

Our text this evening is verses 12-26 of Acts 1 which deals with the time between Jesus' ascension into heaven and the day of Pentecost - the day Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church. These verses tell us the story of what the followers of Jesus did while they were waiting for Jesus to send the Holy Spirit upon them. The majority of the verses deal with the replacement of Judas so that the number of the apostles was restored to 12.

The first paragraph of this section describes the 11 apostles returning to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension. They gather with some others in an upper room. The names of the 11 apostles are given. Meeting with them are a number of women who belonged to Jesus followers, Mary the mother of Jesus and Jesus' brothers.

The reason for listing the names of the 11 apostles is to make that point that these men were the ones that Jesus had chosen as his first disciples. The names are the same as the names in the lists of twelve disciples that are recorded in the Gospels except that Judas is not listed. The point is to confirm that these 11 are the core group of disciples who had been chosen by Jesus and so they were authorized by Jesus himself to fulfill the key role of being the foundation of the NT church. One of Luke's great concerns in the book of Acts is to establish the continuity between Jesus and his mission before the ascension and after the ascension. We will look at the role of the apostles shortly, but for now we see that listing the names of the 11 disciples confirms that these 11 men were the ones Jesus had chosen to be his apostles.

With the 11 in this initial group were a group that Luke refers to as "the women." These are undoubtedly the same women that Luke refers to in his Gospel at 8:2-3. Luke there describes Jesus going through cities and villages bringing the good news of the kingdom. He mentions that the twelve were with him and he mentions that a number of women were also with him. These women, Luke says, "provided for them out of their means." These women had been followers and supporters of Jesus' mission and they were among the group that gathered with the apostles as they waited for Jesus to send his Spirit upon them. Some of these women had been the first witnesses of the resurrection. Luke also mentions that Mary, Jesus' mother, was there as well as his brothers. We know from the gospels that Jesus' brothers had not always believed in Jesus, but their presence in this initial group waiting for the Holy Spirit indicated that they had come to faith.

Luke mentions two things about this group. Verse 14 says, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer...." They were praying and they were praying together. They were united in prayer. This highlights the importance of believers praying together. It highlights the importance of prayer meetings. David Peterson writes in his commentary, "It is striking that at almost every turning point in the narrative of God's redemptive action in Acts we find a mention of prayer...." (p. 118) There is a mysterious relationship between God's fulfilling his purposes for his kingdom and prayer, but there is no question that God uses the prayers of his people for the coming of his kingdom.

What is particularly interesting in this passage is the relationship between Jesus' promise of the Spirit and prayer. Before he ascended into heaven Jesus had told the apostles to "wait for the promise of the Father." He

had told them that they would “be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” They had Jesus’ explicit promise concerning the Holy Spirit and yet as they were waiting for the fulfillment of that promise, they were busying praying for the fulfillment of that promise. They were devoting themselves to prayer.

We too live in the light of promises. Jesus has promised to build his church. God has promised that “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow ... and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” And if we follow the example of the followers of Jesus waiting in that upper room, we will devote ourselves to prayer that the Lord will fulfill all the promises that are yet to be fulfilled.

Verse 15 begins a new paragraph and we are told that “Peter stood up among the brothers” and that “the company of persons was in all about 120.” Probably this is describing different meeting. The meeting described in the preceding paragraph appears to have been far less than 120. So we have a somewhat larger group, but still a fairly small group. We don’t know whether this was all of the followers of Jesus at that time, but certainly before the outpouring of the Spirit, the numbers were fairly small. During his lifetime Jesus sometimes attracted large crowds, but the number of his real followers was always quite small. This 120 may well represent the majority of Jesus’ followers at that moment.

Peter take the lead. He stands up and begins to speak. Peter is very prominent in these opening chapters of Acts. And that reflects an ongoing reality in Christ’s church. There are always a few whom God has called to be prominent leaders in the church and there are always a larger number who are called to be less prominent leaders in the church and then we have church members who are called to follow the leaders of the church. All believers are important and have an important contribution to make. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:7 writes, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” It is interesting to observe leadership in the church. There are those who are household names at least in Christian circles. Sometimes that degree of prominence is not healthy, but many times it is simply the result of God’s calling and gifting. And they are a tremendous blessing to the church.

But most leaders in the church are not so prominent. Very few people know of us outside of a relatively small circle. And that is just fine. God’s kingdom grows through a few highly gifted leaders and we are so grateful for them and a much larger number of leaders who toil in obscurity and through the variety of gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to all of his people, the church is built and the kingdom comes. It is interesting that most of the apostles are never mentioned again in the Bible after this chapter. They labored in relative obscurity. We ought to be thankful both for the ones who stand out and the ones who worked in obscurity. They both belong to God’s way of building his church. We can be grateful for Peter and Paul and Augustine and Calvin and Ferguson and Keller and Piper, but also for the many whose names are known only to a few, but who are a vital part of the picture of God building his church.

The rest of this paragraph to the end of verse 20 deals with Judas. Judas had been one of the twelve disciples Jesus had chosen. He had followed Jesus almost right to the end, but near the end, he had betrayed Jesus by helping the authorities arrest Jesus. He was the one who betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver.

There are two verses in parentheses that give some detail about Judas' death – verses 18-19. Matthew's gospel also has a description of Judas's death and his version is different from what Luke tells us here. I won't go into the details except to say that Matthew says that Judas hung himself and Luke's version here is rather graphic and gross saying that Judas "fell headlong [and] burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out." I'm not exactly sure why we need to know that.

Now those who do not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible just say that there are two contradictory versions of Judas' death in the Bible. We who believe that the Bible is without error can't take that approach. We must harmonize the two accounts. And usually that is not hard to do. The biblical authors wrote from different perspectives and tended to notice different aspects of the same event. So in this case it may be that first Judas hung himself and after a time his body decayed and fell and burst open. We don't have a lot to go on, but we trust that both perspectives are true and that they do not contradict one another.

In any case, these details about Judas' death do not appear to be part of Peter's speech, but rather added by Luke to give some background about Judas to help this readers to understand why he had to be replaced. That is why the ESV puts these verses in parentheses.

Peter's concern is to show that what happened to Judas had to happen in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled. Perhaps Judas apostasy raised questions about Jesus' judgment in choosing him in the first place. Peter here is making it clear that Judas' apostasy had to happen because it was part of God's plan.

It is very common in the gospels and in the book of Acts that we are told that this or that happened that the Scriptures might be fulfilled. And every time we read that, the point that is being made is that the event being mentioned had to happen because it was part of God's plan. Notice how Peter puts it here. "[T]he Scripture had to be fulfilled ... concerning Judas." There was a divine necessity that Judas betray Jesus and end up dead in a field. And that divine necessity is made known to us because of the way Judas' betrayal and death fulfilled Scripture. That divine necessity does not in any way minimize Judas's responsibility. But what Peter is emphasizing here is the fact that Judas' apostasy was part of God's plan because it fulfilled Scripture.

Now the fulfillment of Scripture is not always the fulfillment of a prediction. The Scripture passages that Peter mentions to demonstrate that Judas' betrayal and death fulfilled Scripture are not predictions. Rather they are foreshadowings of the events that fulfill them. That is why it is sometimes difficult for us to see the connection between the event and the Scripture that it fulfills. In verse 20, Peter quotes from two Psalms. "For it is written in the Book of Psalms, 'May his camp become desolate and let there be no one to dwell in it'; and 'Let another take his office.'" It is not that the OT saints could have pondered these verses and know beforehand

that Judas would betray Jesus and then be replaced so that there would be twelve apostles again. What is going on here is that, after the fact, the disciples could see how Judas' betrayal and death fulfilled a theme in Scripture that alerted them to the fact that Judas' betrayal and death were part of God's plan.

Let's look at these two quotations. The first one comes from Psalm 69:25. Psalm 69 is one of the most quoted Psalms with respect to Jesus fulfilling it. It is a Psalm of David. It is about David being attacked by his enemies without cause. Jesus fulfills this Psalm in a number of ways, not because it predicted exactly what would happen to Jesus, but because David's experience as a righteous sufferer being attacked by enemies foreshadowed Jesus' experience of being hated without cause. Since David is a type of Christ, aspects of his experience foreshadowed what Christ would experience and the apostles guided by the Holy Spirit saw in these foreshadowings the fact that it was God's plan that David's Son should suffer and be hated without cause.

And in the same Psalm David prays that the enemies who persecuted him would be punished by God. Psalm 69:24-25, "Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger over take them. May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents." Peter sees that Judas' death and terrible end is a fulfillment of these verses. It is not that these verses explicitly predict Judas' terrible end. It is that after the fact the apostles saw how Judas' terrible end fulfilled these verses. And the great take-away from this is that Judas' betrayal and death were not some random event, but they had to happen because they were part of God's plan.

The second verse that Peter quotes makes the same point. Psalm 109 is another Psalm of David where David is describing his unjust suffering because wicked men were persecuting him. And once again David is praying that God will punish the wicked people who are unjustly persecuting him. So he prays in verses 7-8, "When he is tried, let him come forth guilty; let his prayer be counted as sin! May his days be few; may another take his office!" In this case David is being persecuted by enemies who held some kind of office and he prays that they would die and that someone else take that office. Again this is not a prediction, but rather after the fact, the apostles saw the need to replace Judas a fulfillment of this verse and so they saw the need to replace Judas with someone else as part of God's plan.

This is what all of the fulfillment language in Scripture is about. All the different ways that the OT foreshadows Jesus and the events surrounding his ministry make the same point that these things are all part of God's plan for the coming of his kingdom and the salvation of sinners. And the reason that Luke includes this episode in his account of the early church is that one of his great goals in writing the book of Acts is to show that the events that he is recording are part of the same plan of God as the events involving Jesus while he was on earth. Jesus had ascended into heaven. It was important for later generations to know that what happened after his ascension was part of the same plan of God that we see unfolding in the OT and in the gospels.

One of the take-aways for us is that we do not need to be surprised when prominent leaders in the church fall away and even become persecutors of the church. We sing of this in the hymn, “The Church’s One Foundation.” “[T]hough there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale, against or foe or traitor she ever shall prevail.” Just as Judas’ betrayal and death were part of God’s plan so there will be others like him who will also be part of God’s plan for the coming of his kingdom. By including these verses in his account of the early church, Luke is making the point that our faith should not waver when even prominent leaders in the church turn away from the Lord. These things must happen. They are part of God’s plan.

So we come to the last paragraph of Acts 1. This tells the story of how the Judas was replaced by Matthias to bring the number of apostles back to twelve. These verses are very important for us to understand the role that the 12 apostles were to play in the fulfillment of God’s plan for the establishment of the NT church and the coming of God’s kingdom.

There were three requirements to be one of the twelve apostles. He had to have been with Jesus from the time that he was baptized until the day of his ascension. He had to have been a witness to Jesus’ resurrection. And he had to be chosen by Jesus. So besides the 11 there were at least two others who met the first two qualifications. There were apparently a number of men who had been with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. Two of these were put forward and then one of them was chosen by lot. Choosing by lot was something like flipping a coin. The ESV Study Bible says that “The lots were probably marked stones that were placed in a pot and then shaken out.” Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”

Before the apostles cast the lot they prayed and what they prayed is important for our understanding of what it meant to be one of the twelve. Verses 24-25 say, “And they prayed and said, ‘You Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these you **have chosen** to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” These verses make it clear that Matthias was the one whom the Lord had chosen to replace Judas. So the twelve apostles had all been chosen by the Lord himself, they had all been with him from the time of his baptism until the time of his ascension and they were witnesses to his resurrection.

Now this is the last instance of the casting of lots in the Bible. What happens next is that the Holy Spirit is poured out and discerning the will of God now is done through prayer and deliberation in the light of the Word of God. Once the Holy Spirit had been given the will of God was discerned by his leading which in turn is discerned by applying the word of God prayerfully and after discussion with other believers. But in the case of adding Matthias to the 11 to make 12 apostles, the casting of lots was used and it was how the early church knew that all twelve of the apostles were chosen by Jesus.

Now why was that so important? It was so important because it make it clear that these twelve men were authorized by Jesus himself to preserve the story of Jesus, to preserve his teaching, and to further interpret

the meaning of Jesus and his ministry. They had been with Jesus through his whole ministry on earth. They had witnessed him after he had risen from the dead. And Jesus had chosen each of them to belong to that very select group whose teaching about Jesus and his significance would be the foundation of the NT church. Once the Holy Spirit was poured out and the members were being added to the church, we are told that the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.”

Here is a clear expression of this point written in a dictionary article by R.D. Rightmire. “Having direct knowledge of the incarnate word, and being sent out as his authorized agents of the gospel, the apostles provided the authentic interpretation of the life and teaching of Jesus. Because their witness to Christ was guided by the Holy Spirit, the apostle’s teaching was considered normative for the church. They were regarded as the “pillars” and “foundation” of the church and their teaching became the norm for Christian faith and practice.” (Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology).

There is another aspect to the significance of the apostles and that has to do with the fact that there had to be twelve of them. Jesus chose 12 disciples to be his inner circle and once Judas turned against Jesus he had to be replaced so that there would again be twelve apostles. The fact that this happens just before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit indicates that there needed to be 12 and not 11 apostles for the Holy Spirit to be poured out.

The number 12 identifies the apostles as the nucleus of the restored Israel. The number 12 reflects the fact that there were 12 tribes of Israel. And so they are the renewed Israel and they receive the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel in the OT.

Consider the following promise from Isaiah 44:1-5. I’ll just read parts of it. God is speaking and he says, “But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! ... I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring and my blessing on your descendants.” And Isaiah 49:6 says that the servant of the Lord, who is Jesus will “raise up the tribes of Jacob and ... bring back the preserved in Israel.” And then he continues a promise that refers to both Jesus and Israel, “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

The fact that there had to be twelve apostles shows that the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel will be fulfilled in them as the core of the new Israel which will then be a blessing to the rest of the nations. It is very interesting that one of the requirements that had to be met before the Holy Spirit was poured out was that there be twelve apostles who would be the beginning of the renewed Israel promised throughout the OT. And this is the connection between the promises made to Israel in the OT and the NT church. The NT church is the new Israel. But the beginning of the NT church is 12 Jewish men whom Jesus had chosen to be the beginning of the new Israel which would in turn be a light to the nations and draw the nations to Jesus through the witness of the apostles and the Jews who were converted through their preaching.

Now all of this underscores the importance of the OT for understanding Jesus and the gospel. And what that does is place Jesus and the gospel in the light of the mission of God that began when God made his first promise of salvation shortly after the fall of Adam and Eve. All of these different connections that the NT authors make to the OT enrich our understanding of the plan of God in Jesus for the salvation of his people, for the defeat of evil, for the coming of his kingdom and for the renewal of all things.

And it is in the light of that grand narrative that we live and move and have our being as believers in Jesus Christ. This is God's plan for his world. This is the meaning of history. This is where the world is headed. "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

And we participate in that through faith in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus our sins are blotted out. Through Jesus we are right with God and heirs of eternal life. Through Jesus we receive the Holy Spirit so that we can be part of the mission of being a light to the nations. We do that by growing in holiness by the Spirit. We do that by reflecting Christ in our lives. We do that by loving one another and giving the world a glimpse of the life of the coming age. We do that in supporting the mission of God by our lives and by our words.

Israel was the recipient of the glorious promises that we read of in the OT and see fulfilled in Jesus and in the apostles as the new Israel. Being the recipients of those promises through faith in Christ is the greatest possible blessing, but at the same time we are blessed so that we worship God and be a blessing to the world. May the Lord use the preaching of his Word to encourage us by the certainty of God's plan and to motivate us to seek more and more to be part of what God is doing in the fulfillment of that plan.