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Sermon 8 May 2022

Title: The Rising Church Sermon 1: Spot the Difference (Acts 2:37-47)

Spot the difference

- Good morning to you from Largs and let me welcome you again to the LargsNaz online service—we are always blessed by your presence and it is our prayer that you are blessed as well and that you have a real sense of God’s presence right there where you are, wherever that is, the Spirit of the Lord is there.
- It has been a wonderful week for us—we’ve been hosting two of our dearest friends, Aubrey and Bryce and we’ve certainly enjoyed showing them around and introducing them to you all—and we appreciate the hospitality that you all have shown them as well.
- Now, this is Week 3 of our Rising Church series—in which we have been looking at the book of Acts and asking, among other things, What can the church in the so-called “Post-Christian age” learn from the church in the pre-Christian age?
- When we began the series, we saw how the ending of Luke’s Gospel, in which Jesus ascends into heaven, becomes the beginning of the book of Acts, and we there found the disciples still a little confused about the meaning of the Kingdom of God—they were still interested in whether Jesus was going to restore Israel’s political power—Jesus tells them they’re going to receive

power as he has promised—and then he is lifted up into heaven, leaving the disciples staring up into the sky—but two angels appear and basically ask “What in the world are you doing? You know what you’re supposed to be doing—you’re supposed to be waiting in Jerusalem”—we also noted the similarities between the ascension of Jesus and the ascension of Elijah—Elijah had told his disciple Elisha that he’d receive a double portion of his Spirit if he saw him lifted up into the heavens, and Luke uses that reminder to let his reader—that’s us-- know what may be coming for the disciples

- As we mentioned last week, what is coming for the disciples is what happens at Pentecost, when the disciples gather in Jerusalem as Jesus has told them to do, and the Holy Spirit descends upon them, filling them and enabling them to proclaim the gospel to all the Jewish pilgrims who had made the journey to Jerusalem from all over the world, speaking to them in their own native languages—most of them are amazed at this, but some mock the disciples and accuse them of being intoxicated before breakfast
- And then as we also saw last week, Peter steps up and raises his voice in response to them, giving a convincing and convicting speech about the place of Jesus as Messiah and Lord within the history of Judaism—referring back to the prophet Joel and to King David—we said that Peter’s actions there at Pentecost were a mighty testimony to the way that Peter had been transformed by the Holy Spirit—from fear to boldness—we suggested that the Holy Spirit empowers Peter’s PEG—his P-E-G—his personality, experience and Gifts—and specifically we saw how the Holy Spirit, the

Paraclete, changed Peter's ATTITUDE, his APTITUDE, and his ALTITUDE, and that the same Spirit that effected Peter's transformation can empower the church and individuals in it—even today—and so we talked about the power of the Holy Spirit to use our PEGs—our personalities, experience and gifts—to change the world.

- This week I want to look again at Peter's response to those crowds at Pentecost, and we're going to move a little further in Chapter 2 of Acts and look at the next few verses, where Luke (now just a reminder that when I refer to Luke I'm referring to the author of Luke and Acts) –and Luke tells us what happens next—about the response to Peter's powerful speech at Pentecost
- But I want begin by first looking at the way that Luke has crafted his gospel and the Book of Acts—the way he has put them together—because Luke is a careful author—he doesn't just slap a bunch of stories together without paying attention to the WAY his words are constructed—you know I know some preachers whose sermons could use a little bit—or a lot for some of them—but they could use some of Luke's care and attention to what he is writing, because it's important—it's life-changing
- And one of the places that you can see Luke's skill and effort in putting Luke/Acts together is in the way that Peter's speech to the crowd here in Acts 2—the first sermon preached to a crowd in Acts--it has a sort of a twin in the first sermon that we hear preached to a crowd in Luke's gospel
- And I want to look at the similarities between the two

- Because what Luke has done here in Luke and Acts is to set up a Parallel—there are other parallels of course in the way Luke structures the two books—like the way that Luke refers to the 40 days before Jesus’ ascension in Acts, reminding us of the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness in Luke—
- And so as we hear Peter’s words in Acts we’re reminded of JTB in Luke, and we notice what’s similar and different
- and I think there’s a lot to learn from the ways that they are similar
- But there is also much to learn, and some very important messages for us in 2022, in their differences—and that’s why this sermon is called “Spot the Difference”—you remember those “spot the difference” games—or puzzles I guess they are—that you used to see when you were kids? I remember they used to put them in the kids section of the newspaper, where the comics were—there would be two pictures that at first glance looked the same, but when you really got to looking, when you really examined them closely, you found that there were many differences—and by the time you found all of them you realized that those two drawings were in fact very different—and the sermon of John the Baptist in Luke and the sermon of Peter here in Acts are not only similar, they are also different--and the difference makes all the difference between these two prophetic proclamations
- Now why do I say Prophetic?
- You may remember that when I have spoken about John the Baptist before, I have compared what he does in Luke to what Dr Martin Luther King calls the “prophetic voice”—

- And using the “prophetic voice” –acting in the role of a prophet is not **simply** “telling the future,” not MERELY forecasting what will happen, what is yet to come—but using the prophetic voice is calling for repentance and a change in behavior or a societal situation, and looking to God’s wrath or reward—what’s coming depending on the response to the prophetic words—that what John the Baptist is doing there by the river in Luke’s gospel
- And Peter is doing the same thing in the 2nd chapter of Acts
- So let’s look at these two proclamations—you have in your listening guide some of the key verses from each of them
- So let’s set the stage: John the Baptist’s sermon occurs early in the Gospel of Luke—after only 2 chapters that have told us that Jesus and John the Baptist have been foretold, and have been born and are growing up—and then we see JTB going all around the region around the Jordan, baptizing and preaching—so in the Gospel of Luke, John’s words follow the coming of the Messiah into the world, the Son of God descending into humanity—and then we hear John preach
- In Acts, Peter’s words follow the ascension and Pentecost—so Peter’s words follow a description—one description, there are others-- of the descending of the Holy Spirit into humanity—into the Apostles in Jerusalem
- So there’s the first similarity, these two sermons appear early in the narrative, following the appearance, the descending, of the **Son** in Luke, and the **Holy Spirit** in Acts

- So, Peter is speaking after Pentecost to the crowd of Pilgrims who have come into Jerusalem—JTB speaks to the crowds who come into the wilderness—and here’s the second similarity—***both JTB and Peter are very tactful and careful with their words, being mindful not to offend them(!)—no that’s not what happens at all***
- JTB, as you see in verse 7 on your listening guide, opens his sermon with “You Brood of Vipers” and goes on to tell the crowd they better get ready for God’s wrath because they’re like trees and God’s axe is coming
- Peter is a little more measured—as he opens with “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say” there at the beginning—but he goes on to tell the crowd—Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and you, with the help of the Roman Empire, **you crucified him**
- Peter doesn’t call the crowd a brood of vipers, but his words are no less critical
- And so that’s the second similarity, neither JTB nor Peter pander to their audience—they do not sugar coat the situation
 - And this is part of that “prophetic” function of what JTB and Peter are saying, they are clear in their assessment—they are “prophetic”
- But not only are the words of JTB in Luke and Peter in Acts “prophetic”, but we see (here’s a THIRD SIMILARITY) in each of them a reference to the prophets of the OT—Isaiah in Luke’s gospel and Joel in Acts---Luke refers to Isaiah’s words there in verse 6—and all flesh shall see the salvation of God—and what does Peter tell the crowd in Jerusalem that they are witnessing? In

the words of the Prophet Joel: **I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. . . .**
(t)hen everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

- It's almost as if JTB and Peter are singing from the same hymnbook—something new is happening here in Acts, but it has a sense of continuity with Israel's history—and Peter's words have a connection to the prophet JTB, and the prophet Joel, and the prophet Isaiah, and the church today lives and breathes and works in that same stream of history—but I'm jumping ahead
- Now these next few similarities are also going to have important differences attached to them—ways in which Peter's post-Pentecost proclamation is like JTB's sermon in Luke, BUT also different—see if you can spot the differences
- Now, we're told in Luke that what JTB went around proclaiming was (you'll see it there in that first sentence)—a **baptism of repentance** for the **forgiveness** of sins (REPEAT)
- And what does Peter tell the crowd in Jerusalem in verse 38? Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit
- Like JTB, Peter is proclaiming baptism, repentance and forgiveness
- But with a difference—baptism in the name of Jesus Christ—AND the gift of the HOLY SPIRIT
- Why didn't John mention that stuff? Because he is preaching BEFORE Jesus' ministry had begun, before the crucifixion, before the resurrection, before the ascension, before Pentecost when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit—the

Paraclete—but he predicts it—in verse 16: ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. . . . John knows what is coming**

- But Peter, like the church today, is not like JTB who predicts the coming of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he, like we, testifies not to what is going to happen, but what HAS HAPPENED, and so Peter can tell the crowd at Jerusalem—you know of his deeds of power, you know about the crucifixion and resurrection, you see what is happening here at Pentecost—and the reaction of the crowd in Jerusalem is similar to the reaction of the crowd that JTB speaks to
- In Acts we read (verse 37) Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “**Brothers, what should we do?**”
- Similarly, in Luke’s gospel: And the crowds asked John the Baptist, “What then should we do?”
- We’ve seen Peter’s answer to this question—repent, be baptized, be forgiven, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit—and Peter goes on to add in verse 40— Save yourselves from this corrupt generation—that is, **live differently**
- This is the same kind of instruction that JTB gives—in verse 11 and following—if you have food, share it with the hungry-- if you’ve got 2 coats, share one of them
- I’m reminded of a story my Dad tells about two farmers who were best friends and one of them asks the other, he says, “Jed, if you had two Cadillacs

would you let me drive one of them?” And Jed says, “Clem, you are my oldest and dearest friend—you know if I had 2 Cadillacs I’d let you have one of them—and then Clem says, “Well, if you had two mansions, would you let me live in one of them?” and Jed says, Clem, you’re my dearest friend, my boon companion, you know I’d give you one of my mansions to live in—so Clem thinks about that thing for a minute or two and then he says, “Jed—if you had two pigs. . .” and Jed says “Clem you just stop right there, now—you KNOW I got two pigs.”

- Oh it’s easy to be hypothetical isn’t it—to give away what we don’t have—but John the Baptist and Peter challenge the crowds to live differently
- Both JTB and Peter are saying to their audiences that the way you live after repenting and being forgiven is different from “this corrupt generation”
- And what happens after the question “what should we do?” is answered?
- Well, in the gospel of Luke we see that (in verse 21) all the people are baptised, including Jesus, on whom the Holy Spirit descends like a dove—and what happens in Acts?
- Verse 41, those who welcomed his message were baptised, and these who are baptised become the body of Christ, on whom the Holy Spirit descends just like it did on Jesus in the gospel of Luke (see I told you Luke pays attention to the way he writes this thing)
- Now, I want to look at verse 40 of the Acts passage—and think about the relationship between Peter and those he’s addressing, we’re told: 40 And he testified with many other arguments and **exhorted them,**

- Now look at the passage from Luke's gospel, verse 18--18 So, with many other **exhortations, JTB proclaimed the good news** to the people.
- That word exhort, and exhortation—the Greek root word there is parakaleó
- It means to call on for support, or to support, to encourage, to stand beside, to comfort, and one of the words used in the New Testament for the Holy Spirit is the “paraclete”—the comforter—you may know that old hymn—O spread the tidings round, wherever man is found, the Comforter has come
- What does this tell us about the way Peter and JTB interact with the people they've called to repentance and forgiveness? Do they continue to berate them and continually remind them of their guilt and their sinfulness? No—they exhort them, they encourage them, they stand beside them and support them—led by the Spirit, the paraclete—the Comforter
- how often do we today hear preaching that continually hammers people with guilt and fear and wrath and hellfire and damnation—preaching that isn't GOOD NEWS—and church, if the message we're preaching isn't good news, then it ain't the gospel—yes Peter and John begin with harsh truths about the need for repentance and forgiveness—but they don't stay there, they both parakehlayo --exhort, comfort, encourage, stand up for, those to whom they've brought the gospel
- Of course, today we also hear those who preach forgiveness without repentance—the gospel that JTB and Peter preached, and that the church should be proclaiming is, as we've heard, a gospel of repentance AND

forgiveness, BOTH an admonition to live differently from “this corrupt generation” AND a gospel that provides exhortation, support, encouragement and comfort

- Now finally, let’s back up and look at the full picture of what happens here after Peter’s proclamation at Pentecost in our scripture for today)—it contains a SILVER BULLET FORMULA for revival, by the way:
- Take a look at what happens in verse 41 --⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. and then in the last sentence—verse 47--And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.
- And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved—3,000 on that first day—now why did this happen?
- Was it because the Apostles wrote up an effective mission statement? Because they funded a new building program, found an attractive location in an area with a promising demographic? Invested in new lighting and sound system, and the latest presentation technology? Began a cool young people’s ministry? Updated their music? Had a slick online livestream and social media presence? No—and there’s nothing wrong with any of these things—but they are not the primary difference-makers.
- Why did the early church see such immediate and incredible development?
- Because they were empowered by the Spirit, and the apostles embraced that power to work many signs and wonders—they did not ask whether they were capable, or whether it was feasible—and what do we find the church

doing—the people who made it up? What are the components of this remarkable church growth program? We asked this question and we used this passage to guide our discussions at the church board's Vision meeting last Saturday

- And here's the answer: They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.
- They followed the apostles teaching, they fellowshiped together, they broke bread together, they prayed together, they spent time in the temple, they ate in each others' homes and were glad and grateful, and they praised God and had goodwill of all people
- It doesn't sound groundbreaking, does it? These are ideas that don't sound like they'd sell too many books about church growth—I mean, what's so great about all that?
- But what if we took them seriously? What if we were intentional as a church and said here's what we are going to do:
 - follow the apostles' teaching
 - fellowship together
 - break bread together/eat with each other—share a table
 - have glad and generous hearts
 - pray together

- spend time in the temple (at church)
- praise God and have goodwill of all the people
- I don't think we could do much better as a church than to say we're going to do these things because we want to follow the example of the early church
- I think we ought to try them, don't you? In fact, I think we're already doing them and we ought to KEEP doing them. Largs Church of the Nazarene and churches all over this country and all over the globe ARE doing these things and wherever they are, they are changing the world—transforming lives and God is blessing their efforts tremendously
- Oh-- but I skipped over a couple of verses that sometimes make people uncomfortable: verse 44 there
- ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."
- Now I'm going to just tell you that this is NOT a Biblical defense of socialism or communism or any other political -ism. It is **much** deeper than that. What it is, is a description of the radical call of Jesus to his followers—to deny themselves, to take up their cross and follow him
- When we read "they had all things in common"—that "in common" means simply this, that they considered nothing—nothing-- as "set aside" for themselves alone—everything was available to meet the needs of others and to further the work of the Kingdom—all that they were, all that they could do, and all that they had, was offered up as it was needed

- can you imagine what would happen if we—the church in 2022—not just LargsNaz but the larger body of believers-- can you imagine what would happen if we recaptured that sense of freedom, that sense of trust in God's provision—knowing that when we say, “it's all yours” to God, we are part of a body of believers that becomes a source of abundance to all of its members—it is a miraculous thing, and it runs counter to the perspective of a world that tells us to hold on to what we've got or someone might take it from us—it is a perspective that says “I am crucified with Christ, a living sacrifice, emptied out for the sake of the Kingdom”—a Kingdom in which every one of us is given access to immeasurably more than we could ask for or imagine.
- It IS an almost unimaginable idea.
- But how do we do that? I think that we see how to do that in the early church—not necessarily with complex strategies and marketing schemes, but by living lives that are empowered by the baptism of repentance and forgiveness, led by the Holy Spirit—the steps are simple, and I believe God will be faithful to us as we are faithful to Him—and as we are we will see the Spirit continue to move in Largs Church of the Nazarene, we'll see the fires of revival in the churches in this town and among the people--families and individuals in this town, up to Skelmorlie and Wemyss Bay, to Ardrossan, throughout this country and into all the world
- Why did the church in Acts have such a tremendous impact on the lives of so many people? Because it offered a real alternative to the “corrupt generation”

in which people lived. And the church today should too. And when we do, it won't go unnoticed--the world outside will spot the difference