



Sermon Transcript

May 10, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption

The Kingdom of God Gone Viral

Acts 1:1-11

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 10, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Acts 1:1-11

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Introduction

“Gone viral” is a relatively new phrase in our common language. This now common phrase in our English language was given birth through the rise and growing popularity of YouTube. YouTube has only been around for 15 years. It was founded on Valentine’s Day, 2005. And now look at us! We have become dependent on YouTube to gather for worship while this virus—COVID-19—has itself “gone viral.”

According to the Urban Dictionary, the phrase “gone viral” refers to “an image, video or link that spreads rapidly through a population by being frequently shared with a number of individuals.” It is something that is circulated from person to person rather quickly most often through the internet. Not surprisingly, there is an ongoing debate over what the benchmark is for something to be considered having “gone viral.” Some say the benchmark is 100,000 views. And yet, only 1% of videos posted on YouTube reach a million views. Should that be the benchmark, some wonder. Or, some consider the benchmark for something having gone viral by how quickly something spreads on the internet. For example, if in the span of four hours there are 40,000 views, then they would argue that the video has “gone viral.” Either way, it is a phrase that describes the rapid spread of information from person to person.

One of the earliest videos to go viral was from 2007 when these two little brothers were sitting on the chair; the oldest holding his younger brother in his lap. The older brother stuck his finger near the mouth of his younger brother, who seized upon the opportunity and bit his brother’s finger. In his British accent, the older brother cried out, “Charlie, you bit my finger . . . that hurt, Charlie.” And then Charlie looks into the camera and does what any younger brother would do. He squeals with delight! That video went viral and to date it has been viewed over 870 million times.

This morning we continue our journey through the story of the Bible and we come to the letter “P” of CASKET EMPTY. This is the acronym we are using to tell the story of the Bible. CASKET puts together the story of the Old Testament. EMPTY puts together the story of the New Testament. The letter “P” stands for “Pentecost.” It is at Pentecost that we see the kingdom of God going viral. The book of Acts tells the story of how the kingdom of God rapidly spread from person to person.

We are told in Acts 1, that at the beginning of that day of Pentecost, there were about 120 people gathered together and waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit came, the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead,

and by the end of the day, 3000 were added to their number. The kingdom of God went viral in the span of one day. But it didn't stop there. By the end of the book of Acts we see that the kingdom of God had spread from Jerusalem to Rome. The book of Acts tells us that the "viral" nature of the kingdom of God had spread from Jew to Samaritan to Gentile. It had spread from region to region throughout the Roman Empire. It had spread from person to person to person.

But of course, if you have been tracking with us in this journey through the story of the Bible, you are not all that surprised to see the kingdom of God going viral. At every letter along the way, we have heard whispers of God's plan to restore this broken and fallen world through his Son, Jesus.

- "C" - **Creation:** After the fall of man, we heard the first whisper of God's promise to restore this broken world. The seed— the offspring—of the woman would crush the head of the serpent.
- "A" - **Abraham:** Abraham was promised that through his descendants God would bring his blessing to the world.
- "S" - **Sinai:** When God formed Israel into a people and brought them to Mt. Sinai and gave them his law—the Ten Commandments—he called them a *kingdom of priests*. He reminded them that the whole earth belongs to God and they were to bring God to the nations.
- "K" - **Kings:** We discover through the kings of Israel that Israel failed to be that holy nation. Instead, they became like the nations around them. Sin and the fallen nature of man had also gone viral—within Jew and Gentile alike. But even in their failure, God remembers his promise and he tells King David that he would have a son who would sit over God's kingdom forever.
- "E" - **Exile:** When Israel goes into exile for not keeping covenant with God, the prophets assure them that God will bring them back and form a new covenant with them.
- "T" - **Temple:** After Israel returns to Jerusalem, they rebuild the temple and the city, but it is never restored to her former glory. And then the prophets come and they speak of a coming day when the future glory of Israel will be greater than the glory of the past. That is how the Old Testament ends.

- "E" - **Expectation:** As the New Testament opens, the people of Israel are waiting with a sense of "expectation." The prophets talked about the coming kingdom of God what would someday fill the earth.
- "M" - **Messiah:** Along comes Jesus—the son of Abraham, the son of David—and what did we see the last few weeks? The message he proclaimed was that the kingdom

of God was at hand. He demonstrated the hope of the kingdom of God through his miracles. And then through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead he opened a way for sinful people like you and me to have our sins forgiven and to enter the kingdom of God.

That is where we pick up the story this morning, at the letter “P” - **Pentecost**. We see in Acts 1:3 that for the forty days between the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his ascension to heaven, Jesus spent time with his disciples *speaking about the kingdom of God*. He was preparing them for his soon departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And he tells them that when the Holy Spirit comes, that the kingdom of God will go viral. He says in Acts 1:8, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*”

And here we are today. The kingdom of God has spread from person to person, from nation to nation, from generation to generation. The kingdom of God is still going viral. It is going viral through people like you and me. In his book *Making Sense of God* Tim Keller notes that the growth of the kingdom of God in the non-Western world is stunning. By the end of this year, it is anticipated that Christianity will have grown from 11.4 million Christians in East Asia to 171.1 million. In 1910 only 12 million people in Africa were Christians. Today, there are 630 million followers of Christ in Africa.¹ In an article in *Newsweek* last year, David Garrison reported that the first part of the 21st century has seen an unprecedented number of Muslims converting to faith in Christ.² We continue to hear of the viral nature in which the gospel is spreading in that part of the world. The kingdom of God has gone viral and it will continue to do so.

What is it in the beginning of the book of Acts that causes the kingdom of God to go viral? There are three things that we discover in Acts 1:1-11 that are critical to the kingdom of God having gone viral in the book of Acts. And these three things are still true and vital today: the authority of Jesus over all things, the power of the Holy Spirit and the witness of God’s people.

The Authority of Jesus

The first major event in the book of Acts is not the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Instead, the first major event described for us in the book of Acts is the ascension of Jesus to heaven. In Acts 1:2 the ascension is described as “*the day when he was taken up.*” Then in verse 9, we read about what the apostles witnessed as they were

standing with Jesus. It says that *“as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”* As we say in our confession, “he ascended into heaven.”

I am afraid that as quickly as this event comes and goes in the book of Acts, it comes and goes in and out of our minds when we think of the major events in the life of Jesus. We make much of the birth of Jesus on Christmas day. We make much of the death of Jesus on Good Friday and the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday. But long lost to us is the event that happens forty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the celebration of the ascension of Jesus. Did you even know that Ascension Day this year falls on Thursday, May 21? For most of us, unlike Christmas or Easter, this day will just come and go like any other day. Even when we refer to it as Ascension Day, it tends to be nothing more than noting that this is the day Jesus ascended into heaven; as if it was some incidental event in the life of Jesus. Perhaps the reason we don't make much of the day is because we have lost a sense of what the ascension of Jesus means. It is more than just describing for us how Jesus left this world and returned to the Father.

In the creed we recite, “And he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” This gets to the heart of the importance of the ascension of Jesus. As one who is “seated” the work of redemption is done! As Jesus proclaimed from the cross, *“It is finished!”* But Jesus is “seated” at the “right hand of God the Father Almighty” which is the seat of authority. It gives testimony that Jesus Christ is King. Peter puts it this way in 1 Peter 3:22, *“Now that he has gone into heaven, He is at God's right hand with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.”* When Peter preached the first sermon on the day of Pentecost, he came to the conclusion of his sermon in Acts 2:34 by appealing to the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father. And then he made his concluding appeal to those who were listening to him, *“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ.”*

This is a big reason why the kingdom of God has gone viral. Keith Whitfield reminds us of the importance of the ascension of Jesus by reminding us of the implication of this event in the life of Jesus. He said, that the ascension of Jesus reminds us that “Jesus Christ is King of the universe, and Satan can do nothing about it.”³ The book of Acts is the second volume of Luke's writings—it is coupled with the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of Luke ends by briefly mentioning the ascension of Jesus. And it tells us that the disciples returned to Jerusalem *“with great joy.”* It is a different kind of reaction than what they had when Jesus first told them he was going to be leaving them. But now they understood. Do you understand that Jesus Christ is King? Forgiveness of sin has been accomplished! The kingdom of God has the power to deliver people from the domain of

darkness. With great joy we proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. The kingdom of God goes viral.

The Power of the Holy Spirit

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus gave his disciples these instructions in Acts 1:4-5, *“And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’”* And so he says in verse 8 that when the Holy Spirit comes they will have *“power”* to be his witnesses. And in the very next chapter, Acts 2, we see the Holy Spirit come in power on what we call “the Day of Pentecost” and there is no other way to say it—the kingdom of God goes viral from that point on—even to today.

Pentecost was a Jewish festival and so it was a time when Jerusalem was teeming with people who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate this important festival. Pentecost in the Jewish mind was a lot like Independence Day—the 4th of July—to Americans. The rabbis believed that this was the day that God came down to Mt. Sinai and met with Moses and gave the people of Israel the ten commandments. Do you remember how that scene was described for us? In Exodus 19 it says that when God came down to meet with Moses there was *thunder and lightnings and thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.* This was the place where the people of Israel became a nation—a people. And more specifically, it is here where they enter into covenant with God and God calls them to be a kingdom of priests—a blessing to the world so that the nations would come to God.

The covenant God made with Israel was stated very plainly in Exodus 19:5-6, *“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* But as we saw through CASKET EMPTY and the unfolding of the Old Testament, Israel was unable to keep their end of the covenant. This is the point Paul makes in Romans 1-3. Both Jews and Gentiles are sinners and in need of Jesus. Paul concludes in Romans 3:23, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

And so the Old Testament prophets began to talk about “a new covenant.” With the “new covenant” not only would there be the forgiveness of sin, but God would take the law and write it on the hearts of his people. In other words, he would transform our

lives from the inside out. How would he do that? Ezekiel said, *“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh. And I will put my Spirit [capital “S” - Holy Spirit—the third person of the Holy Trinity] within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”* In the Upper Room before his death, Jesus raised the cup and said, *this is the blood of the new covenant.* In other words, the time has come to send the Holy Spirit who has the power to change the heart. The kingdom of God was inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Jesus and goes viral through the work of the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 2 we find the disciples gathered in a room during the feast of Pentecost. All of a sudden, we read, that there was a sound from heaven and a mighty rushing wind filled the entire house. Then they saw what were like tongues of fire resting on the heads of those gathered in the house. Like on Mt. Sinai when God was forming a people for himself, he came once again with an undeniable display of power. As a result of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were able to speak in the languages of those who had come to Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire. The apostles gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and that forgiveness of sin could be found in Jesus. Those in Jerusalem who heard the apostles speaking in their native tongue were surprised and so they asked *“what does this mean?”* That is a good question for us this morning as well. What does this Pentecost experience we have recorded for us mean for us today? Peter begins to answer the question in Acts 2:17. He tells the people that what they had just witnessed is what the prophet Joel spoke about in the Old Testament when he wrote, *“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”*

Do you know what is at the heart of Pentecost? Through the sending of the Holy Spirit, God gives birth to a new people. It is here that the church is born. It is here that God is forming a people unto himself from every tribe and nation and tongue. The kingdom of God has gone viral! The disciples bear witness that day to Jesus Christ . . . crucified, buried, risen and ascended. The wind of the Spirit of God blew into the hearts of those who were gathered in Jerusalem and 3,000 people gave their lives to Christ.

Herein lies the significance of Pentecost. When Peter was preaching that day, the people said to him in Acts 2:37, *“what shall we do?”* After hearing that the resurrected Jesus was the promised Messiah and the ascended Lord, they wanted to know what to do. And Peter said, *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* And so at the heart of Pentecost, not only is God forming a people unto himself, but we his people have been clothed with power from on high to bear witness to Jesus and through us,

God is calling a people to himself. Just like you can't contain the wind, you can't restrain the work of the Holy Spirit when God's people give witness to Jesus. And so we give ourselves to the mission of Jesus, knowing full well that God is at work through the testimony of his people. The Holy Spirit has come and the kingdom of God has gone viral. And so we give ourselves fully to the mission of proclaiming the gospel to this world because the wind of the Spirit is at work through the testimony of his people.

The Witness of God's People

Up to this point, we have readily acknowledged that the kingdom of God going viral is largely a work of God. It is a work of God that Jesus Christ ascended into heaven having accomplished the work he was sent to do; making atonement for our sin. Then the disciples are told to go and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, we have no power to accomplish the work of God on our own. We are dependent upon God and the moving of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God going viral is clearly the work of God. The title of the book of Acts is often called the "Acts of the Apostles" as they bear witness to the resurrected Jesus from Jerusalem to Rome. Others say, "No, this the Acts of the Holy Spirit who empowers them to bear witness from Jerusalem to Rome. I would take it a step further. Allan Thompson put it this way, the Book of Acts is "the Acts of the Lord Jesus, through his people, by the Holy Spirit for the accomplishment of God's purposes."⁴ As we have seen throughout the story of the Bible—CASKET EMPTY—God is the main character and it is God who moves towards us with his redeeming love in order to restore this broken world to himself.

And yet, we play a role. The disciples were to go and wait for the Holy Spirit to come. But when the Spirit came, they were empowered to bear witness to Jesus. That is our role. We are to give witness to this world that Jesus has risen from the dead and that in his name there is the forgiveness of sins. The kingdom of God goes viral through people like you and me giving witness to Jesus.

What does it mean to be a "witness" for Jesus? Jesus said to them in Acts 1:8, "*you will be my witnesses.*" What does it mean to be a "witness" for Jesus? I can imagine there are various things that come to mind when you think of being a "witness" for Jesus. Part of being a "witness" may include sharing your story of what Jesus has done in your life. There is power in that personal story. Or, you might say that part of our witness is how we live our lives in front of others. The Holy Spirit is changing us from the inside out and so there is something different about our lives that comes through the way we live. That too is part of how we give "witness" to Jesus.

But in the book of Acts, to be a “witness” for Jesus has a more narrow focus. In a very specific way, these first century followers of Jesus Christ were to give witness to the fact that Jesus—who died on the cross—has risen from the dead. They are to give “witness” to what they saw. This is why it says in Acts 1:3, *“He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”* This is why we have four Gospels—four accounts of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Alan Thompson said that “the term ‘witness’ or ‘testify’ in Acts frequently has to do not with what we might describe as personal testimony of God has done in our lives, but with actual ‘witness’ or ‘sight’ of the risen Lord Jesus.”⁵ They are given witness to what they actually saw. John says it this way in 1 John 1. He said that he proclaims to us “what he heard . . . and what he saw with his eyes . . . and what he touched with his hands.” He is talking about the resurrected Lord. He heard him. He saw him. He touched him. Therefore, he gives “witness” to him.

Just consider these verses from the Book of Acts:

Acts 2:32 - *“This Jesus, God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.”*

Acts 3:15 - *“And you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.”*

Acts 4:33 - *“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.”*

Acts 5:30-32 - *“The God of our fathers raised Jesus . . . and we are witnesses to these things.”*

Acts 10:39-41 - *“And we are witnesses of all that he did . . . God raised him on the third day and made him to appear . . . to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses.”*

Acts 13:30-31 - *“But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.”*

Acts 22:14-15 - Speaking of Paul’s conversion *“The God of our Fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth [the resurrected Christ whom he was persecuting] for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.”*

Clearly in the context of Acts, to bear witness to Jesus Christ meant to give testimony that this Jesus who was crucified has indeed risen from the dead. Before you can dismiss the claims of Christianity, you need to form an intelligent response to the central claim of our faith, “Jesus has risen from the dead!” Eric Metaxas poses this question: “The real defeat of death hangs on an event as implausible as anything imaginable: In a hewn rock

tomb just outside Jerusalem, the cosmos itself . . . Pivoted and reversed course, undoing the curse of death that had been upon us since the Garden of Eden. Is this a beautiful myth, or did something miraculously happen?”⁶ The reason the kingdom of God has gone viral is because the church is built on the reasonable and reliable evidence that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and therefore sin and Death and the Devil are defeated. We give witness to the testimony that has been preserved and passed down to us through the Scriptures. Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians 15, “*For I delivered unto you as of first importance **what I also received:** that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*” Through the ongoing witness of the church to the resurrected Jesus, the kingdom of God goes viral.

Conclusion

This is the beginning of three weeks in “P” Pentecost. This week we are affirming the viral nature of the kingdom of God through the ascension of Jesus, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the witness of God’s people. Next week we will look at how God calls a local church to discern their calling. And then we will acknowledge that none of this can happen apart from prayer. In fact, next week we are going to ask you to join us in a time of prayer and fasting from Ascension Day (May 21) to Pentecost Sunday (May 31) so that the might power of the kingdom of God might spread through the work of WEFC. In trying to put his finger on why there has been an unprecedented movement of God among the Muslim world, David Garrison said that he cannot discount that for the past 25 years there has been a concentrated and sustained prayer movement called “30 Days of Prayer For the Muslim World.”⁷ May the kingdom of God continue to go viral through our witness to the resurrected and ascended Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. May it be so.

¹Tim Keller *Making Sense of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018) 26

²David Garrison “Why More Muslims Are Turning To Jesus” June 28, 2019 www.newsweek.com

³Keith Whitfield “Four Reasons Jesus’ Ascension Matters” Aug. 20, 2013
www.christianitytoday.com

⁴Alan J. Thompson *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011)

⁵Ibid

⁶Eric Metaxas *Miracles* (New York: Dutton, 2014)

⁷Garrison

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Spend some time “checking-in” with each other and praying for each other.
2. What is one thing that stood out to you from the sermon?

Diving Into The Word

Read Acts 1:1-11

How is God revealed in this portion of Scripture?
(Who is God and what is he like:?)

What does this portion of Scripture teach us about the people of God?

What does God require of us from this section?

How does this portion of Scripture testify to Christ?

Taking It Home

How and where is God calling you to bear witness for Christ?

What role does prayer play in giving witness to Christ?