

**Who will be a witness?**  
**Sermon 221 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 19, 2024**  
**Acts 1:15-17, 21-26**

*“Behold!” Says the Lord through the prophet Isaiah!  
“I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (Is. 43:19)*

I. The iPad

I can still remember the exact place I was standing when I first learned that apple was coming out with a new device. Not an iPod or an iPhone, but another different kind of thing the likes of which the world had never seen (or needed). It would be called the iPad and it would change the way we lived and worked... forever.

“That’s about the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard!” I said out loud as I stood in my tiny New York City apartment working on something in the kitchen (which was basically a closet with the accordion doors removed and a miniature stove shoved in. Who would need something like that? And with a name like iPad... that should be an uphill climb for the marketing team. Yeah, that’s never going to take off. I thought.

As I stand here preaching from the 3rd iPad I’ve owned, I stand corrected.

I am a person who typically loves change. I get excited about “new things” and am usually an early adapter to new ideas. But for whatever reason, I just couldn’t see it with the iPad. I was wrong.

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In the days following Jesus’ ascension into heaven, the disciples and other followers of Jesus stayed in Jerusalem waiting for a sign. This sign would be the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate each Pentecost. It would ordain them to go out and be the proclaimers of the good news in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. At least that’s what Jesus said. Those were his last words before he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:6-11). So the disciples gathered close in the Jerusalem upper room - presumably the same upper room where Jesus shared his last Passover supper with them not so long ago - and waited for the Spirit to bring them a sign.

As they started waited, they started to look around and they realized that the old crew of 12 was now only 11. Judas was gone, his body lying in a field after his betrayal; and without him, there was a gap to fill. For so long they had been a group of 12. 12 faithful friends and followers, fitting around tables suited for that specific number. 12 men,

representing (or at least symbolizing) the 12 tribes of Israel. 12 was the right number, the holy number, the God-ordained number. ...But now there were only 11.

So the disciples decided to organize an election process to choose who would be the new #12. They cast lots see who might fill the void. For the longest time I thought casting lots was the same as taking a vote. Like we so often do, assuming majority rule. But that wasn't exactly how things worked in the ancient world. Luke doesn't tell us as he's writing the first chapter of Acts, but scholars say that the most common way of "casting lots" was for men to write the names of their candidate in small stones, they'd put all the stones in a container, and then shake it until one came out. It was part probability and part providence.

Whether by chance, luck, or divine intervention, Matthias is the name that pops out of the rock container that day and therefore he is chosen to replace Judas. He is the new #12. The group is whole again.

Now we're ready for the sign.

But here's the thing. No one in that upper room had any idea what was coming next; and they sure as heck weren't ready for it.

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## II. The Art of Parenting

In the first weeks of our daughter's life, we learned pretty quickly that there was so much we didn't know. We had done a ton of reading, asking friends, asking our own parents, listening to all the advice we were given... and yet we were woefully unprepared. We learned pretty quickly that as soon as we would get used to one rhythm, sometimes as simple as a feeding and napping schedule, she'd grow a bit overnight and we'd wake up the next day to find that everything had changed. One day she'd roll, the next she'd crawl. And each little advancement turned our world upside down, requiring us to up our game to keep her safe as she grew.

She's ten now; and we are still struggling to keep up with each new phase as it comes. Pray for us as we are still trying to keep her safe, and healthy, and whole.

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Back in that upper room. I am sure the disciples had some ideas about how they were going to take the Gospel out into Jerusalem and even the broader region of Judea. I

wonder what they thought about the Samaria idea. I mean, sure, Jesus made them travel through it on at least one occasion which is recorded in John's Gospel. But there's not a lot of evidence - even in that story - that convinces me they'd be excited to go back. They were, after all, people of their day and time. But then again, Jesus did tell them - in his final words on this earth - to go there and proclaim the good news.

What's more, Samaria wasn't the furthest, most outrageous destination, no Jesus also says that they are to take the Gospel "to the ends of the earth" meaning... until there is no place left to go, no road left untraveled, no person left unmet. This good news that Jesus brings, is good news for everyone.

For us, these words from Jesus sound a lot like Matthew's great commission: *Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost* (KJV). The words are familiar, poetic, and comforting. But for the disciples, hearing them in this context, for the first time, without thousands of years of theological interpretation and word-smithing, this particular call must have been terrifying and terribly unsettling.

It is no wonder they wanted the full team in tact - staffed with 12 disciples, not 11, before this sign came that would launch their mission into its next phase.

But here's the thing. The Spirit that would come on Pentecost - the long awaited sign - was doing something new. In the prophetic tradition of Isaiah, which Luke has been quoting and fulfilling since the very beginning of his Gospel, the Spirit is making a way in the wildernesses of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and far beyond, and this *new thing* doesn't need 11 or 12 disciples... it needs so many more. In fact the Spirit needs so many more bearers of good news that social boundaries that had been confused for *spiritual boundaries* for far too long, those were going to be broken as the flames of the Holy Spirit began to dance over the heads of Jew and Greek, slave and free, men and women and eunuch alike. This sign from the Spirit was going to usher the church into a new season of ministry together and it was going to require a new kind of leadership in order to do it.

Pentecost marked a turning point in the mission of God, it was a resurrection of sorts, which offered new life to the fledgling movement which sat huddled inside the upper room waiting for the Spirit to arrive with a sign guiding them into uncharted territory. At Pentecost, "the Spirit is ready to do new things, opening the Church to a wider world, which requires other leaders. The task of being witnesses, not only in Jerusalem and Judea (where they themselves had come to know Jesus and his Gospel), but also in Samaria and to the ends of the earth, required people who could participate in that mission. For that reason, it has become commonplace to say that the disciples chose Mathias, but the Spirit chose Paul."<sup>1</sup> Of course this is not a literal or limited statement, but one to point to the ever-existing reality that we (as disciples of Jesus, members of a church with a rich history and heritage) often look to the past to define the needs of the future, we are looking for Mathias to replace Judas (so to speak). But the Spirit is already anointing, already calling,

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<sup>1</sup> Gonzales. 30-31.

already equipping new leaders to guide us into our future together with God. *Who will be a witness? Who is willing to go?* Not just to Jerusalem and Judea, but to Samaria and the ends of the earth too?

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For a long time Christians thought about missions and evangelism as a one way conversion exercise. One in which we would go and take our American version of Christianity out into the corners of the world and convert everyone to our way of praying, worshipping, and living. We thought this was faithful discipleship, following the call of Jesus as expressed here and in the Great Commission. But if we read the book of Acts carefully and pay attention to what is happening to the church too, we will find that as the good news spreads, relationships expand, people grow, but the structure of the church is perpetually being re-formed for the sake of the mission. The mission which invites all people, everywhere to know the unconditional love of God as shown through the life of Jesus, that stays the same, but everything else changes. Because we cannot grow in relationship with anyone if we are unwilling to change for the sake of Love.

But what I have come to know, is that when we do change for the sake of Love, there *is* new creation, new life, a resurrection of sorts... and that is a beautiful thing to behold.

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### III. The Redwoods

I've never made it to the Giant Redwoods of California, but they are on my bucket list for sure. I can't imagine a tree that is 20 or 30 feet in diameter. It is a beautiful mystery to me and one I'd like to see with my own eyes one day.

Arborists say that the Giant Redwoods that are famous enough to have names like Grizzly Giant, General Grant, and General Sherman are thousands of years old - some of them even 2,200 years old. That's just about the same - maybe a little older than the Jesus movement and the Christian church. And just as the church has grown slowly over time, so have these trees. Putting on between 2 and 6 feet of height and 2 to 3 inches of diameter each year. Each inch subtly changing the face of the tree, sometimes in leaps and spurts, other times in slow and steady progression. Each season of growth producing a new ring, a mark of change, telling the story of the tree that was and the tree that is still becoming.

Thinking about these trees and the time it has taken for them to grow, and being a steward of the church, a minister of the Gospel in a world where change is forced upon us from so many directions we cling to the church as a source of consistency and comfort.

In a world where churches are choosing to change or stay the same, it makes me curious about the Redwoods. What would happen if they were to stop taking on new rings, stop reaching for new heights, stop expanding into wider spaces on the ground. What would happen if the redwoods decided to stop growing because it required too much change?

What would they be today if they had decided to stop adding new rings of growth a thousand years ago?

They certainly wouldn't be so grand and tall and wide and majestic and beautiful...

In fact, they would probably just be... dead.

And so I wonder, if the same is true for us?

When we ask ourselves the question: Where do we go from here? Are the options as simple as change or stay the same?

And is staying the same imitating the disciples who elected Matthias to fill the 12th spot in the old model when the Spirit is about to blow open the doors to that model in the first place... calling all kinds of people new and old, foreign and native, like us and beautifully unlike us... in order to create and call and equip a new church for a new world and a new life that God is longing for us to see?

The Kingdom of God is near, Jesus says...as his whole life fulfills the words of the prophet.

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Who will be a witness to this new thing?

Who will collaborate with our God who is always making a way through the wilderness?

Who will go?

Who will serve?

Who will be a witness?