

## Uncertain Waiting: The Seven Missional Acts of Acts (Part 1)

Psalm 47; Luke 24:36-53; Acts 1:1-11

So, a new year, huh? Has any New Year in your lifetime felt quite the same?

One of my favorite rock and roll bands for 25 years is Counting Crows. They had a hit song called “A Long December.”

On New Years Day, the band tweeted one line from that song: “Maybe this year will be better than the last.” I think they probably thought of that way back in March during the lockdown; set a reminder on their phone; and tweeted it out, feeling very clever, on Friday. Maybe this year will be better than the last.

Has any New Year made you more hopeful that it *will* be better than the last? Has any New Year given you the feeling that you shouldn’t hope too much that this year will be better than the last?

We are full of uncertainty, huh? And we’re waiting. For our vaccine doses. For the R-naught to keep going down. For this thing to get under control. Uncertainty. Waiting.

While we as a church *do* have to wait for this pandemic to get under control before we do *many* of the things we might want to do in terms of moving OUT into our community, one thing is certain: we can’t wait to start thinking and learning and praying.

Thinking, learning, and praying. That kind of describes the circumstances of the disciples in the two passages we read: first at the end of Luke’s gospel, and then at the beginning of his work we call “The Acts of the Apostles.”

Our new series is called “The Seven Missional Acts of Acts.” I mean *acts* like acts in a play. Seven phases of action, where scenes shift and the story gains momentum as God moves among his people.

But the first act *feels* like it lacks much action—at least among the followers of Jesus. They’re thinking, learning, praying. Uncertain waiting.

Think of the phases of uncertainty that the disciples go through in these verses.

- Jesus has died, but hasn’t risen
- Jesus has risen, but hasn’t appeared

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- Jesus is appearing to the disciples and teaching them, especially about how he fulfills the OT, but hasn't taken the throne
- Jesus ascends to heaven's throne, but hasn't manifested his reign

Look with me again over the end of Luke's gospel: Luke gives us the account of his rising, then (36ff) his appearances; Luke tells us Jesus lead some serious Bible studies (44-5) with his followers; he gives (47) some small hints about the disciples' future mission; and then (50ff) Luke tells how he rose to heaven's throne.

Now look again at Acts 1. The beginning of Luke's history of the first church overlaps with these events. It gives us (3-4) his appearances, his teaching sessions (2), his promise (5, 8) of the Spirit's coming, another version (8) of the disciple's coming work, and another account (9ff) of his rise to heaven's throne.

At each stage in this process, the disciples are not *clueless*. But they are *uncertain*.

They know he has died, but they don't know what that means for their relationship to him and their futures.

They have heard he's risen, but they don't know if they should believe the reports, or what it would even mean that he was alive.

They see him alive, but they don't know how his death and resurrection are the fulfillment of their Hebrew hopes and Bibles.

They know more about the fulfillment of the OT in Jesus, but they don't know what it means for their own future, or for the future of God's Kingdom.

Another way to say this is, at every stage in this bizarre experience, they are looking around at one another, and they are looking to God, and, when they get a chance to, they are looking at Jesus, and they're asking, *ok, but what NOW?*

Every stage along the way, they learn. They have their stunning "ah ha" moments. Gradually they learn to expect the unexpected.

The English missionary to India William Carey famously said "expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." Here in Act 1 of Acts, here in the period of uncertain waiting, the disciples are learning this, aren't they? Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God. Before act 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the drama,

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when the disciples attempt great things for God, they're learning first to expect great things from God.

His sacrificial death, his resurrection, just as he said. His appearances. His ascension—again, just like he said. His sitting on the throne of heaven, just like he said. And his sending forth of the Spirit, just as he had promised. The Lord is building their confident expectation in this period of uncertain waiting.

Notice, as someone else has pointed out, that William Carey's expression doesn't go "Attempt great things for God. Expect great things from God." My parents have always joked with me that I have a "ready-fire-aim" kind of way of approaching things. My parents would have preferred if I'd learned the "measure twice, cut once" principle. I am tempted to attempt great things for God, and then to expect great things from God. In that order. To leap before I look. To try to produce before I pray. A lot of us do.

Regardless of our temperament, and whether we are careful planners or impulsive risk-takers, I don't think many of us learn the Act 1 principle. The William Carey principle. We want to be the center of the action, doing great things for God. And then we expect God to come behind us and sprinkle his divine magic dust all over our half-baked efforts. When the Lord doesn't bless our carefully planned or our impulsive actions, we get discouraged. Huh— maybe we can't really expect anything from God.

But the Lord Jesus is teaching his disciples, in this Act 1 period of uncertain waiting, to learn to expect great things from God. To expect that the things he promises are true. To expect that we can and will grow in the fear and knowledge of the Lord over time and with study and prayer. To expect that he is with us even when we cannot see him. To expect most of all that the Father in heaven *loves loves loves* to exalt the Son in the world; that the Spirit *loves loves loves* to bring the grace and truth of the Son home to the hearts of women and men and girls and boys. To expect that when we expect his presence and power, and call upon him in prayer, *even in the midst of uncertain waiting*, he will lead us not only into all truth, but into labor on his behalf that is never in vain.

But, you might wonder, is our church really in the same situation here in the 21st century as the disciples were in the 1st century? Can we really draw a "principle" from Act 1? Are we, as a church, really in "Act 1" ourselves? Is it *arrogant*, maybe?

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By putting ourselves in the position of the first church in history, are we acting like we're as important as they were?

Yes and no.

On the one hand, the first stage of uncertain waiting, which we read about here, *is indeed* a single, historical period. It's a parenthesis in between the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit that propels the church into its mission. It's an unrepeatable, singular experience in the history of God's people. Just as there's only one crucifixion and burial and resurrection and sending of the Spirit at the first Pentecost, there's *one* period of uncertain waiting when Jesus said and did *just these particular things with these particular people*.

In a sense, the period of uncertain waiting is *over*. The specific confusions they felt, and the literal *inaction* of those days, is done: there is no more hiding in the hidden room and waiting for what's next, because the Spirit has come and the mission is underway.

But on the other hand, there's a sense in which we are right where they were. The uncertain waiting of this unique period in history is kind of like our everyday experience following Jesus. Their process of learning to expect great things from God before attempting great things for God— well, that's right where we are, too. You and I go through some of the same confusion that the disciples did. We're all still learning the story of Israel fulfilled in Jesus—the same stuff Jesus was teaching his disciples when he would show up out of nowhere and give them a sporadic Bible study after his resurrection.

You and I also know, like the disciples knew during this period, that if this stuff is true, our lives can never be the same. And we must radically reorient our lives toward God's kingdom. We, like them, are called to pour all our energy into this kingdom.

And yet we never know *exactly* what this means. We are *uncertain*. As James says in his letter, it's pure arrogance to think we can plan tomorrow and next week, and next month, and 2021 with any semblance of certainty. Are we *God*? Someone has said "man makes his plans, and God laughs." (Hasn't 2020 taught us this!?)

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Our days are in the Lord's hands, and all our plans are just guesses about what shape our faithfulness to God's kingdom are going to take as time ticks on. Our missional lives—and that's what they are, if we're kingdom people— consist of plenty of uncertain waiting. We're sure of many things. But we're never quite sure what we should do or say or not do or not say in any particular moment or season of our lives—individually or together.

But friends, haven't we been taught to expect great things from God? No one realized exactly how God would do it, but he did it. He overcame the world. Its sin, death, and hell. Its angry crowds. Its most awful form of capital punishment. "After his suffering, he presented himself with many convincing proofs that he was alive." Jesus gave himself in his incarnation, his life, his death, and his resurrection. And then he gave himself to his uncertain, waiting disciples. He taught them. He trained them. And then he asked them to wait and pray.

Look, Jesus wants to implement the full flowering of his Father's kingdom more than any of us do. But because he wants us to trust his Father's heart and his Father's rule, he asks us to draw near to him by faith, to learn to pray and hope and trust in this period of uncertain waiting, and to learn to expect great things from his God and ours.

And once we've become convinced that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again, and the Holy Spirit seals these hopes to our hearts, that same Holy Spirit will send us forth to attempt great things for the God who has already done more for us than we could have ever dared to hope or expect.