

“Don’t Be Beaten Before You Begin”

Acts 1:1-11

Series: The Story Chapter 28 New Beginnings

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

November 8, 2015

You should never assume anything.

A fire blazed across the California Mountains. Hoping to cover the story, a CNN News photographer called the local airport to charter a flight. He was told a twin-engine plane would be waiting for him. Arriving at the airfield, he spotted a plane warming up outside a hanger. He jumped in, slammed the door shut, and shouted, 'Let's go'. The pilot taxied out, swung the plane into the wind and took off. Once in the air, the photographer instructed the pilot, 'Fly over the valley and make low passes so I can take pictures of the fires on the hillsides.' 'Why?' asked the pilot. 'Because I'm a photographer for CNN,' he responded, 'and I need to get some close up shots.' The pilot stammered, 'So, what you're telling me, is . . . You're NOT my flight instructor?'

Assumptions are dangerous. They fracture marriages, divide families, create hostile schools and workplaces, split churches. Pride is an assumption. So is prejudice. Assumptions give birth to fatalism, fanaticism and fear. Sisters and brothers, we are afflicted with assumptions. We are prisoners of our thinking. So often we are beaten before we begin the battle. When life gets stressful, when the pressure builds, we start to play the blame game. “It’s the economy you know.” “It’s the government’s fault.” “It’s the media.” “It’s the way my parents raised me.” “My spouse just doesn’t understand me.” “I was given a raw deal.” “Everyone is against me.” Assumptions make us look outside for someone or something to blame. We really should start by looking within.

Even the disciples were prisoners of assumptions. In fact, they were afflicted with the Great Assumption. Before the Ascension there was the Assumption. It shows up in the first chapter of the book of Acts. Forty days after the Resurrection the disciples ask Jesus a question.

So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

What a dumb question. The disciples were schooled in the Old Testament. They knew God’s Story from childhood. When they met and followed Jesus for three years they discovered that the Story led directly to Him. Then they witnessed the climax of the Story in His crucifixion and resurrection. For forty days they heard His teaching. Yet after spending all that time with Him they still completely missed the point of God’s Story. They expected Jesus to be a military Messiah who came to make Israel a mighty empire. They dreamed of sitting on thrones in Jerusalem next to Jesus while all the nations crawled on their knees to Him. It was a selfish and self-centered question. You can’t blame them. Centuries of tradition trained them to think that way. God, however, is really not interested in real estate. After all He already owns it all. God does not want us to sit back and wait for everyone to come to us. That is the Great Assumption.

It still imprisons the Church today. Win Arn, a church consultant, surveyed a thousand churches with this question, “Why does the church exist?” 89% of church members replied, “The church’s purpose is to take care of my family’s needs and my

needs.” Only 11% said the purpose of the church is “to win the world for Jesus Christ.” This may come as a shock but the Church does not exist to cater to you and me.

In response to the Great Assumption, the next verse gives Jesus’ plan. In fact, these are Jesus’ last words to the His disciples before His Ascension.

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:7-8).

Jesus smashed the Great Assumption with the Great Commission. The disciples asked, “When will the world come to us?” Jesus replied, “I’m sending you out to the whole world.” As usual, God’s purpose is 180 degrees different than ours.

Scholars point out that the rest of the book of Acts is an unfolding of this key verse. Like a rock thrown into a pool, the Holy Spirit moves the disciples outward in ever expanding rings from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and all the way to Rome. For the first three hundred years the Church spread like wildfire. The Church was more a mission than an institution, more a movement than an establishment. But once we built buildings we fell back into the Great Assumption. We waited for everyone to come to us. Now hear me friends. Church buildings are not the problem. We are not imprisoned by our sanctuaries but by our assumptions. That is why the Presbyterian Church and other churches are rapidly declining in America. We are beaten before we even begin. The Good News is we possess within ourselves the ability to break free. But first we must break some assumptions. Let me mention three.

Assumption 1: “I Can’t Do It.” When it comes to breaking out of any box – a box of depression, a box of addiction, a box of frustration, a box of anger, a box of failure – you may have hit the lid so many times you assume: I can’t do it. It can’t be done. I’m stuck in this box forever. We assume our power is our only resource. We are convinced we are all on our own, that God is not going to intervene. Presbyterians say it all depends on God but we act like it all depends on us. And we often don’t expect anything supernatural to happen. I remember a story about a woman who came into a Presbyterian worship service and during the pastor’s sermon shouted, “Hallelujah!” Some heads turned. She did it again. “Hallelujah!” A few feathers were ruffled. After the third “Hallelujah!” the head usher approached her and said, “Ma’am, you mustn’t do that here.” The woman replied, “But I’ve got the Spirit!” The usher replied, “Well you didn’t get it here.”

The truth is we don’t get the Spirit. The Spirit gets us.

Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “...you will be baptized with Holy Spirit not many days from now.... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you... (Acts 1:4-5, 8).

In Greek the word *baptize* means to plunge, sink, drench, soak and overwhelm. We don’t just spritz ourselves with Spirit. It takes us over and it takes us out into the world. When you say, “I can’t do it” you are doubting the Spirit. God’s plans are always bigger than ours. Paul once said that

The power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

I'd be happy if God would do what I ask or imagine. But Paul says the power that created the cosmos wants to do superabundantly more than we can ask or imagine. One time I was advised to put a zero behind whatever goal I thought God was giving us. If we wanted to start five small groups – put a zero behind it and plan for 50. When we did that we didn't get 50. But today, when you count all the Growth Groups for adults and youth we have over 60. That's a God-thing. We could not accomplish that on our own power.

Don't box yourself in with the assumption you can't do it. If you are following God's will He will provide all the power you need. It's not God's will for you to be boxed in by denial, defeat, depression or destructive habits. His will for you is a life of love, joy, freedom, peace and grace. And He will provide the power of the Spirit to help you do what you can't do on your own.

Assumption 2: "I Can't Change." Some say, "I've tried to change and I keep making the same mistakes." Others complain, "I don't want to change. I'm comfortable the way things are." You've heard the oft repeated story, "How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "Change? I don't want to change. My grandmother gave that light bulb." But life is constantly changing. General Electric no longer makes incandescent light bulbs. Whether we like it or not the world is changing and it's getting faster all the time.

The book of Acts is a book of change. At the beginning, the followers of Jesus made sacrifices in the Temple, worshiped on Saturday, followed the Law, ate kosher food and avoided Gentiles. For thousands of years they observed all these traditions and more. By the end of the book all that changed. The Spirit did that. As you read Acts, notice how the Apostles are always running to keep up with the Spirit. From Pentecost onward the Spirit keeps leap frogging over them. Just when they think they have a good thing going in Judea, the Spirit shows up in Samaria, then Gaza, Damascus, Caesarea, Antioch, Philippi, Corinth and on to Rome. If we want to see the Spirit at work we have to get out of this building. Your life will never stand still. The only time your life stops changing is when it stops. Resisting change is like trying to stop the Delaware from flowing. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit is the River of Life. The Spirit will help you navigate the changes in your life. So don't just stand on the river bank. Jump in.

Assumption 3: "I Can't Make a Difference" After Jesus gave them a mission to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth, He led them out of Jerusalem to the top of the Mount of Olives.

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9-11)

I imagine after the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven they probably turned to each other and said, "Great. Now what do we do?" Jesus is gone. How can these guys change the world? If you want to change the world today you need to engage a top flight marketing firm, start a social media blitz, hire celebrities to hawk your product. Jesus does none of these things. Instead, He takes a huge risk. The entire Story, from Creation through Crucifixion to Resurrection, has led to this point: the spreading of His Kingdom and His Good News to the ends of the earth. Now Jesus places this enormous task, this

earth-shaking mission, this eternal plan for which He literally gave His life, into the hands of eleven unknown guys who were not very good at their day jobs and who failed nearly every test Jesus gave them. What difference can they make?

Nothing...on their own. But through the power of the Holy Spirit those first disciples standing on that hilltop changed the world. By the end of the book of Acts the Gospel had gone from that little hilltop right into the heart of the most powerful empire of that day in Rome. And there was no stopping it.

The same way the Spirit is working today. Here are four ways the Holy Spirit smashes our assumptions. **Send Not Sit.** The disciples assumed they would sit back and let the world come to them. God is a sending God. The Father sent the Son who sent the Spirit who sent the Church. Rick Warren once said you don't measure the effectiveness of a church by its seating capacity but by its sending capacity. Our goal is not to hide our faith in this box but to launch out and bless the world in the name of Jesus Christ. We cannot share the Good News if we don't spend time with people, build relationships with people and bless people.

Second, **Break Down Not Build Walls.** The Holy Spirit forced the disciples to break down denominational walls, ethnic walls, racial walls, and religious walls. As far as I can tell, the Christian church was the first international, multi-ethnic, multi-racial movement in history. Unfortunately, throughout history, we have rebuilt walls which always slow down or stop the work of the Spirit. I am not talking about uniformity. The Lord does not want one big denomination. God loves variety – that's the way He created the universe. I'm sure the Lord loves the variety of ways we worship and serve Him. The Spirit creates unity not uniformity. Walls get in the way.

Third, **Body And Spirit Not Either/Or.** Some churches, such as the Presbyterian Church, focus on caring for the body, for physical needs. We are into soup kitchens, building schools and hospitals, housing the homeless, fighting for justice. That's certainly what God wants us to do. No question. Yet when it comes to sharing the Good News of salvation, to inviting people to believe in Jesus as their Savior and Lord, we Presbyterians suddenly get very silent. We act like that's a private matter and we don't want to offend. On the other hand, there are churches that focus entirely on saving souls and have little interest in health, hunger, or homelessness. The Spirit moved the Apostles to do both.

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need (Acts 4:33-35).

We need to share Good Deeds AND Good News. We are sent to heal body and spirit.

Finally, **Multiply Not Add.** By the end of the book of Acts the Spirit planted groups of disciples in Jerusalem, Samaria, Antioch, Cyprus, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Rome and hundreds of other nameless towns. By AD 100 scholars estimate there were 25,000 Christians in the Roman Empire. By AD 310, despite state-sponsored systematic persecution, there were 20,000,000 Christians. Today there are more than a billion. How did that happen? Multiplication. One church started three churches and those three each started two or three churches and so on and so on and so on.

God loves multiplication. I've seen this with my own eyes. We started with one Growth Group. Now we have over 60. We started with one worship service. Now we have five. We started with one mission trip. Now we send people to Haiti, the DR, Appalachia and multiple trips to the Bahamas. We started with one location. Now Greg is over at Parkland, Leah is at Anchor and the Presbytery is asking us to coach other churches. If we simply tried to add more people to one Bible study, one worship service, one mission trip and one location we would very quickly run out of room.

Why do I bring this up? During the Share the Story campaign members asked me, "After the building is paid off, what's next? Another, bigger building?" No. Jesus did not say, "Go and make mega-churches." He said, "Go and make disciples." And the best way to make disciples is to multiply groups that make disciples in Lower Makefield, Lower Bucks, Pennsylvania, the East coast, the United States and to the ends of the earth.

A prime example is the Church Has Left the Building. Woodside did it for the first time in 2010. Now there are churches in Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware Counties, Philadelphia, Mercer County, south Jersey, the Jersey shore and even in South Dakota leaving their buildings. On this day God's people do not sit. We are sent. On this day there are no denominational, ethnic or racial walls that divide us. On this day we care for the body and the spirit and we multiply many times over what Woodside could accomplish alone.

Jesus doesn't want you to sit. He wants to send you. There will come a time when He will tell you to start a new Growth group, a new ministry, a new mission, a new campus, a new church. Don't say, "I can't do it. I can't change. I can't make a difference." Don't be beaten before you begin. Why sit around and wait for a miracle to come...when you can be one?

Usually I tell you what Woodside did. Instead, I want to share what St. John's Roman Catholic church did:

We had over 200 volunteers. Today, we made the following:

Over 250 meals for Aids for Friends

177 personal care kits to be dispersed by the Willard School, St John Hospice, HomeFront, & Zubaida Foundation

130 care bags for children with handmade hats & scarves, socks, & gloves going to the Willard School in Philadelphia.

75 soup jars to sell - proceeds will go to help a mission in El Salvador

48 Christmas gifts for abused women sheltered at Homefront

17 lap blankets going to Manor Care & children at the Backpack Center

500 peanut butter & jelly sandwiches at the Trenton Soup Kitchen & shelters

72 birthday boxes going to children supported by HomeFront

The sewers made personal care products for women that will be taken to Uganda next week by a parishioner.

Collected 20 bags of clothes & 5 boxes of high protein food for HomeFront

Filled 2 U-Haul trucks with furniture that is going to HomeFront

We cleaned 3 yards for elderly parishioners

The choir went to D'Youville Manor We also sent people to visit with the people there.

It was an awesome day!

Last week at Presbytery we closed another congregation. Some say the day of the Church is over, that Christianity is on the way out and that church buildings will be closed or turned into bars, dance clubs or homes. I say the Church is not dying. The Church is a sleeping giant. God is still changing the world, God is still making a difference if believers are willing to get out of the box of the church building and join Him in the world.

What difference can a handful of people make? A handful of you started mission trips to the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic and to Haiti. A handful of you partnered with other churches and welcomed the homeless into the church buildings on bitter cold nights. A handful of you decided to partner with other churches who were offering dinners to the homeless. A handful of you partnered with other churches to lead worship services in prison. A handful of you are helping to build homes, working in soup kitchens, helping single moms recover from divorce, assisting the unemployed to find work. In all of that you are sharing the love and Good News of Jesus Christ. Last Easter this congregation raised \$40,000 – half went to the victims of the earthquake in Haiti. The other went to the local Advocates for the Homeless and those in Need and with that money they just bought a bus they desperately needed. This morning it's parked outside in our lot. What difference can a handful make? In God's power they can change the world.

Look at the list of projects in your bulletin. On Sunday, November 7th we will go out in handfults and make a difference for the glory of Jesus Christ. These are going to fill up very fast. Sign up today or this week through your Growth Group. Don't let assumptions keep you boxed in. Don't say, "I can't do it, I can't change, I can't make a difference." Be the change you want to see in others. Make a difference. By the power of the Holy Spirit just do it!

Tom Harsha, a member of Woodside, used to think a missionary was someone you give money to, someone who goes overseas and you only hear what they are doing occasionally from your pastor. Then Tom went on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic and everything changed. He became a missionary. Now he has been on 5 trips to the D.R. and to Haiti. He says he works harder on those trips than he does any other time of the year because he feels the power of the Spirit working in him and through the team he works with. But when Tom came home he discovered something new. He found he was still a missionary to the homeless and needy in Trenton, Lower Bucks and Philadelphia. He learned he is a missionary all the time. He's a follower of Jesus outside the box of this building. And if you ask him why he brings the love of Jesus to all these people, I bet Tom will say, "That's the wrong assumption. I don't bring Jesus to them. That's where I find Jesus."

Assumptions are only one of the walls that keep us inside the box. Today we begin a new series: Living Outside the Box. When people today talk of thinking outside the box they mean approaching a problem from a fresh perspective or a new angle. God, however, did not intend for us to just think outside the box. He wants us to live out there. He intended for us to live free from all the walls which keep us from growing, keep us from becoming the people He created us to be, keep us from being with Him. For the next eight weeks we will discover how to open and live outside one box after another. The explosive book of Acts will be our guidebook and map. As we watch the Holy Spirit break the Apostles out of their boxes, we'll learn how the Spirit can do the same for us.