**Sermon for September 8th 2024 Acts 1, selected verses “Backstory”**

*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach**until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.**After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.**On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.****5****For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.****11****“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*

Bold claims. Pastors are famous for them, and I make them all the time, but not willy-nilly, I make them from a position of certainty. So when I title a sermon series ***All You Need to Know about Christianity, a Drama in Eight Acts,*** I really, really mean it. Here in the first several chapters of the book of Acts we readily find the beginning, middle, and end of Christian piety and practice. And this inaugural sermon, this ‘first act’, sets the tone, presents the backstory, and brings us all up to speed even if we didn’t read volume one, the Gospel of Luke.

Our unknown bible author introduces this book rather informally in the original Greek – dear Theophilus, he says. Personal, direct, and very important to you and me, because *Theophilus*, so far as we know, was not a specific individual, but points us towards something much more inclusive. The debates have been raging, quietly, for centuries about the identity of this Theophilus, but I believe that this name – *Theo* meaning God, and *philus*, one of the Greek words for love – I believe that this name was for all of humanity. Dear Lover of God, he writes. Other possible translations would be Beloved of God, or Friend of God, but these are all kittens from the same litter. So this is the first point, right out the gate, and it is a big one, and it will color our entire immersion in this wonderful book, that if you love God, or are friendly with God, or perceive that God loves you, this book is for you.

Let’s marinate in that for a few moments…we are so accustomed to a formal gulf between ourselves and the Holy Writ. The Bible was before us and will remain after us and allegedly has nothing to do with us individually or personally, and yet…dear Lover of God,

*I have previously written about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.* He references the Gospel of Luke here, the gospel written, not to the inner circle of converted Jews, but to all the Gentile world, the gospel where women are lifted up and hypocrisy is decried, the gospel that takes seriously the earthly sufferings of ordinary people.*After his suffering, -* a suffering that included severe beating and whipping and crucifixion and entombment, a suffering no mere mortal could ever have survived -  *he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*This is quite a concise nugget, isn’t it? In a few spare sentences he charts the entire dramatic arc of Jesus’ life and death and life again. Just in case you didn’t read my first book, here are the Cliff notes. And those Cliff notes are for *us*, friends, *Theophili*, lovers of God, beloved of God. This is what we are about, he writes, telling this life-changing story.

The traumatized disciples, despite history’s whitewashing, were *very* human, ordinary folks under extraordinary pressures and expectations. And thus they react in a very normal way: when people are under stress, we seek to alleviate or escape the stress as quickly as possible. Make the pain go away, right? Jesus instructs them to wait there, in Jerusalem, for the gift of the Spirit is on its way, and what do they ask? Like, immediately? *“Lord, does this mean it’s time to restore the kingdom to Israel?”* In plainer words, is this the revolution where God wins, and the Romans are put out to pasture? History might record that the subtle answer to this is yes, but it is not the immediate pain relief that they are hoping for. Rather, the immersion in the very Breath of God empowers and inspires them, and changes begin, slowly but inexorably, and this revolution is not over, even now we continue to tell the story and live the life and follow the Way. We have explored two major points – one, that this book is for us, and two, that this book is a primer to help us proclaim, to the ends of the earth, the astounding resurrection story. And the third point is coming right up…

Following this charge to proclaim forever and everywhere, Jesus is lifted up into the sky, ascended, and they are gobsmacked. Like the enormity of the teaching wasn’t enough on its own, now they have to do it, they assume, by themselves. No more Jesus on earth to guide us, to inspire us, to heal us, to protect us. Stunned and jaws agape, they are joined by two men dressed all in white. Angels? Not clear, although I would lean that way since what they say is the third point for today and the biggest of all. Listen: *They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.****11****“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?”* Twenty centuries later, those words ring out and call us, the *theophili*, to better and more effective lives. Why, O Church, are you standing around looking into the sky? The sky is not where the people to love, the hearts to be changed, the wounds to be healed, the relationships to be repaired, the sky is not where you will find these.

You know how we are - the extremes of our habits lean towards either sky-gazing or navel-gazing, but the actual ministry is *between those two*. And that is why this writing is called the Book of Acts – not the book of ideas to be possibly implemented someday when we get around to it! Acts, a verbal spirituality, a life of action rather than just looking up and vaguely hoping that Jesus will intervene. Men of Galilee? How about People of Chico? Believers in California? Christian Americans? Why are you standing around gobsmacked? In the name of Christ there is love to be shared and food to be cooked, clothing to be given and housing to be procured. The list of the ways we proclaim the resurrection through our actions is a long to-do list, friends, none of which gets accomplished when we are paralyzed by indecision or fatigue or overwhelmed by the weirdness of the world. And that is why, knowing that we could not manage all of this on our own, we are given internal reserves and wisdom through the indwelling Spirit of God. The next chapter is the most famous in the entire book, the story of Pentecost, the giving of the spiritual gifts to humanity.

But for today, we have supped on the backstory, the foundation of all that we aspire to be and to do. Let’s take a few quiet minutes and reflect on our aspirations. How do we want to be in this world? And what life-giving acts are we inspired to do?