All In

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Acts 1:1-8

September 9, 2018
I enjoy the change of seasons. It’s a perk of living in Northern Virginia. I welcome the relief from summer heat and humidity. Autumn means cooler temperatures, vivid color and fall foliage. Perhaps God created fall for the sheer beauty of it all. I associate fall with football and the World Series. It’s time to break out sweaters and sweatshirts, the apple cider, hot chocolate and warm soup.

The Sunday after Labor Day also marks a transition for our church. We not only shift to three services but we also transition from a sermon series on Pressure Points to All-In. More about All-In later in this sermon.

Earlier this year, we devoted seven months to preaching our way through Luke’s gospel. Luke wrote a sequel to his gospel called Acts. His gospel takes us on a whirlwind tour of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Acts picks up where Luke left off in his gospel by focusing on the risen Jesus. Jesus lives in his disciples (that’s us!) through the Holy Spirit.

Luke begins his second volume in Acts by reminding his readers of something Jesus said at the close of his gospel, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (1:4-5).

The disciples ask Jesus, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? (1:6). While I do not know if Jesus ever face-planted, this would be an ideal time for it.
The disciples still conceive of the kingdom of God as coterminous with the nation-state of Israel. They fail to grasp Jesus’ worldwide mission.

Jesus refuses to cite chapter and verse of his kingdom still to come. Instead, he brings them back to his mission. He promises his disciples two things to carry out his mission: power and witness.

First promise: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (1:8). The power promised to them is supernatural power. The Greek word is *dunamis*, where we derive our English word dynamite. It’s the same word used to describe Jesus’ miracles in the gospels. The power resident in Jesus is the same power promised to us through the Holy Spirit.

Second promise: “You will be witnesses” (1:8). God’s divine power gives Jesus’ disciples the ability and authority to be his witnesses. The Greek word for witness, *martys*, correlates with our English word martyr. A martyr is a witness to the point of death. Jesus gives us power through the Spirit to become his witnesses.

Some of you freak at the prospect of witnessing for Jesus. Look at it this way, everybody witnesses to what they value and enjoy. People talk about their favorite musicians because they enjoy good music. People talk about their favorite
restaurant because they enjoy good food. People talk about their favorite teams because they enjoy sports. Christians are not the only ones who witness. Everybody witnesses.

The last thing Jesus tells his disciples in Luke are the words, “You are witnesses of these things” (24:48). “These things” refers back to Jesus’ death and resurrection witnessed earlier in Luke’s gospel. The first words out of Jesus’ mouth in Acts are virtually identical: “You will be my witnesses” (1:8). If witnessing is the last thing Jesus says in Luke’s gospel and the first thing Jesus says in Acts, witnessing is vitally important to Jesus.

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” functions like a theme verse for Acts. The first seven chapters describe the witness of these disciples in Jerusalem. Chapters 8-12 recount their witness in the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. Chapters 13-28 chronicle their witness to the ends of the earth. This language, “ends of the earth,” is an Old Testament motif to describe the heart and soul of the Gentile world. Paul takes the mission of Jesus all the way to Rome itself, headquarters for the mighty Roman Empire.

The book of Acts ends abruptly in chapter 28. It lacks a formal ending. We are left hanging with Paul witnessing to palace guards under house arrest in Rome (28:23). Luke leaves the story open-ended on purpose. The ends of the earth are still in play. Christ’s mission remains for us to do.
For the past year, our elder board, staff and deacons have been reading Luke’s gospel and praying about Jesus’ mission for Vienna Presbyterian. To keep Jesus’ mission before us, we have come to speak of three core commitments: commitment to the person of Jesus, commitment to the body of Jesus and commitment to the work of Jesus. These three commitments constitute the so-what to today’s sermon.

The first commitment is to the person of Jesus Christ. Some clarification may be needed with regard to “person” in relationship to Christ. Jesus is not an abstract idea or impersonal force. God takes on human flesh in the person of Jesus.

Jesus is one person with two essential natures. He has a divine nature as God and a human nature as a man. Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human.

Anthony Bloom, a Russian Orthodox monk describes Christ’s dual nature: “The one who could place himself between the two would be someone equal to each of the two, who could put his hand on the shoulder of the living God, without sacrilege and on the shoulder of the man in his agony, without destroying him.” God sent Jesus as our go-between.

Have your ever committed your life to the person of Jesus? Every journey begins with a step. Take the first step by committing yourself to the risen Jesus.
Some of you are thinking, I’ve done that, I’ve checked the box. You may be at an opportune moment to recommit your life to Jesus. Perhaps you have lost your way or become lethargic about matters of faith. It may be time to recommit to Christ all over again.

Committing ourselves to Jesus takes intentionality on our part. We talk about the spiritual practices of worship, prayer and reading the Word to deepen your commitment to Christ. Our devotional is a great resource to center our day in prayer and the Word. We want you to be as intentional about your spiritual life as you would an exercise regimen, a business plan at work or an exam at school.

Commit to...
The person of Christ
The body of Christ

The second commitment is to the body of Jesus. The New Testament depicts the church as the body of Christ where Christ is the head and we are members of his body. You may find yourself drawn to Jesus but leery of his followers. I get it—church people drive me nuts sometimes. Yet what makes you think you are any different from the rest of us? Everyone is a little bit crazy. Everybody is normal until you get to know them. Make no mistake, we are deeply flawed people called into union with Christ with other flawed people.

I read an article recently by a pastor reflecting on his frequent drives across Illinois farmland. In the monotony of long-distance driving, he observed starlings streaking swooping and soaring across the sky. In the video you are watching, 40,000 starlings fly together in close quarters without ever running into each other. They resemble a magic carpet ride.
Thanks to high-speed photography, researchers have figured out why starlings are able to avoid midair collisions. Starlings pay attention to six or seven other birds in closest proximity to them. Each takes its lead from starlings flying next to them.

Do you have 6-7 believers in close proximity to whom you pay attention, who keep you on track? If so, lean on your spiritual friends for growth and support. If not, we are starting ten new small groups later this month to study the person, body and work of Christ. Glenda is writing a seven-week curriculum expressly for this purpose. We will employ this same curriculum at Monday Night Men’s and two women’s Bible studies. Use Groupfinder on our website to find the group right for you.

Why all this emphasis on groups? Life is better together. We can be better Christians together than alone.

The third commitment is to the work of Christ. Christ has a mission for each of us. It may not be any grand assignment, like solving the problem of world hunger. Your mission may be more commonplace, like helping a child learn about Jesus or caring for a neighbor in need.

What is your Jerusalem? Your mission field may be your family, friends, neighborhood, work colleagues or classmates at school.

If you are unsure about what Christ wants you to do, take the SHAPE inventory on our website. Ask your spiritual friends for input. Frederick Buechner writes, “Your calling is
the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet. The kind of work God usually calls you to do is the kind of work that you most need to do and the world most needs to have done.”

We challenge you to go All-In with us this fall. Acts will be central for aligning our church to the person, body and work of Jesus. The flames signify the power of the Holy Spirit sent by God the Father and the risen Jesus. The cross remains central to our ministry. Jesus went All-In for us at the cross.

Go All-in for Christ this fall. No more Sunday-only, pretend-type of Christian. Whatever you ask, whatever the cost, Lord, I will follow.

Take the This Is Who We Are pamphlet from the pews. Those of you watching online will find it on our home page. The front cover states, “We seek to lead people into transforming relationships with Jesus, authentic community with each other and purposeful engagement in Christ’s work in the world. We want everyone in Northern Virginia and beyond, to experience the abundant life Jesus offers people.” The second page articulates our vision. The third page outlines our mission. The fourth page enumerates our core values. If you share these beliefs in common with us, we ask you to engage with our ministry.

The final three pages articulate our three commitments to the person, body and work of Christ. Go All-In for Christ with us this fall.