

Join our congregation as we read

The Book of Acts

Purpose: To reflect deeply and intentionally upon God's intents for our congregation. Praying that Trinity will use time during Lent to seek God's direction for our congregation rather than personal preference of comfort.

General Directions: During the season of Lent, the first chapter & study for each week will be discussed in small groups after worship. Groups will each have a facilitator to keep the conversation moving. You may talk with the same group of people each Sunday or flow between different groups. Then during the week, you are encouraged to complete the remaining chapters, questions, action plans and prayers for that week on your own. Feel free to discuss the studies with your spouse, kids or a friend as well. Be ready to share some of your answers, ah-ha moments and actions with others on Sundays.

Week 1: March 10 – 16, 2019

Chapter 1: Waiting

The book of Acts is a letter written by Luke to a person named Theophilus which means "God's friend" or "beloved of God." This is Luke's second letter to Theophilus. The first was the gospel of Luke. (Investigate more at Luke 1:1-4.) Why do you think Luke wants to write more? Why wasn't writing about Jesus enough?

The disciples are told to wait in Jerusalem. According to Jesus, what is God's dream for the disciples? (Verses 1 – 8)

Notice what the disciples (more than 12, including men and women) are doing while they are waiting (1:12-26). In what ways is our congregation waiting for God's direction? Are there ways in which you personally are waiting for God's guidance?

The disciples decided there was a leadership gap. How did they choose a replacement for Judas? What are the different ways leaders are chosen in our congregation? Is prayer involved? Think of the leadership you see in our congregation. What spiritual gifts are evident among them?

Action Plan: Write a note to someone affirming a spiritual gift you see in them that inspires and helps others in the faith community.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for people in leadership at Trinity.



Chapter 2: The Holy Spirit Brings Change

This story is the event that we celebrate as "Pentecost" every year. The Holy Spirit shows up like fire and wind and look what happens! What does it say about God's dream for the disciples that every one of them was speaking in a different language?

In what ways did that initial group of followers of Jesus change in this chapter (location, numbers, activities)?

How would you describe the change in Peter from the time he denied Jesus before the crucifixion to now after the Holy Spirit shows up?

Are there ways in which you think the Holy Spirit is changing our congregation? Are there ways that the Holy Spirit is changing your life?

Action plan: Pick one activity of that earliest congregation (2:42-47) and do it today.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for the Holy Spirit to continue working in and through Trinity.



Chapter 3: Interruptions on the Way

What did Peter and John plan for the afternoon and what interrupted them (3:1-3)? Can you think of some different ways that Peter and John could have responded? Did what they say and do surprise you? Why or why not?

How did the healed man's faith go public? How did Peter and John's faith go public? How does our congregation go public?

Peter and John gave credit to God for the healing (3:12-13), told about Jesus and invited the bystanders to change their hearts and turn back to God. Put yourself in the crowd. How would you respond?

Action Plan: Pray and ask God to interrupt your day by someone needing help in some way. When you help, will you have a chance to share why you are doing it---Jesus!? Ask God for courage.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for awareness of God's interruptions in your life.



Chapter 4: Arrested! (Or not?)

If you were the reporter for this event, what reasons would you give for Peter and John being arrested?

When does the Holy Spirit show up in this chapter? Why is the timing of the Spirit's power significant? How does this insight about the Holy Spirit encourage us? What do you think were the motives and fears behind the effort to stop the disciples? Were the disciples afraid? Why or why not?

Action Plan: Investigate one Christian organization working for social justice or relief in dire circumstances (Lutheran World Relief, LIRS- Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service, St. Joseph's Food Program, International Justice Mission). What roadblocks do they face? What motivates them to care about the people they are trying to serve/ heal/ free/ feed/ house/ educate/ etc.? What might the Holy Spirit be doing here?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for the organization you researched, social justice and relief aid.

Week 2: March 17 – 23, 2019

Chapter 5: Tell It Like It Is

Read again the last verse of Acts 4 where Barnabas (formerly Joseph) brings money for the church to the apostles. How is the monetary gift of Ananias and Saphira different? What characteristic of a healthy faith community is uplifted by the swift judgment and why do you think this characteristic is so important?

Where and what were the apostles doing in their community? Where can our congregation be found in the community and what do you think the community observes about us?

Who tells the truth with courage in this chapter? Which truth-teller is not a disciple? In what kind of situations do we need to speak out or witness to God's grace and love?

Action Plan: Go somewhere in the Fox Valley where you have never been - - perhaps a restaurant, a new store, a neighborhood never walked. Greet someone with a smile and hello and maybe a question about the place where you are.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for our community and for the person you met on your journey.



Chapter 6: Spiritual Gifts and New Leadership

The young church has growing pains and a complaint is voiced. In what healthy ways is the problem handled?

Where is and what is the Holy Spirit doing in this chapter? How do you think prayer leaves room for the Holy Spirit to act in your life?

This is the first we hear from Stephen. How is he described?

Action Plan: In verse 6, the apostles laid hands on and prayed for new leaders. Who do you see as the leaders at Trinity? Are there any new leaders? Make a list of leaders in our congregation and pray for them daily this week.

Prayer Suggestion: Continue to pray for those who lead at Trinity.



Chapter 7: Last Words

In chapter 6 Stephen was accused of insulting Moses and God and speaking against the temple and the law. How does Stephen's defense prove that accusation to be false? Of what does Stephen accuse the Council? Of whom does Stephen's last words remind you?

Where is the Holy Spirit at work in this chapter?

In what ways might you expect the Jerusalem church to react now that one of their leaders was stoned for his faith? Fleeing? Protests? Fear? Discouragement? Courage? Hiding? Keep doing what they are doing? Prayer?

Action Plan: Write a note from you to the early church, encouraging their faith after the event of Stephen's stoning. What do you think is important for them to hear?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for those face persecution and danger because of their faith.



Chapter 8: Spreading Out

Where and what is the Holy Spirit up to this chapter?

How is the growing persecution on the church in Jerusalem affecting mission? Where is the gospel being heard now and what barriers are being broken?

Are there any barriers that the Holy Spirit might be calling our congregation to cross over in order to carry out God's mission in our community?

Action Plan: Go for a walk with a friend or drive around a local neighborhood. Ask God to open your eyes to needs and for the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of those whose homes you pass. What barriers might need to be crossed?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for people in the local neighborhood you visited.



Chapter 9: New Visions and New Directions

The main actor in this chapter is God-Jesus-the Holy Spirit. What did God orchestrate in this chapter?

The Church took risks in this chapter. For example, Peter stayed in the home of Simon the Tanner and tanning was an unclean, unkosher business. What risk was that for Peter? What risks did Ananias (a different one from chapter 5), Barnabas and the Jerusalem church take in order to follow God's direction?

What was the church doing in the community that drew people to faith in Christ?

Action Plan: Be a detective. At the beginning of the day ask God to show you what God is up to today. Then when the day is over reflect on your day. Looking back, where did you notice God working? Were you involved in some of God's activity -- maybe even without planning it?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for courage to be a risk-taker.



Chapter 10: The Spirit Falls on Gentiles

Gentile means non-Jewish. Most of us are not Jews but Gentiles. What is surprising for the Jewish followers of Jesus in this chapter? What do you think was surprising for Cornelius and his Gentile friends and family?

When have you in your life had to make a surprising change in order to follow Christ?

Action Plan: Make a list of things that surprise you about God.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for continued openness to change.

Week 3: March 24 – 30, 2019

Chapter 11: Change on the Horizon

In this chapter the Church resists and then accepts major "policy" changes. What does Peter tell the Jerusalem church is the reason he changed his view about gentiles? After listening to Peter, why does the Jerusalem church change their mind about whether Gentiles could be Christians?

What convinced Barnabas that the Hellenists (non-Jewish Greeks) were genuine?

Can you think of ways that the church has changed over your lifetime? What changes have met the most resistance in our congregation? Looking back, what changes do you believe to have been good and directed by God?

Action Plan: Write down ways that you think God may be calling our congregation to change in the future?

Prayer Suggestion: Ask for God's guidance for Trinity as we move forward.



Chapter 12: The Church Prays and God Answers

How are Peter and the believers who are praying for him surprised by how God answers their prayers?

Review Acts 11:19-30 and read again Acts 12:24-25. From way back when Saul became a Christian, Barnabas has teamed up and encouraged Saul. What Christian friends have teamed up with you in areas of service and mission?

As you reflect on this chapter what is God inviting you to pray for?

Action Plan: Write a thank you note to a person who has mentored and encouraged your faith to grow or who has worked with you on a mission project. Or write a note of encouragement to someone who is younger or perhaps struggling in faith.

Prayer Suggestion: Prayers of thanks for those who have been examples to you through their faith or prayers of encouragement for those younger than you or struggling in faith.



Chapter 13: The Holy Spirit Appoints a New Team

In this chapter the Holy Spirit appoints (v. 2), sends (v. 4), empowers (v. 9) and is present (v. 52). How does the Holy Spirit appoint, send, empower and become present for you?

Paul preached a long sermon in the synagogue and people responded with both enthusiasm and resistance. What is your favorite part of the sermon (vs. 16-41)?

Action Plan: Make a list of "teams" that you have seen sent out from our congregation to serve and/or share the good news of Christ.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for those who are servants in our congregation.

Chapter 14: Stones, More Stones and a Case of Mistaken Identity

The Paul and Barnabas team are facing opposition. How do they respond?

Barnabas and Paul are mistaken  turn it into a teachable moment?

Where is God's protection evident?

Action Plan: Trinity recently adopted a new purpose statement. "Sharing God's love with all people as we grow in faith together." Write a purpose statement that fits with the Paul-Barnabas Team.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for God's guidance to help us live out our new purpose statement.

Chapter 15: Consensus and Disagreement

The believers in Jesus at a Jerusalem Council made a theological decision that, quite frankly, still affects us today. How has that decision changed the face of the Church today? Where do you think the Holy Spirit was in the process of making that decision?

Does it surprise you that Paul and Barnabas go their separate ways? What good could come out of that separation? What harm?

Action Plan: Ask someone in a leadership position if they have participated in a difficult decision for the congregation. Ask how they think the Holy Spirit may have been at work.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for the Holy Spirit to guide your decisions.



Chapter 16: If I Had a Dream

Name all the things that God / Holy Spirit / Spirit of Jesus does in this chapter. What surprises you? What is your favorite part of this adventurous story?

Action Plan: This account occurs in Philippi, a congregation that Paul held dear. Read of his love for these people in his letter written to them from prison: Philippians 1:1-11. What is your favorite verse or phrase in this part of the letter? Write it down and refer to it frequently throughout the day.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for those who are imprisoned.



Chapter 17: Turning the World Upside Down?

How would you describe the opposition / challenges that Christians faced in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens? How would you describe the "success"? What challenges and "successes" do we see in our ministry here in this place?

The Christians were accused in Thessalonica of "turning the world upside down." What was true and/or false about that statement? Would people accuse us of "turning the world upside down"?

Paul paid attention to the neighborhood of Athens to know how to make connections when he shared his faith in Christ. What about our congregation's neighborhood is important for us to pay attention to?

Action Plan: Take a drive or walk around the neighborhood (again) as if the apostle Paul were with you. What needs do you both see? Any ideas about connections Paul would say our congregation could make?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray again for the people in the neighborhood that you visited.

Chapter 18: New Leadership

Where does the new leadership come from in this chapter?

What kind of leadership role do Priscilla and Aquila play in the faith community? What about Apollos?

Action Plan: Look for a map (likely in the back of your Bible) of Paul's Missionary journeys. Find all the places that were named in Paul's travels in these last two chapters. Now get a map of our community. What places are you most familiar with?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for new believers and new leaders.



Chapter 19: "The Way" Confronts Evil, Economics, a Riot and a Town Clerk

In this and the previous chapter, Christians are beginning to call themselves "The Way." Can you come up with some reasons why this might be a good description?

What does this chapter specifically credit the Holy Spirit and God with doing? How was Paul used by God in this chapter? How did God use a simple town clerk?

Action Plan: Many Bibles have an introduction before each "book" written by people who have studied biblical history. Read the introductions to 1st Corinthians, 1st Thessalonians and Ephesians. These are letters written by Paul (or on Paul's behalf) to the congregations in places we have read about in the last three chapters.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for resolution to conflict.



Chapter 20: Farewell and Godspeed

The author (Luke) joins Paul at Troas where the Christians meet for conversation and to "break bread" (a meal which included prayer and communion). What do you notice and wonder about in this brief story (vs. 7-12)?

Paul is convinced of where he must go and what awaits him in his future and wants to say some final words to the leaders at Ephesus. Last words are important. If you were one of the Ephesians, how would Paul's last words be a guide for your future work in that congregation?

Action Plan: Has someone who was important to you ever said "last words" to you? If so, write down ways these words affected you. Or write down words you might say or write to someone you have mentored in faith if you were to find out you would never see them again.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for those who have shared important "last words" with you.

Chapter 21: An Uproar in Jerusalem

The disciples in Tyre warn Paul “in the Holy Spirit” not to go to Jerusalem. The prophet Agabus, warned by the Holy Spirit, tells Paul that he will be imprisoned in Jerusalem. Most of Paul’s fellow believers interpret these warnings to mean Paul should stay away from Jerusalem. Paul, however, interprets these warnings as reality checks of what is going to happen if he follows Christ’s call. Paul proceeds with more determination than ever. With whom do you identify in the story? Why do you think Paul is so sure? How do you think a congregation should determine together God’s will?

Does it surprise you that Paul is going through a Jewish purification ritual? Why or why not?

Rumors are rampant, the truth is twisted, the mob is violent. Why do you think Paul seems unafraid?

Action Plan: Do a little research to find a Christian (or a group) who is doing something courageous because they believe in God’s call. Pray for that person or group.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for the courageous Christian or group you researched.



Chapter 22: The Citizenship Card

Paul tells a spellbound crowd his personal story of coming to believe in Jesus Christ. Why do you think the crowd stopped yelling to listen? For the first time we also hear another piece of Paul’s story omitted earlier in Acts 9 - - about his praying in the Jerusalem temple on an earlier visit and Jesus telling him to leave and preach to the Gentiles. In what we have read in Acts so far, how has Paul obeyed that specific command of Christ? What do you think triggered the crowd into reacting violently again?

Are you surprised that there is a different system of justice reserved for Roman citizens? How does Paul’s citizenship change things for Paul?

Action Plan: Does our congregation / synod support missionaries in other countries? Do you know people from other countries who come to serve Christ in ministry here? Are there people from other countries whom you work or interact with during the week? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, find out more about that country through discussion or research.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for missionaries.

Chapter 23: Suspense and Conspiracy

How does Paul use the "Law" card against the high priest Ananias? How does Paul use the "Pharisee" card to confuse the Jewish Council? What do you think the message from the Lord that night in prison meant to Paul? An encouragement? A warning? Direction? Does it surprise you that the Lord says Paul is headed for Rome?

How is Roman law turning out to be a protection for Paul?

Action Plan: Check out LOPPW (Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin) or another advocacy group in our area and the kinds of legislation that are advocated for based on the social policy statements of the ELCA. The LOPPW website is found here: www.loppw.org. Are there laws you would like to see passed that would provide protection for people in our community?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for LOPPW and others who seek advocacy for social justice.

Week 6: April 14 - 20, 2019

Chapter 24: Passing Time in Prison

Governor Felix's help for Paul fizzles. What motivates Felix? If you were Paul, what might you be feeling / thinking at the end of this chapter?

Paul seems to have plenty of access to visitors while he is in prison. What do you suspect that Paul is doing with his time?

It is possible that some of Paul's letters in our New Testament could have been written at this time. Read Philippians 1:12-18 to find out how Paul viewed time in prison. (We are unsure which imprisonment is referred to here.)

Action Plan: Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, anti-Nazi dissident, and key founding member of the Confessing Church. He was known for his staunch resistance to the Nazi dictatorship, including vocal opposition to Hitler's euthanasia program and genocidal persecution of the Jews. He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo, imprisoned at Tegel prison for one and a half years, transferred to a Nazi concentration camp and was executed. While in prison, he wrote letters. Go to this web address to read quotes from his prison writings (in English):

<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1153999-widerstand-und-ergebung-und-aufzeichnungen-aus-der-haft>

Prayer Suggestion: Send prayers of thanks to the saints who have gone before us like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Apostle Paul.

Chapter 25: An Appeal to the Emperor

How does Paul's appeal to the emperor thwart the plans of the religious leaders in Jerusalem? What strange irony surfaces when governmental law must protect innocent persons from an unjust interpretation of religious law?

Paul has not yet given a defense to Festus or to Agrippa. Imagine visiting with Paul in prison on the night before Paul appears before Agrippa and Festus. What do you think the two of you would pray about? How do you think Paul is going to handle the situation: by defending himself from the accusations of religious leaders or by sharing the gospel message of Jesus Christ?

Action Plan: In 1521 Martin Luther was ordered to appear at the Diet of Worms to defend his writing before Emperor Charles V and representatives sent from the Pope in Rome. Rent the 2003 movie "Luther" or watch it on YouTube by searching "Film Luther 2003." What are the similarities and differences in Paul's and Luther's situations?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for religious leaders in our community.



Chapter 26: Paul's Defense & Testimony

Much of this chapter is Paul's defense before the Roman governor Festus and King Agrippa and Bernice. Did Paul handle the situation the way you were expecting at the end of the previous chapter?

If you were a visitor in the audience hall hearing Paul and his message about Jesus for the first time, what would make you curious to hear more?

Is there anything that you would have liked to happen in this chapter's scene that didn't?

How does the fact that people might not respond positively to the gospel message make it harder for us to be willing to talk about Christ to others? What gives us courage to speak up anyway.

Action Plan: Schedule a time with a participant who is reading Acts to each share a story about an experience of God in your faith life: how God called you to a task or helped you in a situation or used you in service or a time when God changed you in some way. What did you learn about each other?

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for the courage to share our faith with others.



Chapter 27: Storm and Shipwreck

Paul, even though a prisoner, is not traveling alone. Where do you notice the “we” in the text? Imagine the ways it was helpful to Paul to have companions along for a ride?

Where do we see God’s work in this chapter?

Paul says, “Keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.” If you were on the ship, would you have believed Paul? Would you have a different view of God once you made it to the beach?

Action Plan: Paul is certain that God’s purpose for him means giving his defense before the emperor in Rome. As our congregation continues to listen for God’s call and purpose for Trinity, pray for discernment about God’s next steps for the congregation.

Prayer Suggestion: Pray for discernment about God’s next steps for our congregation.



Chapter 28: Snakebite and Rome

In the previous chapter, Paul encouraged people on the ship to take courage. In this chapter, how does Paul receive courage from people?

In Rome, Paul is under house arrest. How does that situation become an opportunity for sharing the gospel?

Action Plan: We have read the book of Acts and what a journey this has been! Review some of the Action Plans you have done. How has God changed you on this journey?

Now you are ready to write down ways that our congregation, like Paul in Rome, has unique opportunities to share the gospel in the midst of its challenges. What do you think God’s purpose for our congregation may be in this time and place? Gather with others in the congregation and share your insights as we have conversations, listen carefully and pray through that question together.

Prayer Suggestion: Continue to pray for and listen to God’s call for our congregation.

Prepared by Pastor Elaine Dent, November 2016, revised February 2019

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Adapted for use at Trinity Lutheran Church, Appleton, WI – Lent 2019

Sunday, April 21 – Easter Celebrations

Sunday, April 28 – Acts Potluck (Easter brunch) & Party following worship