

God's Unstoppable Mission:  
Stories from the Acts of the Apostles  
**Finding our Place in the History of Grace**

Acts 1:1-3

(September 10, 2006)

This morning I am beginning a sermon series that I am calling *God's Unstoppable Mission: Stories from the Acts of the Apostles*. Stories are loved by all of us because when we hear stories, watch stories in movie form or read them in book form they invite us into another world. Good stories not only invite us into another world, they also help us to better understand the world in which we live. If you are a parent you have undoubtedly read this story, *Good Night Moon* to your very young children. On a much more serious note, the movie *Flight 93*, captures something of the horrors of 9/11 in a way that help the viewers to more fully capture what happened on that life-changing day.

Not only do stories do this, it is also true with songs. When I am captured by a song and want to hear it repeatedly it is often because the music and lyrics work on my mind and heart in a way that help me to better understand my place in the world. They can also be just plain fun at the same time.

I have been enamoured by a song I want to play for you now. The lyrics talk about a man named Matthew West and his experience and understanding of what it means to be a Christian. As he thinks about his story, he connects it into the story of what the Creed calls the Communion

of the Saints. He then asks the listener to think about his or her story. So let's listen to it now and then I will explain to you why I think it's such a good song to introduce the Acts of the Apostles.

### **Next Thing you Know**

I remember when I was thirteen I saw a picture on my T.V. screen  
The Reverend Billy Graham and the people singing "Just As I Am"  
And it felt like You were talking to me And the whole world seemed to  
fade away Until I heard my mother say:  
"Son, are you okay? Do you wanna pray?" And that became the hour I  
first believed

Next thing you know I'm high and flyin' Next thing you know My  
heart is in your hands Next thing you know There's no denyin' Next  
thing you know I'm a brand new man

Well, I wish I could say I always stayed right there And I did until my  
freshman year But the world was pulling me a long way from thirteen  
And you were calling but I didn't hear Still I knew there was  
something more So, one day my knees hit the dorm room floor I said,

"If you're there, and if you really care, Come and talk to me like I was  
thirteen."

**Chorus Next thing you know I'm high and flyin' Next thing you know  
My heart is in your hands Next thing you know There's no denyin'  
Next thing you know I'm a brand new man**

### **Instrumental**

**Got a picture in my head today of how heaven might look someday I  
see the people there, so I pull up a chair And their stories, they blow  
me away 'Cause I can see it on every face The evidence of grace And as  
I listen it occurs to me Everybody's got their own thirteen**

**So, what's your story about His glory? You gotta find your place in the  
history of grace Yeah, what's your story about His glory? Come on and  
find your place**

**Chorus Next thing you know I'm high and flyin' Next thing you know  
My heart is in your hands Next thing you know There's no denyin'  
Next thing you know I'm a brand new man<sup>1</sup>**

When it comes to the Acts of the Apostles we have 28 chapters of stories that invite us into the world known as the kingdom of God. But these stories are not just for our entertainment, although they are entertaining. They are also intended for our conversion. As we listen to these stories,

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Luke wants us to find our identity more clear defined and understood as we read them. Luke is doing the same thing as Matthew West is doing in this song. As we read of people with names like Saul, Peter, Stephen Cornelius, and countless others we hear about their thirteens. We are also given an understanding of what it means to find ourselves in the history of grace. In writing to his friend Theopholus Luke intending to share the story of grace with just one person. But in so doing the Holy Spirit deemed it necessary that this story be recorded for posterity so that countless billions of other people could also her the story. That is the power of a good story, and indeed there are no stories more transforming than Gospel stories because when they get hold of our hearts with Matthew West we can sing:

Next thing you know I'm high and flyin' Next thing you know My heart is in  
your hands Next thing you know There's no denyin' Next thing you know  
I'm a brand new man

As Luke introduces his story he wants Theophlous to know that he had spend many hours listening to the stories of those who had been there with Jesus. Let's listen in on what he has to say:

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, 2 until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, 3 to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

In these verses Luke begins referring to the Gospel. He tells his friend that his intention in that volume was to write an account of all that Jesus had begun to do. The focus of the Gospel was of course on the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Now in Acts he will go on to show what Jesus will continue to do through those who were first generation disciples.

He also wants Theophilus to know that this is a reliable story. Back at the beginning of the Gospel he does this by writing the following:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

Notice that here Luke is emphasizing that his grasp of the Jesus story is one that is very clear in his mind. He says he had a perfect understanding of it. In other words he has the details very straight in his mind so that he can retell it truthfully and thoroughly. This is true of course not only of the Gospel but also of Acts. He wants the reader to know that what he started to tell us in volume one is carried on here in volume two. As he does this he emphasizes that Jesus was seen by the disciples by many infallible proofs as he talked to them about the kingdom of God.

So as we read through Acts we are to recognize that Jesus is the main player here as those who are empowered by the Holy Spirit live in the power of the Spirit making real the kingdom that will never pass away. And the way Luke will do this is with stories. And so I want to end this morning by saying three things about stories and then provide an application.

- i) Stories make sense.
- ii) This story in Acts not only depicts the nature of God but also makes real the promise of God to give us a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1).
- iii) Acts, like the rest of Scripture, has as its purpose the formation and equipment of disciples<sup>2</sup>

*1. Stories make sense.* A story not only means something but also *does* something. The story performs certain actions when told, heard, and remembered. In the telling of the story in Acts we begin to glimpse that behind what happens there is an active presence who gives coherence and meaning to the narrative. As it turns out, it was not just by chance, not just blind fate, that Saul happened to be on the road to Damascus. It was not for nothing that the believers happened to be gathered in an upper room at Pentecost. They are part of a story that *makes sense*, that reveals an author who is someone more than

Luke, someone none other than the one in whom "... we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God is not just a character in the

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<sup>2</sup> the material that follows comes directly from a commentary by William H. Willimon on Acts from the Interpretation series.

story, rather God is the author who makes the story possible and whose nature and purposes are revealed in the telling of the story.

1. This story in Acts not only depicts the nature of God but also renders the promise of God to give us a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). The God of Luke-Acts is a God of promise who can be depended upon to be faithful to his promises. In listening to this story of God's fidelity to promises made "to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39), something happens to us. The reader becomes the recipient of the promise. Not only is a God depicted but a new world as well. The world rendered to us in Acts is not just a few images from the ancient Middle East or first-century Rome. What is portrayed is what is going on in the creation as a whole. This world in Acts is not a sober description of what is but an evocative portrayal of what, by God's work, shall be, a poetic presentation of an alternative world to the given world, where Caesar rules and there is enmity and selfishness between men and women and there is death. This is a world where God is busy making good of his promises. Therefore the future is never completely closed, finished, fixed. God has been faithful before (history) and will be faithful again (apocalyptic). The story is a stubborn refusal to keep quiet and accept the world as unalterably given. The "world" of Acts is what is real, what is really going on in life, the ultimate meaning and destiny of humanity. The more we talk about and tell stories of this "world," the more this "world" becomes our own. Or to coin Matthew West's phrase "We find our place in the history of grace".

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We find that we have not simply been listening to a story from some long ago, long away place but we have been changed by their story, shaped by it, so that we can no longer think of ourselves without thinking through their story. We live in a world where God makes promises and keeps them.

Whenever we tell the story of our lives or of our church, we can be expected to engage in a good deal of fanciful reconstruction and downright cover-up and deceit. It is a difficult task to see our lives truthfully. We are frightened creatures who, in the absence of a story which makes sense and gives us hope and security, can be counted upon to make up stories about ourselves in order to get by. My world is invariably refracted through the distorted vision of my own deceit and alienation. I need some story so coherent, so dependable, so truthful, yet so hopeful that it will enable me to tell my story truthfully. The Christian claim is more than that the stories in Acts are interesting, exciting or historically valuable – which they often are. Our claim is that these stories, are true. That is they help us to see the world as it truly is. The world really is a place where God's promises make a difference and that makes all the difference to us.

Lest this all sound too intellectualized, let us be reminded that *Acts, like the rest of Scripture, has as its purpose the formation and equipment of disciples.* Jesus did not come bringing an interesting philosophy of life. He came calling people to a new way of living and dying. The stories in Acts not only depict an author, God, not only render a new world, God's world, but they also render a new way of

living, discipleship in the church. Given who God is and the way God's world is, this way of life makes sense. When we read about the way the early church organized itself and stood with its surrounding culture, or when we read the exploits of people like Paul, we are learning what sort of pilgrimage life is, the dangers it holds for those who are faithful, the limitations inherent in this life, what sort of character is required to make it through, the rewards to be had by living faithfully.

Scripture, like any good story, depicts an adventure and gives clues as to how ordinary folk like you and I can get on in this life, can be the church today, or how we can miss the whole point. When asked by unbelievers, "How do we know your gospel is true?" we must, like Acts, trot out not only our little arguments for inspection but also our little lives. The best support any of us can give these stories is the way we back them up with the lives we lead.

One of the lovely things about the Gospel and Acts is that Luke mentions the powerful people of his time. They are so to speak the people who would be on the cover of all the flashy magazines. But Luke tells us that his story isn't about these super stars. Rather it is about ordinary people like you and me. I think it is important that we hear this afresh because we live in an age where we are oppressed by the cult of the superstar. Everywhere we see and hear stories of the famous or the would be famous. But the church is another kind of story. The people are ordinary but what makes them extra-ordinary is their encounter with the God who is at the centre of this story.

As we listen to these stories over the next two months may we people able to say yes there is evidence of grace on every face within this fellowship of Jesus' disciples, because we are more fully finding our palce in the history of grace.

Amen.