

Unpacking the Gospel
The Assignment: Week 1
By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

I need you to imagine. You're back on the playground as a kid. And it's time to pick teams for kickball. Now, at first, it might feel like the same few kids always get picked. Like there's this chosen squad that is about to happen. And if you're not in this club, in this chosen squad, you're left standing there awkwardly waiting for your turn, wondering if anyone will ever call your name.

Now you were on either one of those two teams, right? The awkward ones or the chosen ones. And it seems, as we learned in this last sermon series, that we just wrapped up the book of Daniel, that that it can feel like God has a team, that God is firmly on Team Israel, while other nations are left on the sidelines.

But there's this plot twist when you zoom out and you look at the entire Bible, the whole story, you start to see this trend that's happening and God's team is not just the VIP team or VIP club. For a few select. It's not just one nation that God is blessing. It's blessings abound. The circle in this story keeps getting bigger and bigger.

See what started out as a promise to one man? Abraham turned into a promise for his family and then to Israel. And then Jesus came and Jesus kind of blows the doors wide open. And suddenly it's not just the Jews who are invited to the party to be on the team, but the Gentiles, too. And if that wasn't enough, the Apostle Paul continues the work of Jesus.

And he tells us in in Galatians we have this verse from Paul, and he says, there is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now there's a tale of caution when it comes to, reading Paul's words. Be careful of anyone or any group of people or anything that is trying to make your circle smaller, because that's not what Jesus had in mind.

So today we kicked off. We kick off this new sermon series, and we'll talk about how God isn't playing favorites or forming teams. But God is in the business of drawing bigger and bigger circles, inviting more and more people into God's kingdom. And this is really important. We're not just invited to be in the circle, but we're actually called to help expand the circle.

So to really appreciate how big this circle gets, let's fast forward from the Old Testament book of Daniel to the New Testament book of acts. Now, if Daniel gives us a glimpse of God working in and through Israel, then, then acts is where we see the same mission go viral. Now, Acts is like this grand opening of God's Kingdom expansion campaign.

And he's like, here's how it's going to happen. And in the book of acts, we read all about it. Now, at the center of this is our narrator, Luke. And Luke is a doctor. He's a thoughtful historian. He's a story storyteller. He doesn't just write one book, but he actually writes a sequel. So Luke's very first book, The Gospel of Luke, focuses on Jesus and everything Jesus began to do and teach.

And then acts picks up where that left off, showing how Jesus's mission continues through the Holy Spirit. Working through Jesus's followers. Now acts is a book full of action and drama and miracles,

and these mic drop moments where the circle keeps getting bigger and bigger, like more than anybody could even imagine. So here's acts chapter one, starting at verse one.

Theophilus, the first scroll I wrote concerned everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning, right up to the day when he was taken up into heaven, before he was taken up working in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus instructed the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs.

He appeared to them over a period of 40 days, speaking to them about God's kingdom. While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the father had promised. He said, this is what you heard from me. John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? And then Jesus replied, it isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the father has set by his own authority, rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Now when I read this last statement of Jesus, when he says, you will receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Two questions immediately come to my mind. How do we know that we have the power of the Holy Spirit?

And what exactly is a witness? What do we what does that mean when Jesus says that we're to be his witness? Now, first of all, this Holy Spirit question, how do we know if we have the Holy Spirit? Jesus promised us, he said, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. But what is this kind of power of the Holy Spirit look like?

Does it look like lightning bolts from the sky and superhuman power or strength? No, probably not. Maybe not quite. But see, the power of the Holy Spirit is unmistakable when it happens and it's evident in in a couple key ways. And first and foremost, the fruit of the spirit. And Galatians it says, the fruit of the spirit, you we'll know when the Holy Spirit is working in us, when we show love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

These are our proofs, proof of the Holy Spirit working in us. Now, Jesus also promised that this Holy Spirit will give us power to be witnesses. And if you've ever if you trusted Jesus, then the spirit is already at work in you. And maybe you can think of times in your own life when that evidence has shown up, when you were bold to share your faith with someone, or maybe you had just a love for others, just start to grow within you.

Maybe you did something that you thought was impossible beyond your limits. I get questions sometimes, like, well, how did you forgive? Or how do you get through funerals? Or how do you, stand up here every weekend and give a sermon? And, the only answer I have for you is the Holy Spirit. And if you ask my husband, Tom, if in the first year or ten years of our marriage, if you ask him, did you ever think that Mandy would be up here giving a sermon every single weekend, he would have said, heck no, there is 0% chance of this.

I can promise you that. Is it the answer? He says it all the time, like I does. This is not what I thought, right? And the only answer that I have is the Holy Spirit. Now we move to this next question of what is a witness in the United Methodist Church? Our membership vows. We say, do you promise to uphold horizons in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?

Now in the United Methodist Church, the witness word was not actually put in this vow until, in 2008. That's when the witness word was added to this vow. Now, I served under a pastor for a long time after 2008, and he refused to to say the witness part because he thought that that would scare people.

Right. What does it mean to be a witness? I have to be a witness. Well, clearly this is important to Jesus. Clearly, being a witness is important to Jesus because he told his followers that that's what we were supposed to do. Now, a witness isn't just someone who saw something. A witness is someone who tells what they saw.

If you are being called to a court case, right. If you're being called as a witness to stand in the courtroom, your job as a witness isn't to explain the legal terms. It's your job isn't to solve the case. Your job simply is to tell the truth about what you know. Now, the big idea that you'll hear all throughout this sermon series is this.

The big idea of this sermon series? Is that effective witness seeing requires this trinity of loving relationships, and it's a loving relationship with God, with those in the church and with the unchurched. But before we get to expanding our circles, this week is largely about just understanding our experience and our relationship with God. That's what Jesus is asking of us in this passage.

Being Jesus's witness means sharing how we've seen Jesus work in our lives. Have we seen Jesus forgive or heal or transform us, or provide for us? What has Jesus done in our life? And you don't need a theology degree. You don't need to have had a perfect life in order to be a witness. You simply need a story and a willingness to share that story.

Now, here's the best part God doesn't expect us to do it alone. God has given us the church in order to support one another. God has given us and sent the Holy Spirit to empower us to do this work. In fact, the spirit and the church has been working together and leading the witness movement since the very beginning, starting in Jerusalem and to the end of the earth.

Now, witness, when witness is a kind of a broad term, about for telling others about your experience with Jesus and inviting others to experience Jesus as well. Sometimes we call this evangelism, and I know that word can, make us cringe or squirm sometimes. Sometimes we hear the word evangelism, and we think about awkward conversations or passing out tracts to strangers or, somebody on the street corner with a megaphone saying, you know, do you know where you are going to go if you die today?

Now, there's also this word evangelical. And in our current culture and in our current policy, there's political baggage that comes with the word evangelical now. And and sometimes we're like, we don't want anything to do with that word. Maybe that word to us looks like nothing like what our faith

is supposed to be about. But we've let some of that stuff of the world steal something really good from us.

And at its core, evangel just means good news, right? That's it. Evangelism is simply sharing the good news and the best news that there ever is. And if you look at Jesus, that's exactly what he was about when he was here on earth. It wasn't about awkward being awkward or being pushy. Jesus was about bringing, bringing hope and healing and showing love for people who needed it most.

Right? Jesus didn't come for the righteousness, but he came for the sick. Or he came to be with the outcast. So that's what evangelism is supposed to be about, sharing the good news in a way that's real and life giving. Now, in the gospel of Mark, Mark has these words he writes. After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, saying, Jesus said, now is the time.

Here comes God's kingdom. Change your hearts and lives and trust this good news. And that is the heart of evangelism. Not a technique, not a program, but the joy of bringing the good news to people who need it. The saying here God's kingdom is coming and you can be a part of it. In a in his book, *A Biblical Perspective on Evangelism*, Walter Brueggemann flips the usual idea of evangelism on its head.

And he says, you know what? Evangelism is not just about bringing people into to the church from the outside into the inside. But he says it's also about something that happens within the church. So here's what, he writes. He says, my theme is that forgetting can become remembers. My thesis is that evangelism is a task not simply of making outsiders into insiders, but of summoning insiders from amnesia to memory.

Without memory, there will be little of courage, generosity, freedom, or passion. In other words, we all need to be reminded of the Good news over and over again. Evangelism isn't just about, it's not just a one time thing that we do or that we hear. It's something that pastors and leaders, and every single person who says that they are a follower of Jesus need to stay connected with because the gospel, the good news, is worth remembering now when we keep, encountering the message of Jesus, ourselves, we're in a much better place to share it with others.

We have to be. And we have to remember this good news for ourselves. Now, one way to remember the good news of Jesus is to gather with others who are passionate about following Jesus and loving others, loving our neighbors. Today I want to invite you to something that's happening this afternoon or that this this evening at 6:00.

Our Justice and Action Network meeting is happening here, in this worship center. And it's a potluck. People are supposed to be bringing things, you know, Super Bowl, snack, like, kind of things. It's at 6:00, and we will be hearing about what is happening in our city and what I love most about justice in action, about sharing this good news with others is that we are doing this with with other churches.

And so today's meeting is just our, church. But this is a connection that we're making with others. So if you want to hear about it, if you don't have time to make a snack, bring the potluck. That's okay. Show up at 6:00 here and hear what is happening in our city. Because of people's passion for the good news of Jesus.

Now, over the next few weeks, we are going to talk about our circles and how we can be the best witnesses we can be in our families and in our to our friends and to our coworkers and to our neighbors and in our city and in our world. But first, we remember why the good news is the good news.

And in order to do that, we need to work on our own stories. Well, maybe maybe you're still working on your story. Maybe you are a brand new Christian, and you're still trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus and how Jesus is working in your life. But the flip side, and this is where, probably many of us fall for many of us, we grew up in the church.

We grew up in the church. Of course, we're going to follow Jesus. But yet for many of us, for most of us, we don't have our story. We don't have a, an elevator pitch where we can, have a couple sentences of here is what Jesus has done in my life. And to be able to share that with others.

So, maybe you received this card on your way in. If you didn't, grab one on the way out. But on this card, there is this faith acronym. And it's going to help us remember our stories. And I hope that you will do this. I hope that you will take time this week to write this down and to really understand and your story.

So for F is stands for Foundation. Write down a couple sentences of who or what brought you to Jesus. How did you first know about Jesus attributes? Who is Jesus to you? Is Jesus a healer, forgiver, connector, friend, a savior? Write those words down of what you know about Jesus. I stands for impact. How has Jesus changed your life?

How has Jesus impacted your life? And write that down in a sentence or two. The T stands for transformation. What continues to transform in your life because of Jesus? What are you doing in your life to follow Jesus? What? What ways? Has Jesus transformed your life? And then H this is this is the end, right? This is when we bring it all together.

And this is the headline. This is where you get to say, I follow Jesus because and you think about all the things that you wrote down before, and you come up with a, a sentence or two where you can boldly and easily share that with others. Now in this sermon series. This sermon series will encourage us to shift our focus from, individual concerns and shift our focus to a more broader, selfless perspective.

And this is because of Jesus's command in acts chapter one, verse eight, where Jesus says, go and be my witnesses through the whole world, through out the whole world. Now, if you don't know your story, find out what your story is. And if you don't do this, if you if you don't take time to do this or whatever works for you and you can't articulate why you follow Jesus, then the whole rest of the sermon series will be pointless.

Because if we don't have a story, we don't have a story to share. So your assignment this weekend is to move from being a forgettable to becoming a remember, why do you follow Jesus?