Inaugural Sermon

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Acts 2:22-36

September 16, 2018
Tom Tarrants directs the C.S. Lewis Institute in metro DC. We became well-acquainted in Tom’s role as president of the Institute. I would describe Tom as a soft-spoken, gentle soul with a real servant heart.

When he spoke at our church a few years ago, my jaw dropped. He confessed to being a former KKK Klansman, considered at one time the most dangerous man in Mississippi. He participated in 30 racially-motivated bombings. He was attempting to plant a bomb at the home of a Jewish business executive when an FBI sting was waiting for him. A gun battle ensued and his female accomplice in the crime died in the fray. Tom’s arrest led to a 30-year prison sentence. He read the New Testament in prison and became a Christ-follower. Tom is living proof that Jesus Christ changes people.

Last Wednesday in our church, a capacity crowd heard the improbable story of Mark and Ginger Whitacre. Mark was a top executive with a Fortune 500 company involved in a massive price-fixing scheme. His wife Ginger blew the whistle on his illegal activity. He wore a wiretap, and a movie was made of his life called The Informant. Mark eventually went to prison and found Christ there. Mark is now COO of CBMC, Christian Businessman’s Connection.

My point is not that you have to go to prison to find Christ. Rather, God changes people. God changes people for the
better. He can change your life if you are open to the possibility. More about that later in this sermon.

Today’s lesson tells another story of God changing people. Peter stands up to preach his inaugural sermon on a day called Pentecost. For the record, only two months previous, Peter is afraid to speak about Jesus to a lowly servant girl (Luke 22:57). Now, we find him preaching boldly to powerful people who recently conspired with Roman authorities to arrest Jesus and condemn him to death.


We are challenging everyone in our church this fall to make three commitments. Commit to the person of Jesus. Commit to the body of Jesus. Commit to the work of Jesus in the world. Acts is a virtual treasure trove of material in helping us arrange our lives around these three core commitments.

In our Scripture lesson, Diaspora Jews congregate in Jerusalem from every corner of the Roman Empire. They gather to observe a Jewish festival called Pentecost. Pentecost also happens to be the day when the risen Jesus fills his followers with his Spirit to carry out his mission. The Holy Spirit equips Jesus’ disciples with power to declare the good news of salvation in foreign languages called tongues.

Peter refutes the charge that Jesus’ disciples are drunk with wine. They are filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter directs his listeners back to Joel’s prophecy that God will pour out His
Spirit on all people in the last days. The last line of Joel’s prophecy, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:21) serves as a jumping off place for Peter to launch into his evangelistic appeal.

“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man credited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs which God did among you through him” (2:22). Peter continues, “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of those outside the law, put him to death” (2:23).

Three observations stand out about this verse for me. First, “Jesus was handed over by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge.” Jesus was not a victim of circumstances. He offered his life as a willing sacrifice. It was always in the heart of God to offer his Son for the sins of the world.

Second, Peter lays the responsibility for Jesus’ death at the feet of Jewish leaders. “You…put him to death.” Are Peter’s words anti-Semitic? Hardly. Peter refers four times in his sermon to my “fellow Jews.” Peter is Jewish, like the rest of the apostles. His sermon targets a particular group of Jewish leaders at a specific moment in history. It is not fitting to indict an entire race based on such passages.

This leads me to my third observation. Peter adds, almost as an aside that “You, with the help of those outside the law,
put Jesus to death.” The language of those “outside the law” is code for Roman leaders, Gentiles like Governor Pilate.

Who is responsible for Jesus’ death? Everyone, Gentiles and Jews alike.

In verses 25-28, Peter refers to Israel’s great patriarch David. He quotes from Psalm 16 that is attributed to David, “You will not let your holy one see decay.” This cannot be an allusion to David since Peter is quick to point out in verse 29 that David died, is still dead and his tomb still occupied. Rather, in Psalm 16 David anticipates Jesus as the one who will not see decay, and thereby reign on David’s throne forever.

In verse 32, Peter declares “God raised this Jesus to life and we are witnesses of it.” God exalted Jesus to his right hand, meaning Christ is elevated to a position of singular authority and supremacy. Peter again cites a Psalm to buttress his argument. Psalm 110 begins, “The Lord said to my Lord; sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” Jesus also identified this same Psalm during his earthly ministry to refer to his own Messianic mission (Matthew 22:44).

Peter closes his sermon with the words, “Therefore, God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (2:36). Lord in the Greek, kurios, is the customary title bestowed on Roman leaders. While Caesar may be an earthly lord, God crowns Jesus as “King of Kings and Lord
of Lords” (Revelation 19:16). Messiah is *Christos* in Greek meaning “the anointed one of God.”

Peter’s sermon finds its mark. His listeners are “cut to the heart.” They ask, “What must we do?” (2:38) This becomes Peter’s so-what moment in his sermon. “Repent and be baptized,” he declares (2:38). *Repent* means to change direction. Do a U-turn. Stop running away from Jesus and move toward him. He wants them to do a 180. Three thousand people do just that. They receive God’s gift of forgiveness and the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

God changes people—changes people for the better. God changed Tom Tarrants and Mark Whitacre. God changed Peter. God changed me, also. Okay, I was not a Klansman. I was never guilty of price-fixing. Yet, I turned away from God. I was a self-centered, pleasure seeking 19-year-old when Christ entered my life. He turned everything upside down and changed the trajectory of my life. Christ shined light into my darkness. He filled empty spaces with his presence.

Last Sunday, I talked about being All-In as commitment to the person, body and work of Christ. Let me elaborate on what we mean by All-In. We want everyone to take the next step toward following Jesus Christ. Some of you find yourselves at the very beginning. I said last Sunday that every journey begins with a step. You may be ready to take the first step toward Christ. Others of you have taken a few steps but need to give your commitment to Christ higher
priority. Simply put, we are asking you to commit as much as you know about yourself to as much as you know about Christ.

Imagine your life as a house. Have you ever invited Christ to make his home in your heart? Jesus said, “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him” (Revelation 3:20). If Christ is knocking on the door of your heart, by all means, open the door. Invite Christ to take up residence in your life.

Some of you have invited Christ into your life, yet have confined him to a few rooms. You have invited him into presentable rooms but you have not invited him into every room.

When we entertain people in our homes, there are certain rooms we prepare to receive our guests. Yet, suppose our house guests wander off to try a door to a messy room, not suitable for entertaining. We would jump to our feet and direct them not to go there: “Why don’t we stay right here?”

Some rooms are strictly off-limits to Christ. I don’t want Christ in my room called resentment. I don’t want him to go in my room of greed and pride. I do not want him to visit my room of lust or anger. We hold back certain rooms for ourselves. Christ wants to live in every room of our house. Give him access to every room. Don’t hold anything back. This is what we mean by All-In.

George MacDonald was a 19th century Scottish novelist and poet. His fantasy novels explored spiritual themes and
had considerable influence on C.S. Lewis. In fact, Lewis cites MacDonald’s metaphor of a house in his book *Mere Christianity*. “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks on the roof and so on: you knew these jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently, he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and doesn’t seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting up an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage but he is building a palace. You see, he intends to come and live in it himself.”

God has this big remodeling project planned for your life and mine. You thought He was making you into a decent little cottage. God is building you a palace. He intends to live in it Himself.