.

Luke here draws on two ancient assumptions. First, many people in antiquity imagined the universe as similar to a three-story house with God dwelling in the upper story (heaven), earth as the middle level, and an underworld beneath. According to the story of the ascension, God elevated Jesus from the earth (the second level) to God's right hand in heaven (the upper level). Second, many people in antiquity regarded the right hand of God as the more powerful hand (for example, Exod. 15:6; Ps. 16:11; 20:6; 110:1 Isa. 48:13; 62:8). Moreover, the ascended Jesus will be present with God for the final judgment (for example, Acts 10:42; 17:31). The ascended Jesus operates with the power from God's right hand.

The preacher could develop a sermon around the implication that all other powers are ultimately subject to the Realm of God. The preacher who uses media in the sermon (such as PowerPoint) could project pictures that depict the three story universe. To be sure, many people today are troubled by the ancient picture of the three story universe. What sense does it make in our scientific age to say that Jesus *ascended* to heaven? However, many thoughtful contemporary Christians (including me) believe that the deeper point of the text is not tied to Luke's outmoded cosmology. The lasting message is that God's authority and purposes transcend all others and that all authorities and powers are accountable

to God. The text communicates this idea in the vivid first century image of a three-story universe, but the point is not tied to that picture.

The sermon could identify forces in the present that work against the purposes of God. These forces range from those that beset the individual to those that disfigure the congregation, the nation, and the world, including such things as personal addictions, diseases, the church's preoccupation with itself, racism, and international economic havoc wreaked by transnational corporations. The ascension gives the congregation the confidence to continue to witness to a more Realm-like world even in the face of resistance. No matter how powerful the Caesars we face—in the political realm, in community life, in the congregation, in personal affairs—the picture of Jesus at the right hand of God is one of ultimate sovereignty.

CHIASTIC PARALLELS. ACTS 1:1-11 AND LUKE 24:43-55

The chiasmic parallel between Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:44-53 is unique in the great chiasmus of Luke-Acts in that these passages combine to form the central element. Indeed, these two elements not only interpret the same event but make the same point. Everything in the Gospel of Luke flows *toward* the ascension. Everything in the Book of Acts flows *from* the ascension. For the Gospel, the ascension is the climax of the story of Jesus. For Acts, the ascension is the charter for the church. The themes that surface in these two passages are central to Luke-Acts: the continuity of the story of Jesus and church with the story of Judaism, the suffering of Jesus (and the implied suffering of his followers), repentance, the Holy Spirit, and the vocation of the community to witness to all nations.

In the spirit of honest theological conversation, the preacher should acknowledge the difficulties with this viewpoint. While the text asserts the final authority of God, our immediate experience is often the rule of Caesar. The Realm may seem defeated as often as it makes headway. The ascension assures us that God will never give up offering opportunities to help the world become more Realm-like. One of my teachers said, "Death may win in every individual case, but ultimately life prevails."

The ascension has political dimensions. Caesar ruled the Roman Empire. If God through Christ rules over all, then the values and practices of the Realm ultimately take priority over those of Caesar. The preacher could reflect on how religious views can help shape our positions on public policy. At one level, this task is easy: Christians should stand for values that are consistent with those of the Realm. On the other hand, this task is complicated in a democracy claiming

to separate church and state. Within the church, the preacher can claim that God's values should prevail because they are God's values. But in the pluralistic public square, on what authority can the preacher use the vision of the Realm of God as a basis for recommending public policy?

Congregations today often develop mission statements. Acts 1:4 and 8, combined with Luke 24:46 and Acts 2:38, is a shorthand version of Luke's understanding of mission. Luke's community is to witness to the Realm of God and to invite people to become a part of the movement toward the Realm through repentance, baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, and witnessing through the life of the community. The sermon could lead the congregation in comparing and contrasting its own formal or informal understandings of mission with those of Luke-Acts. The sermon could help the congregation identify specific ways it can more fully carry out its mission.

One aspect of the witness moving from Jerusalem and Judea through Samaria to the ends of the earth suggests a norm that preacher and congregation can use to gauge the adequacy of their own witness to the Realm. By portraying the movement from Jerusalem and Judea through Samaria to the ends of the earth, Luke indicates that the faithful witness enlarges community. The witnessing church becomes ever more inclusive. The witness of the church today, then, is in continuity with Acts when it also extends the boundaries of community.

As Jesus ascends, his followers simply stare upward at the place where Jesus went. Two figures from heaven ask a question to the disciples that the preacher might ask the congregation. "Why do you [do nothing more than] stand looking up toward heaven?" (Acts 1:11). In other words, "Now that you have the confidence that Jesus is at the right hand of God, why are you not engaging in the mission Jesus gives you?"

THE COMING OF THE REIGN OF GOD: PREPARING THE COMMUNITY TO REPRESENT THE REALM (ACTS 1:12-26)

In Luke 24:40 and Acts 1:4-5, the risen Jesus instructs the community to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit, the power that comes from on high. Acts 1:12-26 depicts the community faithfully doing what Jesus commanded: they wait. Their waiting, however, is not passive. They pray. They support one another. They wrestle theologically with the death of Judas. They work with God to elect Matthias as the twelfth living apostle. Their wait is one in which they prepare to represent the Realm.

Acts 1:12-26 is a miniature of the situation of Luke's congregation. The congregation is in a delay between the ascension and the return of Jesus. They wait. Yet their wait is not to be passive, but is to be a season in which they witness actively to the possibilities offered by the Realm. The time between the ascension and Pentecost is a paradigm for the time between Pentecost and the second coming. After Pentecost, the congregation awaits the second coming by assertively engaging in mission.

We see in the larger context of this passage an instance of a larger pattern important in the Gospel and Acts. An authoritative figure, such as Jesus or an apostle makes a prediction or gives an instruction. The prediction comes to pass. The community follows the instructions, and finds that the instructions are true (or the community disobeys the instructions and suffers destructive consequences). In the present case, Jesus's promise of Luke 24:40 and Acts 1:4-5 comes true in Acts 2:1-4. This turn of events reinforces the congregation's confidence in the reliability of Acts as a guide for how live as they await the return of Jesus.

In antiquity, identity was more communal than in cultures of European origin today in which identity is often individualistic. Many Eurocentric people think of identity as something we achieve as individuals. Indeed, some folk glorify personal achievement even when it takes place at the expense of other people. By contrast, Acts 1:12-14 points toward a theme fundamental to Luke: participants in the movement toward the Realm are genuine *community*. They are together in identity, mutual support, and mission. The preacher could encourage the church today toward understanding itself as such a community. From the perspective of common identity, the individual is complete only when actively involved in the whole, and the community is represented in the individual.

Luke underscores the fact that the community of the Realm includes both men (v. 13) and women (v. 14). Unfortunately, Luke does not present the church in Acts as an altogether egalitarian community. The apostles, for instance, are all men, and they maintain the major roles of leadership. Nevertheless, in this passage we see evidence of Luke's belief that in the Realm God seeks to restore the relationship of women and men to the mutuality and equality of Genesis 1-2. The preacher could reflect on the degree to which relationships among women and men in the congregation and in the larger social world point toward the Realm.

CHIASTIC PARALLEL. LUKE 24:36-44 AND ACTS 1:12-14

Luke 24:36-44 and Acts 1:12-24 present different responses to the risen Jesus. In Luke 24:36-44, the disciples are together, but when the resurrected Jesus comes into their sight, they do not recognize him and become afraid and immobilized. However, Jesus reveals he is present. In Acts 1:12-14 the community is together. Jesus has gone out of their sight (by ascending), but God assured them of the continuing validity of Jesus's ministry (through Jesus eating the fish in Luke 24:36-44 and through the ascension in Acts 1:6-11). The preacher could explore ways the congregation fails to recognize Jesus and the Realm and becomes fearful and immobilized (Luke 24:36-44) yet how the risen Jesus is present to assure them and to revitalize their common life (Acts 1:12-14).

The motif of prayer (v. 14) permeates both the Gospel and Acts. For Luke, prayer is the intentional opening of self and community to the coming of the Realm (Luke 11:2-4). By praying the congregation not only asks God to regenerate the present but indicates its willingness to join God in the movement toward the Realm. To pray is thus to seek social transformation that brings the world more into harmony with the values and practices of the Realm. This part of the passage could inspire a sermon on the doctrine of prayer. The preacher might survey the congregation's current attitudes and practices of prayer, bringing out similarities and differences with Luke's perceptions and with the church's systematic theological understanding of prayer. Can the preacher identify points at which Luke's notion of prayer could help enlarge the congregation's understanding and practice?

CONNECTIONS TO THE LECTIONARY

The lectionary offers the congregation a choice of readings from Acts for the Seventh Sunday after Easter for each lectionary year. The minister may preach from the readings for Ascension Day (Acts 1:6-11 and Luke 24:44-53) or may follow the readings assigned for the Seventh Sunday after Easter: Acts 1:6-14 appears in Year A while Acts 1:15-16, 21-26 appears in Year B. Acts 16:19-34 is given for Year C. If the congregation does not have a service of worship on Ascension Day in Year A, then on the Seventh Sunday after Easter, the preacher could expose the congregation to the ascension via Acts 1:6-14. If the congregation does not have a service on Ascension Day in Years B and C, worship leaders can judge whether the congregation would be most helped on the Seventh Sunday of Easter by Ascension readings, by readings assigned for

the Seventh Sunday, or by one of the other texts that depict Christ at the right hand of God (see “Connections to the Lectionary” for Acts 1:1–11). In Year B, if worship planners opt for the assigned texts, the reading should include all of Acts 1:15–26 to maintain the theological and literary unity of the passage.

ACTS 1:15–20. THE DEATH OF JUDAS

Many Christians are puzzled by Judas. Why did he betray Jesus? At one end of the spectrum of possible answers is Judas as a selfish person who wanted to profit from the sale of Jesus. At the other end of the spectrum is Judas as a person who wanted Jesus to bring the Realm and who thought that selling Jesus to the authorities would facilitate that process. From this point of view, Judas had a good intention but was misdirected. That both Matthew 27:3–10 and Acts 1:15–20 explain the death of Judas suggests that many in the ancient churches wondered how to understand Judas. The appearance of Judas in this text gives the preacher an opportunity to introduce the congregation to Luke’s interpretation of Judas and to bring Luke’s perspective into dialogue with opinions in the wider church.

When we first hear about the Lukan Judas, he is one of the Twelve (Luke 6:16). However, Satan took control of Judas (Luke 22:3). Judas betrays Jesus as part of Satan’s attempt to put Jesus to death to prevent Jesus from continuing the movement toward the Realm (Luke 22:47–48). Satan thought that by murdering Jesus, the possibility of the Realm would go away. In Luke-Acts, the death of Jesus is not primarily salvific but is mainly a martyr’s death; the crucifixion demonstrates the power of old age and the lengths to which the rulers of the old age go to resist the Realm and to maintain their own privilege. With the prophet of the Realm dead, Satan’s power would be intact.

Judas’s presence in Jesus’s inner circle might prompt today’s preacher to ponder whether there are Judas-like people and values inside the church today. Are old-age values and behaviors still present in the church?

Matthew and Luke interpret the death of Judas differently. In Matthew 27:3–10, Judas repents and takes his own life. In Acts, Judas shows no regret. Instead, God puts Judas to death as punishment for being complicit in the death of Jesus (Acts 1:18). Luke joined many other Jewish writers in antiquity that God punished the disobedient in ways appropriate to their disobedience (cf. Acts 5:1–11; 12:20–23). Since Judas was complicit in bringing Jesus to a horrible death, God would cause Judas to die in a horrible way: “He burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.”

This text presents a significant theological challenge to many Christians today with its assumption that God punishes people in accordance with their disobedience. Because I believe God is unconditional love, I cannot affirm that God visits pain and suffering upon people, much less that God carries out capital punishment (as in the case of Judas). However, as presaged in the Introduction, I do believe that unfaithful attitudes set in motion values and behaviors that are self-destructive. A preacher might use Judas as a warning that when we resist the Realm, we create circumstances that bring collapse upon ourselves. Do we, like Judas, betray Jesus? If so, how? What consequences can we expect? And what can we do to avoid this fate?

ACTS 1:21-26. COMPLETING THE CIRCLE OF THE TWELVE

In the Gospel of Luke, as in the other gospels, Jesus gathers a group of twelve close followers. Luke reserves the term “apostles” for these twelve. The number twelve recollects the twelve tribes of Israel and in Jewish life represents community as God intends. The covenantal life of the twelve tribes was to be a light for all other peoples (for example, Isa. 42:6). For Luke, the twelve apostles indicate that the church continues the mission of Israel by representing the community of the Realm (Luke 22:28-30). The church of the apostles is to represent completeness of community in the Realm.

In Acts 1:15-20, the death of Judas reduced the number of active apostles to eleven, thus making incomplete the circle representing the Realm. In Acts 1:21-26, God reconstitutes the community of twelve. According to Acts 1:21-22, the criteria for an apostle is being with Jesus throughout Jesus’s ministry, including being a witness to the resurrection. The congregation puts forward two such candidates—Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. Matthias was chosen by casting lots. Ancient people did not regard casting lots as a mechanism of chance or luck but as a medium through which God revealed God’s choice. Thus, God selected Matthias.

The twelve play an important role in Luke-Acts. Jesus is the model for the twelve, and the twelve are models for the church. In Acts the twelve are an authoritative body for the church. Luke often uses the figures of the twelve to authorize (or to partly authorize) significant developments in the witness of the church. Consequently, it was imperative for the number of active apostles to represent completeness of community.

CHIASTIC PARALLEL. LUKE 24:13-35 AND ACTS 1:15-26

These parallel elements in the Gospel and Acts contrast Jesus and Judas and the possibilities they offer community. In Luke 24:13-35 the disciples on the road are disheartened (Luke 24:13-24), but the risen Jesus appears as definitive sign of the presence of the Realm (Luke 24:25-32). By the end of the story, the travelers join other disciples in witness (Luke 24:33-35). In Acts 1:15-20, the death of Judas exemplifies the old age and its resistance to the Realm. When Satan entered Judas, the community of the twelve was disrupted. Nevertheless, through the selection of Matthias, the twelve were stored so the community could continue its witness to the Realm (Acts 1:21-26). A sermon might contrast the two possibilities for life represented by Jesus and Judas. Jesus creates the community of the Realm whereas Judas leads to destruction and death. In which force field does the congregation want to live—that of Jesus or Judas?

At the risk of making an interpretive move that Luke did not intend, the preacher might play on the fact that the community of the Realm was incomplete when there were only eleven apostles by asking, “Who is missing from the church today? Who needs to be included for the church adequately to represent the Realm?”

Most congregations in North America operate through democratic process. We elect officers. We vote on major directions, decisions, and expenditures. In seminary, we offer classes in church leadership and administration. The preacher might ponder similarities and differences between making decisions by means of casting lots and by means of democratic process. On the one hand, what confidence can a congregation have that casting lots is divinely guided? On the other hand, can a congregation be confident that every vote reflects God’s highest purposes? The voice of the people is not inherently the voice of God. Indeed, I have witnessed some decisions made by democratic process that seemed to contradict God’s highest aims. In such situations, the preacher might meditate with the congregation on methods and criteria to attempt to discern God’s purposes in particular settings. The preacher could also help a person or group ponder what to do when the person or the group concludes that a congregation has made decisions that go against God’s purposes. Do we leave? Do we stay and work for change? If the latter, to what degree do we confront, and to what degree do we take more indirect approaches?

The particular situation in this text raises a broader issue for preacher and congregation. Few churches today cast lots. The apostles are no longer with us

to provide direct guidance in the way Luke pictures them in Acts. In any event, they did not consider many issues that are before the church today. Hence, the church can seldom appeal directly to apostolic authority.

The preacher could help the church ponder the sources on which the church draws when moving toward decision. Most ecclesial bodies implicitly or explicitly draw on the Bible, tradition, experience, and reason (or what makes sense). Of course, each of these sources is itself diverse. Moreover, different people and different churches give different weights to these different sources. Here self-awareness and honesty are important. For example, some churches say they rely almost solely on the Bible and do not recognize that they claim the authority of the Bible through the lens of their own theological tradition that developed much later than the Bible. Other churches claim to get back to what the Bible really says when they actually interpret the Bible through the lens of their contemporary experience without taking into account differences between the contemporary and ancient worlds. Interpreters need to be as self-aware as possible so they can reflect critically on their own theological moves and conclusions.

THE COMING OF THE REALM OF GOD: THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS THE COMMUNITY TO WITNESS TO THE REALM (ACTS 2:1-13)

The Torah, Prophets and Writings present the Holy Spirit as one of God's closest agents who operates in five related ways. (1) The Spirit was present with God at creation. (2) God sustains the world through the ever-present Spirit. (3) God fills people through the Spirit, that is, gives them an experiential awareness that God is with them. (4) God anoints people through the Spirit for special tasks. (5) In the end-times, God would pour out the Spirit even more generously to empower communities to endure the last days and to witness boldly. The outpouring of the Spirit is itself a sign of the coming Realm.

John the Baptist announced that Jesus would baptize his followers with the Spirit expected in the last days (Luke 3:15-17). Jesus received an eschatological apportionment of the Spirit (Luke 3:21-22) and promised the disciples they would be empowered similarly (Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:4-5, 8). Acts 2:1-13 describes the event in which the promise of Jesus comes true: the disciples are filled with the Spirit to continue Jesus's ministry.

Given the many ways the Spirit is understood in the Bible and in the church, it is important note that that for Luke the primary purposes of the Spirit are to assure the beleaguered followers of Jesus they are following a faithful path,

to strengthen them to witness, including manifesting signs of the Realm. The infilling of the Spirit empowers the church to extend the witness to the Realm to gentiles.

ACTS 2:1-4. THE SPIRIT FALLS ON JEWISH BELIEVERS

Pentecost was a Jewish holy day. Exodus 23:16 describes it as “the festival of the harvest of the first fruits,” the beginning of the wheat harvest (Exod. 23:14-17; 34:18-24; Deut. 16:16; cf. Jub. 6:1-21, 22:1). By setting this event on Pentecost, Luke implies that the outpouring of the Spirit is part of the harvest of the end-times. Luke joins other Jewish end-time theologians in speaking figuratively of the coming of the Realm as a harvest (for example, Luke 3:16-17; 8:4-8, 11-15; 10:1-12).

By saying “They were all together in one place,” Luke emphasizes that the outpouring of the Spirit is an event in community. As the narrative unfolds, we see that the Spirit forms community.

The coming of the Spirit sounds “like the rush of a violent wind.” Some parishioners may be surprised with the description of the wind as “violent.” However, the Greek word “violent” (*biaias*) typically refers to the use of force, often violently. This expression is consistent with the idea that the coming of the Spirit is part of the end-time. For that period was to include conflict between the forces of God and Satan. As in the temptation of Jesus (Luke 4:1-13), the Spirit strengthens the community in that tense time and aggressively leads the community to witness.

Luke pictures tongues, as of fire, coming down from heaven, with a tongue resting on each person. Luke here draws on fire as a Jewish symbol with multiple levels of meaning. Fire is often associated with manifestations of the divine presence (for example, Exod. 19:16-25; 1 Kgs. 19:11-12). The prophets use the vocabulary of fire to speak of judgment (Jer. 4:4; Isa. 66:24; Dan. 7:11; 1 Enoch 18:11). Even more to the point for Luke-Acts, the prophetic vocation is itself sometimes compared to being filled with fire (Jer. 5:14; Sir. 48:1; cf. Jer. 20:9). In this tradition, John the Baptist, an end-time prophet, promises that the disciples will be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16): God empowers them with the Holy Spirit to continue the prophetic vocation (cf. Luke 3:9; 9:54; 17:20; Acts 2:19). In the full exercise of the prophetic vocation, the prophet and the prophetic community announce both judgment and salvation, and invite listeners to repent. For Luke, the prophetic witness points to the present and coming Realm. The presence of the fire in this narrative identifies Luke’s congregation as such a prophetic community.

Acts 2:5-13 develops the notion of what it means to speak in other languages. I discuss that phenomenon in the next section.

CHIASTIC PARALLEL. ACTS 2:1-4 AND LUKE 24:1-12

These parallels bring the resurrection and the Spirit into interpretive relationship. For Luke, the resurrection is the definitive sign that the ministry of Jesus points toward the Realm. In Acts 2:1-4, then, the coming of the Spirit means that the power that resurrected Jesus—the power that brings the Realm—is still at work in the world. This chiasmic connection gives the preacher a powerful opportunity to help the congregation grasp the Lukan understanding of the gift of the Spirit. Those who receive Spirit (per Acts 2:38-39) not only look forward to being resurrected at the last day but already operate with Realm power.

This passage gives the preacher a point of departure into both Luke's particular perception of the Spirit and the church's broader theological reflection on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. On the one hand, many Christians in the historic Eurocentric congregations have little understanding of the Spirit. On the other hand, some Christians have truncated views—seeing the infilling of the Spirit in individualistic terms and not recognizing its community-forming power or its Realm-witnessing intent.

The preacher who uses media in the sermon could project paintings that depict Pentecost, or could broadcast the sound of rushing wind and the tongues. Furthermore, dancers could portray the dynamics at Pentecost.

CONNECTION TO THE LECTIONARY

In the Revised Common Lectionary, Acts 2:1-21 could be read on Pentecost in Years A, B, and C. The boundaries of this passage capture the event of Pentecost itself (Acts 2:1-4), the manifestation and initial response (vv. 5-13), and the beginning of Peter's sermon (vv. 14-21). A passage of 21 verses is about as long as many congregations can pay attention given the typical matter-of-fact style of reading from the Bible in public worship. Nevertheless, by ending the reading at v. 21, the lectionary interrupts Peter's sermon. To capture more of Luke's purposes in this sermon, the lector should summarize vv. 22-36 and read Acts 2:37-39, which reveal Luke's purpose in the Pentecost drama: to impress upon the listeners that they are an *eschatological community empowered by the*

Spirit. Through repentance, baptism and the gift of the Spirit, God prepares them to witness to the Realm.

By using Acts' title for this day, "Pentecost," the Christian Year leaves the subtle impression that the Lukan account is the normative interpretation of the nature and work of the Spirit. This impression is reinforced when Acts 2:1-21 is read in each lectionary year. Of course, the Gospels and Letters contain several interpretations, and the preacher should help the congregation become aware of this range of perspective. The lectionary itself helps the preacher in Year A by appointing John 20:19-23 and 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13. The sermon could compare and contrast the Spirit in Luke-Acts, John, and Paul. Yet in Years B and C, the lectionary limits the congregation's exposure to Spirit theologies by again providing readings from Paul. To expose the congregation to more of the spectrum of the Spirit in the Bible, the preacher could supplement the lectionary texts with other passages.

ACTS 2:5-13. THE MANIFESTATION OF THE SPIRIT AND INITIAL RESPONSE

The story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9 is part of the background for Acts 2:5-13. Genesis 11:1-9 recalls a time when everyone on earth spoke one language. The population worked together to create tower (a ziggurat) with its top in the heavens so they could "make a name for themselves," an inappropriate role for creatures. In response, God scattered the peoples and gave them different languages so they would not be able to understand one another, and, hence, could not repeat the error. From that time forward, human communities in the old age were contentious. Many end-time theologians—Luke among them—looked forward to a great reunion of the human family in the Realm.

Acts 2:5-13 pictures the Spirit demonstrating on Pentecost that the reunion of the scattered human family is beginning to take place. In Acts 2, the reunion is partial because it involves only people of Jewish origin and proselytes. Gentiles become a part of the reunion in Acts 10.

The first work of the Spirit is to create mutual understanding and community among Jewish people from many nations who were in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival (Acts 2:5-11). In vv. 9-11 Luke illustrates the remarkable diversity present by listing residents from fifteen nationalities involved in the Pentecost experience. A preacher with a penchant for PowerPoint could project a map showing these different nations in relationship to one another.

Luke underscores the universal nature of this event and offers an indirect criticism of the Roman Empire by including peoples who lived outside the Roman Empire (for example, Parthians). Within the Empire, Rome could maintain quiet (the Pax Romana) by the sword. But the Empire could not achieve universal rule. Indeed, Rome was often suspicious and often afraid of Parthia. Yet, God through the Spirit brings together in community people from these enemy nations.

At Pentecost people from different cultures who spoke different languages understood one another. This phenomenon empowered them to work together in the Realm. Indeed, their mutual understanding was itself a manifestation of the Realm.

Under the power of the Spirit, these Jewish people from different nations, cultures and languages understand one another and become a community of mutual support without losing their particular cultural identities. They do not give up being Parthians, Medes and Elamites. They share a common purpose and many common values without becoming culturally the same.

An essential work of the sermon is to show where similar Realm-like community-building is happening today. My impression is that multicultural understanding is taking place more outside the church than in it. Despite many congregations becoming more diverse today than in the past, most are still dominated by one culture whose values and practices are the informal norms. To be sure, the preacher wants to celebrate points at which expressions of the church are moving toward Realm-like community today. But the pastor may need to help the church name points at which the congregation can learn from outside cultural movements how better to become a multicultural community.

Some nonbelievers who were present at Pentecost did not understand what was happening. Some bystanders sneered that the believers were drunk (Acts 1:12-13). These bystanders were creatures of the old age whose structures of awareness were not prepared to recognize the community of the Realm. The sermon could help the congregation identify ways that individuals and groups today fail to recognize the emerging community of the Realm. Eurocentric people particularly resist the multicultural dimension of the Realm. They continue to see people and cultures of European origin as the norm. Indeed, some people today sneer at the multicultural respect and solidarity emerging in increasingly pluralistic North America. To such folk, Luke offers a pastoral word: the Holy Spirit is the force behind such efforts. Those who join the Spirit experience Pentecost afresh. Those who resist the Spirit continue to try to build the tower of Babel.

CHIASTIC PARALLELS. ACTS 2:5-13 AND LUKE 23:26-56

Luke 23:26-56 recounts the death and burial of Jesus whereas Acts 2:5-13 depicts people from different nations speaking about God's deeds of power in community. This chiasmic pair illustrates two possibilities for life by showing two different spheres of influence—one shaped by the old age and the other shaped by the Spirit. Luke 23:26-56 is a snapshot of the old world: the rulers of that age crucify Jesus in an attempt to maintain their rigid and exploitative control of community. Indeed, as this part of the story closes, the body of the primary prophet of the Realm, Jesus, is in the tomb, and the immediate possibility of the Realm seems to be finished (Luke 23:50-56). The old age appears to be the only possibility for existence. But after the resurrection and the ascension, the possibility of the Realm is very much in evidence as the Spirit brings together people from different nations in a community of mutual understanding (Acts 2:5-13).

In the passages leading to Luke 23:26-56, different kinds of people cooperated to put Jesus to death, whereas in Acts 2:5-23 different kinds of people understand one another and engage in mutual support. The preacher could use these two scenes to ask the congregation whether we want to orient ourselves toward the old age (ultimately leading to death) or to the Spirit-empowered new world in which people live together in mutual understanding and support.

For the public reading of scripture during the service of worship, many congregations have several lectors read the story of Pentecost simultaneously, each in a different language. This custom captures the mood of the Pentecost event, but does not fully capture the mutual understanding that Luke pictures.

The preacher could help Christians today distinguish between people speaking and hearing in other languages at Pentecost and the glossalalia Paul reports in 1 Corinthians 12-14 (cf. Romans 8:12-17, 26-27). The latter—sometimes called “unknown tongues”—is ecstatic sound prompted by the Spirit but not organized into words and grammar. At a crucial point Luke and Paul agree. For Luke, the purpose of understanding at Pentecost was to build up community. For Paul, the purpose of glossalalia is to build up the believer who can then build up the community. When glossalalia is interpreted, the community is built up directly (1 Cor. 14:1-12).