

## **Seedfolks.**<sup>1</sup> (slide.1)

For centuries Christians from all walks of life have used this day to celebrate to remember, and to learn from the coming of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the book of Acts, and we want to do the same. We'll look at the significance of what took place in the second chapter of Acts. We'll then look at what happened after, especially in Acts 8. And as we do that, we'll consider how these ideas connect to the providential hand of the Holy Spirit in our lives and to the kind of community He seeks to build, even today. Debi already read our text, so let's begin by looking to our Lord in prayer (slide/black.2).

There's a book I like. The name of the book is (slide.3) *Seedfolks*. It was written in 1997 by Paul Fleischman. On the surface, the book does not look like much. It tells the story of an inner-city community garden in Cleveland, Ohio. That's about it. And yet it's a terrific story. Part of the reason why is because of the actual way the book is written. Most books are written from the perspective of a single narrator. Fleischman doesn't do that. Instead, each chapter is written as a first-person narrative in the voice of one of the main characters. Each character speaks just once—from *their* perspective, in *their* chapter. We may hear about them from one or two of the other characters in a later portion of the book, but we never hear directly from that person again. Yet combined, we're able to piece together the larger story.

The characters in *Seedfolks* represent a wide variety of demographics and ethnicities:

- (slide.4) Kim is a nine-year-old girl from Vietnam.
- (slide.5) Ana is an older woman from Romania.
- (slide.6) Virgil is from Haiti.
- (slide.7) Nora is from England.
- (slide.8) Amir is from India.
- (slide.9) Sae Young is from Korea.
- (slide.10) Wendell is from this very exotic place called "Kentucky,"
- (slide.11) Marciela is from Mexico, and on and on.

All (slide.12) these different people and all these different ethnicities. And you might be thinking that this will be one of those "let's-get-together-and-work-out-our-differences" kinds of stories where everyone joins hands in the end and sings a chorus of "Kumbaya." But that's not what this book is about. It's far more honest than that.

While there are moments of reconciliation and cooperation, This is also a story of infighting, animosity, backbiting, ethnic divisions; and the dumping of garbage and beer bottles on each other's gardens, and the putting up of barbed-wire fences and "no trespassing" signs, and even the story of a guy who claims additional plots of land in the names of relatives who do not exist for his commercial produce startup.<sup>2</sup>

It is a story that is uplifting as it often portrays the best side of human nature. But, at the same time, it is also a story that often portrays the *most suspicious* side of human nature. It's a book that speaks honestly of the condition of our humanity—and especially of our temptation to turn inward and (at times) to act *tribal* (slide/black.13).

But acting tribal is not an especially new phenomenon. Instead, we see it from the very beginning, even in the book of Acts.

### **The Day of Pentecost.**

Here's Jesus (slide.14). Just before ascending to the Father's right hand (the stuff Mark spoke of last week), He gives His followers some very specific instructions. First off, He tells them to not leave Jerusalem right away, but to instead wait for the gift the Father promised. He (slide.15) then explains that this gift will give them power, and that, as a result of this power, (slide.16) they will be His witnesses "*in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" What is Jesus doing? He's making it clear that the goal is not to stay in Jerusalem, but instead to take this message from "here" and to get it "out there." This same goal is true for us, even today (slide/black.17).

Ten days pass (slide.18); it's now the day of Pentecost. About 120 followers of Jesus are packed into a house. Suddenly tongues of fire appear out of nowhere and to everyone's surprise these followers of Jesus are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other languages. Five minutes prior they couldn't do any of this, but now here they are speaking all sorts of complex dialects. And it turns out that this ability to speak complex dialects comes in handy because "out there" in the street is an (slide.19) international gathering of men and women visiting Jerusalem for the Jewish Pentecost celebration. And the text tells us that all these men and women, from as far *east* as the Parthian Empire and as far *west* as the city of Rome, hear these 120 followers of Jesus (slide.20) telling them in their own tongues "*the mighty works of God.*" And these people from all over the known world are totally blown away by what they're hearing. We read that (slide.21) all are amazed and perplexed, and say to one another, "*What does this mean?*"

## **The Eventual Spread of the Gospel.**

So that's how it all began—on that day, in that house, on that street in Jerusalem. And yet it's interesting to see how this plays out in the next few chapters (slide/black.22). Despite the clear prophecies of the OT which spoke of the salvation of God being made known to the nations, despite the clear words of Jesus concerning the call on His followers to take this gospel to the ends of the earth, despite the clear work of the Holy Spirit who miraculously causes the 120 to declare the "mighty works of God" in the languages of the people, despite all of this, the particulars of this call to mission does not exactly catch on. At least not at first. Don't get me wrong: the church we see in the early chapters of the book of Acts is absolutely amazing. And yet, at the same time, it's also a church that is somewhat ingrown/cloistered/parochial/tribal. By all accounts, for the first several chapters of the book of Acts, the church does not seem to venture much past the borders of Jerusalem. As best as we can tell, no one is really thinking about those folks "out there."<sup>3</sup> I guess that's part of our human nature—that temptation to huddle and to isolate.

Back when I was in school, word got out that a newly-formed band called (slide.23) Loggins and Messina was coming to campus to perform, and that the concert was absolutely free! This all came as a complete surprise to me. The concert had not been advertised; it was all word of mouth. I heard about it on the day of the show from my friend Amy. Amy was a hippy; everyone who knew her thought she was really groovy. She told me about the concert, *but told me to keep it "hush hush."* I remember Amy telling me that she and her friends wanted to be sure that only the "right people" got in to see the show. Anyway, that evening I arrived at the venue on campus, and honestly, I expected to see something like (slide.24) this. Something small and intimate; an exclusive setting with maybe a couple hundred people. Instead, it was more like (slide.25) this. The concert promoters footing the bill for this free show had something else very different in mind (slide/black.26).

At its worst, the early Jerusalem church was like my friend Amy. But the Holy Spirit is different; He's more like those concert promoters. We see this, chapter by chapter, as the book of Acts unfolds. Not by human ingenuity, but by the work of the Holy Spirit, we see the gospel spread from (slide.27) Jerusalem, to (slide.28) Judea and Samaria, to (slide.29) the ends of the earth—*just like Jesus said.*

## **The Ethiopian Eunuch.**

One of the best examples of this move of the Holy Spirit is in the passage (slide.30) Debi read from Acts 8. We're introduced to a man name (slide.31) Philip. Philip is a deacon who is told by an angel of the Lord to travel south to a road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. While on that road he sees a chariot; in the chariot is an (slide.32) Ethiopian.<sup>4</sup> On paper, these two men have nothing in common. Philip is Jewish; he's a Christian; he's a deacon. A later passage tells us that he has four grown daughters. That same passage mentions that Philip has a house, but nothing indicates that he's especially wealthy. In contrast, this Ethiopian eunuch is loaded; he's a man of means. He's sitting in a chariot while someone else drives. He has an entourage. He's not an Israelite, but an African. This Ethiopian is also a man of great power. He's the Minister of Finance, in charge of the treasury of the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup> He's also well-educated; he's *reading* a copy of the book of Isaiah in a language that for him would have been foreign. In addition, this Ethiopian is a eunuch.

So here's Philip. For Philip, this Ethiopian would have lied outside of every category of Jewish propriety. As a Gentile, he would have been considered unclean. As a eunuch, he would have been considered unfit to go near the temple. As a rich foreigner, he would have been met with suspicion. For Philip, this man was someone to avoid. And yet we read (slide.33) in verse 29 that the same Spirit that caused those men and women on the Day of Pentecost to declare the "mighty works of God" in languages they did not know, tells Philip to (slide.34), "Go over and join this chariot." The word (slide.35) used here literally means to, "Glue yourself to it" ("don't let it get away from you").<sup>6</sup> The Spirit of God is saying to Philip, ±"Run up to this man who is so different from you, this man whom you would normally have no dealings with, and stay close to him."<sup>7</sup>

Philip obeys the Holy Spirit (slide.36). He runs alongside of the chariot. He hears the man reading from the book of Isaiah. Philip doesn't have a canned pitch; instead, he meets the guy where he's at (which is always good to do). And he asks a very basic question; he asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian is honest (slide.37); he says that he doesn't. He invites Philip into the chariot. And breaking all Jewish customs of the day, Philip agrees and climbs in.

They (slide.38) look at this passage concerning one who, like a sheep, was led to slaughter; one who in his humiliation justice was denied. The eunuch asks (slide.39) if Isaiah is saying this about himself or someone else? Philip (slide.40) tells the Ethiopian that the passage is about a man named Jesus. Something clicks/connects. So much so that when (slide.41) the chariot

comes near a body of water, he orders his entourage to stop the chariot (slide.42) so he might be baptized. I picture these Ethiopian servants scratching their heads, wondering what in the world is going on; wondering why their master is in a pool of water with this middle-class Jewish guy.

As (slide.43) they come out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carries Phillip away and suddenly finds himself in a town called Azotus, some 20 miles away. And the Ethiopian eunuch? We read that (slide.44) he "went on his way rejoicing."

### **The Providence of the Holy Spirit.**

What do we (slide/black.45) learn from this text? What do we see? For one, we see (slide.46) **the providence of the Holy Spirit.** Philip did not strategically orchestrate the events of that day. Nor did he simply "stumble upon" this Ethiopian out of dumb luck. No, everything that took place was divinely initiated and orchestrated and prepared by the Holy Spirit:

Philip is led to a desert road going from Jerusalem to Gaza. He's instructed by the Spirit to approach the chariot. The man in the chariot "just happens" to be reading Isaiah 53. He's full of questions. Philip is able to explain the text. The Ethiopian's heart is moved, and then with perfect timing, the middle of nowhere/dry season, what do they stumble upon? They stumble upon just enough water for a baptism.

Neither Philip nor the Ethiopian eunuch planned this out. Instead, this is sheer grace and the total work of the Holy Spirit. Every bit of it. The Westminster Confession speaks of the Holy Spirit as the only efficient agent in the application of redemption. He regenerates those called by His grace, convicts them of sin, moves them to repentance, and persuades and enables them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith.<sup>8</sup> And the same is true of each of us who profess Christ as our hope for salvation. Not one of us set out on our own to become a Christian. Not really. No, we're here because something happened in our lives. Something of the Holy Spirit, even if it occurred *seemingly* through ordinary means—a parent/friend/co-worker who took the time to tell you (slide.47) "the good news about Jesus." Something happened by God's grace. The coincidences were too numerous to be coincidences. The family you were born into, the school you attended, the job you took, the gym you go to, the coffee house you frequent, the book you just "happened" to pick up.

And because this occurred in our lives, it seems that we should maybe do the same and to respond to those situations and circumstances the same Holy Spirit brings before you and me—that friend/neighbor/co-worker/stranger. The stuff Mark spoke of a couple of weeks ago. Not by our power or might or clever arguments. But (slide.48) by the providential hand of the Holy Spirit.

## **The Community of the Holy Spirit.**

Along with **the providence of the Holy Spirit**, our text (and especially the rest of the book of Acts) shows us **(slide.49) the community of the Holy Spirit**. And what we see as the book of Acts plays out is a community that is bigger and far more diverse than anything anyone first imagined.

- In chapter 9, we see the conversion of a Jewish Pharisee named Paul.
- In chapter 10, the conversion of a Roman centurion named Cornelius.
- A few chapters later, the conversion of a Philippian jailer and some prominent Thess women.
- From there: Berean seekers, Athenian skeptics, Corinthian hedonists, Ephesian sorcerers.
- By the time we get to the end of the book of Acts, we see the conversion of a whole host of people, including soldiers, sailors, and slaves on a sinking ship **(slide/black.50)**.

Together it becomes the beginning of the story of a gospel community that spreads throughout the world. And that's still the case. You see, there is something unique about the Christian faith. What makes it unique is that it does not belong to a single culture. In truth, it never has.

There's a British historian; his name is **(slide.51) Andrew Walls**. For years he was a missionary and a professor in Nigeria, and before that in Sierra Leone (West Africa). He writes that there is a conventional, modern approach to religion that sees religion as a "social construct" that reflects a specific culture—that those in the Middle East are naturally attracted to Islam, those living in East Asia are naturally attracted to Buddhism, those living in India and South Asia are naturally attracted to Hinduism. And there's good reason to believe this **(slide/black.52)**:

The center of Islam is still largely where it's always been.

Ninety-eight percent of all Hindus are still in India and South Asia.

Ninety-nine percent of Buddhists are still in East Asia.

After all, we tend to construct gods that align with our tastes.

But the Christian religion is different. The dynamic is not the same; there's something more fluid taking place. For one, unlike other religions, the *center* of Christianity has changed, and continues to change. As we see in the book of Acts, the original center of Christianity is in Jerusalem. It later moves to Antioch. Within a century it moves to the Mediterranean region—to Rome and to Alexandria in North Africa. For a while the center is in Constantinople (in Asia), and then back in Rome (in Europe). We then see a shift to Northern Europe and North America. But now, a strong case can be made that the center of Christianity is moving to South America and to Africa.

Furthermore, Walls and others note that the (slide.53) populations centers of Christianity are *infinitely* more diverse and dispersed than anything we see in any other faith. Most nowadays think of Christianity as a North American or European religion, but in truth:

- (slide.54) worldwide, only 12% of all Christians are in North America,
- (slide.55) 19% are in Europe,
- (slide.56) 15% are in Asia (but that number continues to grow),
- (slide.57) 25% are in the Caribbean and in Central and South America,
- (slide.58) and 22% of all Christians are in Africa.<sup>9</sup>

It's this idea that we see in a line from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins; this idea that (slide.59) *"Christ plays in ten thousand places."*<sup>10</sup>

Through the lives and actions, and limbs and eyes, and faith and faces of all sorts of people, from all walks of life, and from all parts of God's creation. Not something that is localized or the property of a single people, but instead, something that is alive and varied and born of the Holy Spirit.

So (slide/black.60) how are we to respond? We embrace it (what else can we do?) And participate in God's work, especially in our neighborhoods and in the city around us. Because to see this, changes our perspective, and opens our hearts, as we experience something that reflecting the love of the Father, the redemption of the Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit who, by His providential hand, guides us, leads us, shapes us, sends us into mission, so we might be connected to people maybe never expected to be connected to. To God's glory, both now and forevermore.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> NT reading: Acts 2:1-11 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 26-27, 30-33.

<sup>3</sup> M. Craig Barnes, "The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuc" (sermon, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Ethiopia corresponds to what is known as Nubia, the region that includes southern Egypt and northern Sudan. In Homer's *Odyssey* (1.23), Ethiopians were spoke of as those who at "the ends of the earth Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 283.

<sup>5</sup> The Kandake was the mother of the king and the person who actually ran the country on behalf of her son who was regarded as a god and too sacred to be engaged in matters of administration. See Pliny, *Natural History* 6.186; William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts*, IVPNTC (Westmount: IVP Academic, 1995); John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 223.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Ger, *The Book of Acts: Witnesses to the World* (Chattanooga: Tyndale, 2004), 126.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Keller, "The Gospel to the African" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 34.3.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Walls, "The Expansion of Christianity: An Interview with Andrew Walls," *The Christian Century*, August 2000, 792-99; *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 259-66; cf. Timothy Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 123-24; Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 15; Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 41; "Christians," *Pew Research Center* (2012), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-christians/> (accessed, May 20, 2026); "Buddhists," *Pew Research Center* (2012), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-buddhist/> (accessed, May 20, 2026).

<sup>10</sup> *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 90.