

Sermon 5-3-26
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Based on the First Lesson and the Gospel for the 5th Sunday of Easter: Acts 6-7
and John 14:1-14

Taking The Field

Two weeks ago, we noted that we're in the fourth quarter of the greatest contest of this age. Jesus won the first three quarters of the game by being obedient unto death, even death on a cross. He was personally rewarded for His obedience with resurrected, eternal righteous life. And He was rewarded with resurrected, eternal righteous life to distribute to all who receive forgiveness of their sins by putting their faith in Him.

But in the wake of His resurrection, Jesus prepared His team for the fourth quarter. He would go to the bench, ascending into heaven, while His team — the Church — took the field for the fourth and final quarter contest against Satan and his horde.

As we've seen, Jesus spent three years training the twelve who would be His apostles. But they were still woefully unprepared until Jesus breathed Lord Holy Spirit into them on Easter evening. Then, in a matter of just the seven weeks from Passover to Pentecost, the understanding, wisdom and courage of the apostles soared to the point that they were able to take to the streets and bring 3,000 fellow Jews to faith in Messiah Jesus on the festival Day of Pentecost alone.

How did this happen? All the pieces of Yahweh's plan for the Church came together in those seven weeks.

One piece is the Word of God. When the apostles began their preaching, what we call the New Testament had not been written. They were going to write it as they went along. But at the beginning, what they had was Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. These ancient books contain a life-script for Messiah that was hidden in plain sight in their text.

We have to remember that these men didn't have bibles. Books and printing as we know it would not be invented for another 1,400 years. If they wanted to read a book of the bible, they had to go to synagogue to look at a handwritten scroll. Therefore, these men, like all other people of their time, had to memorize everything that was important. This is why Jesus took three years to teach them His life-script.

However, without a second piece falling into place, Messiah's life-script hidden in the Old Testament would never have been discovered. That second piece was and is Lord Holy Spirit. Here's what Jesus said about Lord Holy Spirit at the Last Supper. John 14:25-26, "25 'These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.'" That's precisely what Lord Holy Spirit did for the apostles after Easter Sunday evening.

A third piece had to fall into place. That was the life and work of Jesus Himself as He fulfilled Messiah's life-script. Jesus named the twelve as the official eyewitnesses of His suffering, death, resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God. Jesus assigned the twelve the task of proclaiming to the world their eyewitness testimony.

The final piece of Yahweh's plan again involved Lord Holy Spirit. We're told in Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. . . ." Saving faith is a gift from God. It comes through Lord Holy Spirit. Many have read the New Testament. Many have heard it preached without it having the slightest effect on them. The reason is simple. They did not receive the saving faith from Lord Holy Spirit necessary to believe its message to us.

Two of our men were recently having a conversation about Jesus' statement in Matthew 22:14, ". . . many are called, but few are chosen." As one man put it, many think the call of the Lord is like a scam call coming in on their phone and they don't answer it. On the other hand, those given saving faith to answer God's call find that it's a life-giving call.

So, in order for Jesus' Church to take the field, the following things had to come together: the life-script of Messiah found in Moses and the Prophets that proves Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah; the power of Lord Holy Spirit to assemble into a whole the pieces of Messiah's life-script scattered throughout Moses and the Prophets; the eyewitness testimony of the apostles about Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection; the Holy Spirit power to preach the eyewitness testimony. All this formed the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And then there was one last ingredient: the outpouring of Lord Holy Spirit on those who heard the preached Gospel so that they might answer God's call with saving faith — that they might repent and be baptized in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and receive Lord Holy Spirit for themselves. Jesus brought all this together as a package deal when He commissioned His Church to take the field for the first time on the Day of Pentecost 33A.D. And it's been that way ever since.

Now, in this morning's first lesson we have the abridged version of what happened when the Deacon, Stephen, began preaching the Gospel. Fully told, the story of Stephen in the book of Acts illustrates the stark, massive contrast between those who receive faith by Lord Holy Spirit and those who do not.

By his name, it's obvious that Stephen was what is called a Grecian Jew in the book of Acts. Therefore, I'm going to guess that he was a Jew from what is called the diaspora — the Jews living all over the Roman Empire and the world outside of Israel. Greek was their language of communication. Again, I'm going to guess that Stephen had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, 33A.D. as the Law commands, and that he was caught up in the salvation poured out on that Day.

If Stephen was from the diaspora, we know from our lesson that after his salvation, he stayed in Jerusalem and became an outstanding member of the new church there. For, he's described in Acts 6:5 as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." Therefore, Stephen was chosen as one of the seven deacons of the new church who would administrate its welfare ministry to widows, orphans and those in need.

Preaching the Gospel to his fellow Jews, Stephen ran into what we might call Jesus Derangement Syndrome or JDS. If the Original Sin in us is not tamed by Lord Holy Spirit, the message of the Gospel causes some people to go nuts and even get violent. Indeed, there's a whole group called Muslims that have fit that category for 1400 years.

In any event, Lord Holy Spirit gave Stephen mastery over Moses and the Prophets so that he could prove from Scripture that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. However, when he preached Jesus in a certain Jerusalem synagogue, Jesus Derangement Syndrome set in. The members refused to believe. But they could not overcome Stephen's arguments from Scripture. Therefore, they did what all irrational people do when confronted by a rational

argument they can not overcome. They became like modern day leftists, full of hatred, lying and violence.

The men of that synagogue caused Stephen to have to stand trial before the same Sanhedrin that had condemned Jesus. By the power of Lord Holy Spirit, Stephen preached an eloquent message steeped in Jewish history to the Sanhedrin. In the past Yahweh had elevated two men to leadership over Israel that Israel had initially rejected. They were Joseph the son of Jacob and Moses. Now, the Sanhedrin was doing the same thing: rejecting the leader that Yahweh had appointed for Israel — Jesus of Nazareth. This is recorded in Acts 7.

In response, JDS really set in. It caused grown men to hold their ears shut with their hands and shout like children do when they don't want to hear what their parents tell them. This was an incredible demonstration of what resisting Lord Holy Spirit looks like. But then the JDS led to hatred, lying and violence. They dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death like a common criminal. By the grace of God, Stephen died like His Master, Jesus — with forgiveness on his lips.

What's it like to have a Master? The few who practice oriental martial arts have some idea of what it is to have a master. But that's it. However, in American society all know what it's like to have Sin as a master. Booze, drugs, sex, debauchery, theft, luxury, skepticism, narcissism — these things and much more have mastered and rule over many.

What's it like to have a king? Lately, there's been all this silly noise about "No Kings." Yet these people have allegiance to the Marxist kings who would rule over us. On the other hand, our constitution purposely ties the hands of a president so that we don't have an absolute monarch reigning over us. Consequently, no Americans know what it's like to be the subjects of an absolute monarch. Therefore, we have no human reference point to understand what it is to have Jesus as our King.

Yet, when Yahweh calls, He calls us into a deep and exclusive relationship. Sin can no longer have mastery over God's people. We bow the knee to our Messiah who has been given the Name above all names — the Name of Yahweh Himself. As Yahweh said to Moses and Israel about the Angel of the Lord in Exodus 23:21, "... my name is in him."

Now, being a subject of righteous King Jesus is not an oppressive thing. For Jesus said to us in Matthew 11:28-30, "28 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'"

However, being a subject of righteous King Jesus is invasive. Two weeks ago we looked at what a temple is. In all of ancient history it was a place made by human hands for a god to dwell in. The remains of such temples litter Rome, Athens and the Middle East. There are still active temples in the far East. But there has been no temple for Yahweh to dwell in for nearly two thousand years now. Whatever may remain of Yahweh's temple is not even visible. It's buried beneath the present ground level of Jerusalem. And as we discovered, there is no temple building to this day for a reason.

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman that He talked with at Jacob's well: John 4:21, 23-24, "21 ... 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain [meaning the temple in Samaria] nor in Jerusalem [meaning the temple in Jerusalem] will you worship the Father. ... 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and

truth.” True to Jesus’ word, neither temple exists today. Nevertheless, a temple for the living God still exists, and we’re it.

Here’s what we discovered two weeks ago. Lord Holy Spirit tells us through the Apostle Paul in 1Corinthians 3:16, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” Also, we read in 1Corinthians 6:19, “. . . do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” This means that the human dwelling place on earth that Yahweh has chosen for Himself is not a building. It’s our bodies. As I said, the relationship between us and Yahweh is not oppressive. But it is most definitely invasive.

But stop a minute. Social media is full of video of out of control people who are quite obviously demon possessed, or at the minimum, oppressed. All of us succumb to indwelling sin — even if it’s in our thoughts and even in our dreams. And what comes out of our mouths can be quite poisonous. Sin and devils are quite invasive. As Jesus said in Luke 11:24-26, “24 ‘When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, “I will return to my house from which I came.” 25 And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. 26 Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.”

This means that our human bodies were designed to be inhabited. Of course, our spirits inhabit our bodies. But as Yahweh designed us, there’s room for more. Yahweh made room for Himself in each of our bodies. However, because of sin, Yahweh does not automatically dwell in us. He only dwells with those who believe and are baptized into Messiah Jesus. Therefore, from birth all of us have room for potentially damaging spirits. Many are blessed in that they are not inhabited by such spirits. However, many resist letting Yahweh inhabit the room He has created within us for Himself.

Great Britain has various palaces in which the king and queen can live. Indeed, the royals move between the palaces. But there’s a way of telling if the king is in a particular palace. The king has a flag that is his personal flag. If that royal flag is raised over a particular palace, it means that the king is in residence there. In a similar way when Yahweh takes up residence in one of His people, He raises His flag over that person. Anyone can know by the behavior and talk of that person if the King Jesus is in residence.

Now, it’s not that a Christian can’t revert to sinful behavior and talk. Original Sin with its Sinful Nature has been put to death in the believer by baptism into the death of Jesus on the cross. Check out the beginning of Romans 6 for that. However, a zombie of Original Sin lives in believers until they check out of this world. That zombie is a pest and a hazard, ever goading into sin and making us constantly subject to temptation. Therefore, if we override Lord Holy Spirit within us, either consciously or casually, we easily sin or fall back into sinful ways. The struggle is continuous and can be intense. It’s like in the old cartoons — having an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other fighting over you. As Saint Paul notes in Romans 7:21, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.” For this reason Martin Luther called the Christian’s situation in this life one of being simultaneously a saint and a sinner.

Because we’re not perfect and cannot be perfected in this life, we forever need Yahweh’s means of grace: confession of sins and absolution; the preaching of the Word and the distribution of the sacraments. That’s why we’re here. This is a distribution center for the

poor and needy. Now, if you don't think yourself poor and needy, you don't need to be here. But that doesn't change the fact that Yahweh says we're all poor and needy in His sight.

Both in the present age and in the age to come, Yahweh inhabits the bodies of His saints. In the age to come, His goodness will completely permeate us. There will be no evil and rebellion left. And no more evil will be able to enter the blessed realm. Jesus who successfully overcame all temptation will see to that.

But, in this life things are different. As we've already seen, God's Word and Holy Spirit given Faith have to come together to make things happen. Without the Word of God, I have zero idea that my body is Yahweh's temple that He created for Himself. Without the Word and Lord Holy Spirit, I'm totally resistant to the fact that I'm Yahweh's temple, even when I do hear about it. In fact, I'm more resistant when I hear about it. Original Sin demands to know why I can't be my own god and why I even need Yahweh. This is why our Sinful Natures need to be crucified with Christ.

Let's consider the dialogue Jesus had with Philip at the seder on Holy Thursday. John 14:8-11, "8 Philip said to him [Jesus], 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.' 9 Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.'"

Of course Jesus is One with the Father in His divine nature. But here, Jesus was speaking of His human nature. When God the Son became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary, He completely took on our characteristics, but without sin. This means that He also had a temple within Himself for Yahweh to inhabit. And He plainly announced this to the apostles when He told them that the Father dwells in Him — dwells in His human flesh.

Now as God, Jesus dwelt in the Father. But as a human being, the Father dwelt in Him. Also, the Holy Spirit dwelt in Jesus. So. Did you see what Jesus said? He never spoke on His own authority. Rather, when Jesus spoke it was the Father dwelling in Him that was speaking through Him. When Jesus performed miracles, He did not do so on His own authority. He only did what He saw the Father doing in Him. Jesus said the same thing in John 5:19, "... 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.'"

Ask yourself this question. What would your life be like if you only did what you saw the Father doing within you? It would be pure love, pure obedience and pure righteousness and goodness — the kind of righteousness and goodness that only Yahweh has. That's what our lives will be like in the resurrection. But not so in this life.

Nevertheless, even here we can have a taste of the resurrected life. But it can only come if by the power of the Word and the power of Lord Holy Spirit we bow the knee and humbly confess to the Lord Jesus, "as you have said, I am your temple. I am your dwelling place on earth."

Now, through such a confession of faith, our personal lives change. However, when we consider the team Jesus left on the field — the Church — it becomes even more important. It says in Ephesians 2:19-22, "19. . . [We are] members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21

in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.
22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

We are in a new time. Wokeism is being rejected. The New Atheism is being rejected. Feminism is being rejected. So-called Sexual Liberation has proved itself empty, hurtful and fruitless. The number of people searching for meaning in this life is growing rapidly, especially among the youngest people. Polling has revealed this. A resurgence in church attendance is confirming it. Therefore, even as hidden as we are in this neighborhood, some people are going to find their way here, as many of you have already.

So what should seekers see when they get here? If we’re serious about the Lord, it should be exactly what we just read in Ephesians — “a holy temple in the Lord.” They should be able to find the Lord Jesus in this sanctuary and in this building because we’re here. Therefore, a good way for all of us to love our neighbors is to confess in our hearts and in our minds, “Jesus has made me a temple, a dwelling place for the living God.” If we will all do so, then it will be plain to anyone who walks through the door that Jesus’ team is on the field. Therefore, let us worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.