

Sermon 5, A Replacement for Judas, Acts 1:12-26

Proposition: We're the new Israel, and so we need to gather for prayer and preaching, and we need 12 apostles to be our foundation.

- I. What the Church Did, vv. 12-26
 - A. Gather, vv. 12-15
 - 1. Pray, vv. 13-15
 - 2. Preach, vv. 16-20
 - B. Get Ready for the Spirit, vv. 21-26
 - 1. Replace Judas
 - 2. Complete the Twelve Apostles
 - 3. Reconstitute Israel
- II. What the Church Should Do
 - A. Gather, vv. 12-15
 - 1. Pray
 - 2. Preach
 - B. Walk By the Spirit
 - C. Build on the Apostolic Foundation
 - 1. Get Ready to Deal with Apostasy
 - 2. Expect to be Ridiculous
 - 3. Don't Expect to be Prominent

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last time that witness is the task of the church in this era between the Ascension and the Second Coming. We know from the rest of the Bible that worship is the primary task of the church, and that witness is a means to the end of worship. But as we look at the history Luke has recorded for us here, we see that the rest of chapter 1 talks about two crucial elements of that witness. They are gathering and preparing for the Spirit. That's what happens in the text before us. The church gathers for prayer and preaching, and while gathered they do what they need to do to be ready for Spirit-empowered witness. That, of course, is to select a twelfth apostle to replace the apostle who apostatized — Judas Iscariot. What I want to show you this morning is that we need to gather for prayer and preaching like the church did in those days, and that they needed a twelfth apostle to make up the full complement of the New Israel. Now that that 12th apostle has been chosen, we need to build on the foundation of the apostles by keeping in step with the Spirit.

I. What the Church Did, vv. 12-26

What we should look at first this morning is what the church did. I say the church, of course, even though our text opens apparently with just the apostles, the “Galilean men” who were there at the Ascension and then walked back to Jerusalem. But it quickly moves forward to tell of the

120 disciples, men and women, who were gathered in the upper room. Some of what the text tells us is simply what happened. Thus, I don't expect to find a deep spiritual lesson in the distance between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem (though the Venerable Bede correctly says that if we don't take "the sabbath journey" of repentance and faith during our working life here on earth, we will not attain to the heavenly sabbath that God has promised to everyone who follows Him), or to say that we all ought to meet for worship on the second floor. But in general, brothers and sisters, I would say that it will be clear to us as we keep examining Acts what's merely local and incidental and what is the result of deeper principles about how the church ought to be governed. We will talk more about this as we get farther into the book. For now, though, see if you don't agree with me that this first scene presents two major things the church ought to be doing while gathered.

A. Gather, vv. 12-15

And that is the first and main thing: The church gathers. Jesus-followers get together. There were a bunch of them, and they all knew each other. There were no nobodies in this church; they were all somebodies! Luke emphasizes this by saying "the crowd of names" — a unique phrase, but one that emphasizes both that they were a crowd and that they were all well-known to each other and to their leaders. This was a crowd, but a definite one, a crowd of somebodies. Just as you doubtless make it your habit to look around and see who's here, so I do as well. In fact, my two churchgoing habits back before I became a preacher sat ill with one another. I loved to sit in the front row, and I loved to look around the whole church at everyone who was there. Well, it's hard to both of those without being really obvious about it. In that sense, I praise God that He called me into the ministry, because now it's my job to sit near the front and to look at you all. Anyway, this crowd of names, this group of somebodies, had come together for a specific purpose.

1. Pray, vv. 13-15

They had gathered to pray. In fact, all of them with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer. It wasn't a few, or some of the most spiritually-minded, but the whole group. And it wasn't that they prayed occasionally, or even regularly, but that they were at it all the time. Now, again, this is not necessarily Luke's way of saying they did it 15 hours a day, 7 days a week, anymore than if we said that so-and-so is always in church we mean that he's here 15/7. But it is important to see that with Jesus gone back to Heaven, the church devoted itself to prayer. They even agreed on what to pray for — which, indeed, I think you will find to be one of the easiest places to find unity in the church today. Everyone agrees that we ought to pray for greater holiness, for more of the Spirit, for more laborers in the harvest field, and on and on. The eleven apostles prayed. The Virgin Mary prayed. The women prayed. Everyone was included; no one was exempted. That is what the church did as it got ready for the descent of the Spirit, the fulfillment of the Father's promise.

2. Preach, vv. 16-20

But though the church began with prayer, it certainly did not stop with prayer. After prayer, they had preaching, as Peter got up and explained the word to them. Now, I daresay that when we read Psalm 69 earlier, you did not immediately think that it was about Judas. Yet Peter says here

that Psalm 69, and Psalm 109 too, are about Judas. How can that be? Historically speaking, these psalms were written a thousand years before Judas was even born. We know that King David was wise, but do we really believe that he was familiar with the name and character of Judas Iscariot and decided to write a psalm about him? That would be a little bit like William the Conqueror writing a poem about Adolf Hitler. It just doesn't fit.

Some people, confronted with this, have thrown in the towel and walked away from the Christian faith. Peter Enns, once a conservative professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, did something along these lines about fifteen years ago when he realized that some things in the Bible just, as he saw it, could not be true. What can we say to Prof. Enns and those like him, who are prepared to say that King David could not have been talking about Judas Iscariot and therefore that Peter is a liar and the Christian Bible is all based on a total misunderstanding of some ancient texts compiled by Hebrew priests in the 500s B.C.? We would say this: The Bible is a thoroughly supernatural thing. It is a thoroughly natural thing too. It is fully human and fully divine, just like the Son of God. But also like the Son of God, its divine element is first and controlling. David was writing about the king of God's kingdom and cursing the enemies of the kingdom of God in those two psalms. He was not thinking about Judas when he wrote them — but the Holy Spirit was, and the Holy Spirit was writing them through David's mouth. That's what Peter says, right here in v. 16.

The Spirit knew what Judas was going to do. And David knew that the Lord's Messiah would be betrayed by a close friend (Ps. 41). He knew that this man would deserve an overwhelming curse and that another man would have to be appointed to take his office. And so David wrote about it in these two psalms, and Peter quotes it here. Later on, we'll see how the church applied Ps. 2 to a situation of persecution.

In other words, brothers and sisters, the Bible is about Jesus. Insofar as David was a type of Christ and one of His most prominent ancestors, the things that happened to David are fulfilled by the things that happened to Christ. And since we are united to Christ, the things that are written about Him become true of us as well as we grow more and more like Him. We will see that over and over as we go through this book of Acts, which is completely saturated with references to the Psalms and the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, for the apostles and the rest of the characters in Acts, there was nothing "Hebrew" about it. It just was the Bible. They were writing what we know as the New Testament, but they hadn't written any of it yet when Peter cited these two psalms and said "This kind of enmity to Christ came to a head in Judas' attack on Jesus. So his property is desolate, and another man will have to take his office."

That was what they did for preaching in those days: They took a text out of the Bible and explained its relevance to the church that was there sitting in front of them. And that's what I am called and every preacher is called to do, week by week. Woe unto me if I don't preach the text and explain how it is relevant to you and to me this week! If I'm not talking about the word of God to the people in front of me at this historical moment, I'm not preaching. That's clear already from this first reported sermon in Acts. It behoves you, as the people of God, to insist that your preacher deliver the word of God to you and explain to you what you're supposed to do

about it. If he doesn't do that, pray for him. If he continues to not do it, talk to him and redouble your prayers. And if he still doesn't do it, you will probably need to find a preacher who does. I'm serious. Peter preached to them while they were gathered. And I preach to you while you are gathered.

B. Get Ready for the Spirit, vv. 21-26

Well, what does Peter say that the church in front of him needs to do? They need to replace Judas.

1. Replace Judas

That's the application section of his message. It starts in v. 21 with the word "It is necessary that." He doesn't say "We have to," or "You should." He uses an impersonal construction: "It'll have to be done." This impersonal construction was slightly more common in Greek than it is in our English today, but we still use it, particularly in phrases like "It's raining." If you ask someone who says that, "What's raining?" the person will have a hard time answering you. We just say that it is raining. Well, the Bible typically uses the impersonal construction to mean that God regards it as necessary. God requires it. That, of course, is what preaching is about. It is the preacher's job to tell you "This is what God wants." And what God wanted them to do was to replace Judas.

2. Complete the Twelve Apostles

Now, why did God want that? Peter knew not just by reflecting on Scripture (Psalms 69 & 109 hardly say "There always need to be 12 apostles"), but by reflecting on the church's situation too. Where were they in salvation history? They were in the unique 10-day period between the Ascension and Pentecost. They needed to be ready for the Spirit to come. And for that, there needed to be 12 apostles.

3. Reconstitute Israel

But again, why? Where does it say "Thou shalt have 12 apostles"? Of course, as you all know, the Bible doesn't say that. Jesus didn't say "You, plus the one you pick to replace Judas, will be my witnesses in Jerusalem," etc. Rather, Peter knew that there should be 12 apostles because there were 12 tribes of Israel. In other words, Peter preached these texts from Pss. 69 & 109 in light of the historical foundation of Israel on the 12 sons of Jacob. Those sons each had a tribe named after them, yielding twelve tribes. We can also note in passing that there were really 14 tribes, and there were also 14 apostles — not 12 of either, even though 12 is the headline figure. If you remember, though, Reuben was banned from being a tribe because he defiled his father's concubine. Joseph, meanwhile, did not have a tribe of Joseph. Instead, he had two tribes, named for his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. So that means that we have 12 sons, but two have been subtracted and two added so that we still come out with 12. But in Revelation, instead of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, John mentions the tribes of Reuben and Joseph. There were 14 tribes, folks. And in the same way, we have the original 12 apostles, minus Judas, plus Matthias and then Paul. That leaves a total of fourteen apostles, just as there were fourteen tribes of Israel.

Anyway, that is not the lesson for us at the moment. Instead, the lesson for us is to look at Peter's symbol-driven biblical reasoning. Peter knew that there were 12 tribes. And he knew that

the church is the new Israel, or better, the reconstituted Israel. And just as Israel started with a dozen leaders, so the church needs to do so as well. This symbolism is important to God; it's picked up in Revelation, where we are told that the foundations of Heaven have the 12 names of the tribes of Israel, but the gates have the 12 names of the apostles of the Lamb. The city is built on ancient Israel and its tribes, but the way into it is through the apostolic teaching. That's incredibly important — and it's why Peter said “We have got to have a 12th apostle.” He was not looking at a direct command; he was looking at what was fitting for the church in that historical moment based on Biblical teaching and example.

It is imperative that you find a pastor who can do that — one who is able to understand not just the direct commands, but also the broader symbolic picture of the church. You might say “That must be why Peter was an apostle, because how he got that lesson is way beyond me.” And you would be right, more or less. But we must also say that anyone can see that Israel had twelve tribes, and that the church is the group that has become the new Israel, the new kingdom of priests and holy nation. Thus, it was important to get the foundation complete so that the new Israel could be built on this foundation of the apostles. You can't make a foundation out of a missing, apostate apostle.

So Peter preached, and so we know to be the case. The body there put forward the two men who met Peter's criteria for an apostle. Jesus chose one of them by speaking through the casting of lots. He no longer ordinarily speaks by the flipping of a coin. But He did on this occasion to make it clear that this apostle was not self-appointed, nor human-appointed, but chosen by God Himself.

II. What the Church Should Do

Well, that is what the church did in the passage in front of us. And what can we learn from it?

A. Gather, vv. 12-15

The first thing we learn is that we need to gather. You and I need to come together.

1. Pray

And while we are together, we need to pray. Prayer is mentioned over and over in Luke-Acts. Jesus prayed. The disciples prayed. The early church prayed. And if you and I don't pray, together, united in heart and voice with one another, then we are not like the early church and we should not expect to see the blessing that attended the early church. This church has two prayer meetings because not all of us have prayer partners at home. Thus, we as your elders have established two prayer meetings because we want to emphasize the necessity and power of united prayer. Waiting for God's promises to come true doesn't preclude praying; in fact, it emphatically includes praying! If you don't come to prayer meeting, you are not a bad Christian — necessarily. But you certainly need to be praying with your family, with a prayer partner, or in some other prayer meeting not sponsored by this church. Do you know how many times the New Testament talks about individual prayer? That's right: one time. One time! Jesus says “Go in your closet and pray.” Every other command to pray in the NT is in the plural. I will certainly say this: If you never pray with others, you are a bad Christian. You are not doing something that Jesus was incredibly clear about. Christians pray, and they don't do it alone. They do it with

others. Yes, we pray as part of our worship service. That's a good start. But let's just say that if you only talk to your father at family gatherings, you're not as close to him as you should be. But if you don't talk to him even there, there's something wrong with you.

2. Preach

The other thing the church needs to be doing is preaching. That has two sides, talking and listening. From the beginning, the church has had one person stand up front and do the preaching, even as Peter did in the text before us. But the whole church — and this very much includes the preacher — is called to be the listening church. If you're going to talk to God and expect to be heard, you better listen when He speaks to you — which He does in His word, both read and preached.

You all are fairly good at gathering for preaching. Many of you are good at gathering for prayer, too, within your own families or with the church body or both. I praise God for that. But don't rest on your laurels now. Don't decide that now is the time to take it easy. Pray. Preach.

B. Walk By the Spirit

And walk by the Spirit. In this passage, the church is getting ready for the Spirit to come. We already have Him! That means that in order to imitate the early church, we should not be readying ourselves for the Spirit. We should be walking by the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit. He is here. We live like that by worshipping Him in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord.

C. Build on the Apostolic Foundation

And finally, we build on the apostolic foundation. Our chapter was about selecting the twelfth apostle so that the foundation of the church could be complete. Our life in the body today, in the moment in history in which God has placed us, is not about selecting a twelfth apostle but about listening to the apostles we already have. What do they tell us?

1. Get Ready to Deal with Apostasy

Well, I find three major lessons in this text. The first has to do with the gory story of Judas. We read the story of Jesus already knowing the end. We see the name "Judas" and shudder. But actually, of course, to them he was Judah, and he was maybe the most trusted of all the apostles because they had made him treasurer. He is notable not for wanting to call down fire, but for wanting to give to the poor. When Jesus said "One of you will betray me," they didn't all say "Yeah. Judas. It's pretty obvious who the snake is."

No. They had no idea. They each thought He was talking about them. Peter thought He was talking about Peter, etc. That's because Judas fit right in. He was just as good an apostle as the other 11. And don't you forget it. Yes, of course sometimes the apostates will be the people that don't surprise you. "Oh, yes. Them. Yeah, I saw that one coming 25 years ago." But just as often, the apostates will shock you. For instance, you know that Ravi Zacharias engaged in sexual misconduct. And the list could go on and on. Indeed, sometimes it's easier to list the prominent preachers about whom there has been nothing scandalous than to list those who have fallen to theological heresy, sexual sin, or financially shady shenanigans.

Judas Iscariot apostatized. Just try, just for a moment, to hear that again with fresh ears. *One of the twelve apostles was a devil.* I mean, we all know it. And we just mentally write off Judas from the get-go. But he was a genuine apostle, appointed by Jesus, treasurer of Jesus Christ Ministries International, Inc. And he fell hard, so hard that he sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

And you're not apostles. You're not handpicked by the Son of God like Iscariot was. What makes you think that you will do better? That you are less likely to fall? Or, failing that, that your pastor won't fall into sin? That your spouse/sibling/elder/granddaughter will not deny Christ? Apostasy is a real thing, and it's a common thing. Get ready to deal with it. How do you deal with it? By recognizing what Peter said in v. 16: The Bible promises that apostasy is necessary. Jesus said "It must needs be that offenses will come." Paul said "There must be heresies among you." Why is it necessary? Because God tests us. Because He wants us to see who is genuine and who isn't. And He wants us to see whether we are genuine — or not.

So apostasy doesn't take God by surprise. It's a necessary part of life in a fallen world. And don't let it take you by surprise either.

2. Expect to be Ridiculous

Though that's the case — though the world acts like it's not surprised by apostasy because "Who could believe that garbage anyway?" — the world still likes to laugh when Christians fall, and especially when apostles fall. Apostolic apostasy is the mother of all scandals. And it's openly recorded in the pages of the New Testament. Even people who don't know anything about Peter and Paul can probably tell you the name and salient characteristic of Judas Iscariot.

And you serve the Messiah who picked him.

Yes. Jesus picked a thief for His treasurer. He gave His whereabouts to the one who was going to sell Him out. If that's not a good reason to walk away from the faith, I don't know what is. Of course, at the end of the day Jesus did that because He came to die. Judas was part of that process — a willing part, a willing partner with Satan, but also one who figured in Jesus' plan to die for our sins. Judas meant it for evil, but Jesus meant it for good.

That said, you serve a Messiah who died in weakness, naked on a cross. He was crucified by a colonizing empire, at the behest of the religious elites who theoretically served Him. If you want a muscular message of domination and triumph, don't look here. In some other religion, perhaps, Jesus would have called the twelve legions of angels and watched while they tortured Judas right there in front of Him, and then He would have invaded Rome, killed the high priest and started over with someone faithful in that role, and generally set the world right in a way that it could understand. He didn't do that. That's not how He works. He set the world right by dying in front of it, taking its pain and shame and guilt on Himself. And if you want to serve Him, get ready for that. Get ready to be jeered at and to live and die in weakness.

3. Don't Expect to be Prominent

Finally, don't expect to be prominent. Yes, you're somebody. You're a name in the kingdom, as we saw in v. 15. But Matthias was an apostle, for crying out loud — and he promptly vanishes after the final verse of this chapter. So do all the rest, except Peter, John, and James. There were

12 apostles, but only a quarter of them did anything. Thus the church was founded, and in that noble tradition it has carried on to this day — oh, wait. Excuse my sarcasm.

Anyway, not even the apostles get a lot of space in Acts. How much less should you expect to be remembered as somebody who was really somebody in the Kingdom of God?

You can be certain about the Kingdom. You can be certain that Kingdom citizens gather for prayer and preaching. You can be certain that the church should build on the apostolic foundation. And you can be certain that people around you will leave the faith and leave you a laughingstock for having trusted them. That's not a reason to despair, give up, or be sad. It's a reason to put your faith in Jesus, the great Lord of the church who built it on the foundation of the apostles but was Himself its cornerstone.

Pray. Preach. Gather. And believe. And I'll see you in Heaven. Amen.