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“What’s Next?” – Acts 28:30-31

The book of Acts is unique in the Bible. There’s debate about what exactly to call it, what category it fits in, but it seems to me to be the second volume of Luke’s Gospel – a sort of sequel, but maybe not so much that as a “Part II.” Here’s why: both written by the same author to the same person, a man named Theophilus – which means “Lover of God” – they’re both telling the story of God working among us. First, in the person of Jesus; second, in the church.

The difference is that Luke, the Gospel, is the story of the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the son of God, Jesus Christ, from before his birth to after his resurrection. Acts, on the other hand, tells us what happened after: his ascension, and what those who actually lived with, followed, touched, and ate with Jesus did once he returned to be with his Father.

Luke is the Good News, the Gospel, of Jesus Christ; Acts is the Good News of how the message about him and salvation spread, and the formation of the Church.

But Acts changes as it moves along: from the beginning as the original few learned to live without the physical presence of the Teacher,

to the questions that inevitably arose about what the message was and whom it was for, to the new peoples and cultures that the great news of the story of Jesus Christ encountered as it spread across the region. And, of course, the controversies and splits that occurred along the way. It starts small, in Jerusalem; it expands to the stories of many; but as it concludes, it focuses on the work of Paul.

Luke wrote two volumes. It's important for us to realize that while no one is going to add to what's between the covers of the Bible, the story continues. And it includes *you*. Yes, you.

Luke finished his writing. The story, though, isn't finished. There's much to learn about how God's work continued after Paul, after the death of the apostles, as the message spread throughout Europe and Asia and, ultimately, to the ends of the earth. God's story, far from finished, expands wider and wider, reaching people and places that the first followers of Jesus never even knew existed with the saving message of Christ. Truth is, Luke narrowed his focus down to the work of Paul because there was just too much to write about! The history of Valley Presbyterian Church just in its thirty-odd years alone would take up a library of records all by itself – and we are just one church among millions, our members just individuals in a great cloud of millions of millions.

The church is a curious thing. It is the most human and most divine earthly group. It is, the Bible tells us, the bride of Christ; it is also brutally insensitive and even sinful, the most human of institutions. Even though it's linked inextricably with God, it seems to be where people are at their most human, least reflective, and, sometimes, their most self-involved. If you go and visit some of the more ancient and remote monasteries in the desolate parts of Greece, you'll find that the entrances, the passages to the caves which are the sanctuaries, are painted with lurid frescoes of hell – just the thing to see before you come in and celebrate God's grace!

While you could say that people seem to be at their most petty around church, which is supposed to be a model for God's pattern for the world, you could also say that people are touchy around the church because the church claims to be the place where the ultimate questions, the most important things, can be found, discussed, understood, shared. What happens in this community is important – very important.

The church, as those who founded it saw it, had two main purposes: to teach about God's saving love in Jesus Christ, spreading that Good News everywhere; and being a community of healing, comfort, love, and mutual support.

The church belongs to God. But it is also ours – because we also belong to God. Our congregation has been through a tough time, when

some of the less-attractive features of our humanity have been on display; it has also been a time when, despite our best efforts, God has continued to work amazing miracles of faith, healing, and hope among the people who've been touched by the people of our congregation.

So, the question for today is, if Luke kept writing, if he were able to chronicle somehow all that has happened since he finished Acts, what would he write about Valley? About you? What is your part in the ongoing story of God and humanity?

To borrow from Apple's iPad commercial, in this great history that's still being written, the history of God's work in and among his creation, the history of the deeds of the followers of Jesus Christ, what is your verse?

We read in Acts about people who are only mentioned once. People like Mattias, the man elected to take Judas place among the twelve (and who is never mentioned again), and Aneas, whom Peter healed from paralysis. They have an enduring place in Scripture, even without much more than a shout-out. But there is another book Scriptures tells us of, the Book of Life, in which are recorded all things that take place – including those of all the people God calls his own, including *us*.

So, again, what is your verse? Or, better, what will be your verse? What is the defining summary of your service for God? Will it be that

you held someone's hand and comforted them in their faith as they left this life? Will it be that you reached out to a child in need? Will it be that you gave some money that helped send food or clothes or a missionary out to some place far away – or around the corner?

You see, we're not that aware of how or when God is working in our lives. At times, God even uses our most catastrophic mistakes and makes them into building blocks of his Kingdom, turns tragedy into triumph.

Last week, we gathered together at the front of the sanctuary to pray over our offerings, all of them, to God.

This stack is what you put in the big basket, and they've been prayed over not just Sunday, but at least twice. Let me share a few with you:

Do you hear hints of how the people who wrote these words might be recorded in God's Book of Life? Hints of what their verses may be about – all, of course, having to do with the growing, pulsing, emerging Kingdom of God of which we are all a part, whether we think we can be or not?

And it's not about being super-holy, or somehow incredibly gifted at making things right; that's God's work: we just do the best we can, and trust that God can use and bless our efforts in his work.

Winston Churchill once said, “Success is failing again and again and never losing your enthusiasm.” The question is not and never will be *if* God’s working in you; it is *how* God is working in and through you. And we are not often privy to how that work is going on.

There are many starts to the year: the calendar year, the fiscal year (of which there are several), the church year; here in Green Valley, our year seems to begin informally when the winter residents return – or when they leave!

Let me propose something really radical: Let’s start our year now, today. Let’s set aside the petty issues and personal hurts we’ve undergone, and take God at his word: every day is a new day. Let’s pool our personal verses, our individual volumes of history once more into this huge work called Valley Presbyterian Church, preach the love and salvation of Jesus Christ (sometimes even using words!), and set about our reason for being: to spread that news, heal the hurting, feed the hungry, comfort the grieving, hold up and love each other, and love this messy, scary world around us.

So, what’s next? Is the work God gave you to do before you were born something you’ve already done, something you’ll do today, or something yet to happen?

Only God knows! Your verse is God’s writing!