

Well, good evening, good to see y'all. Welcome to CenterPoint. We're gonna go through the book of Acts, and we're in chapter one this evening. I'm hoping that this will help launch us into a time of prayer. So if you wanna join us, we're at Acts chapter one, and I'm gonna cover a fair amount of material. So I'll read six through verse 26 as we look at Acts chapter one. This is where Luke writes, so when they come together, they ask him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, it is not for you to know times or seasons that the father has fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying. Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. All of these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers. In those days, Peter stood up among the brothers, the company of persons was in all about 120, and said, brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry. Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem that the field was called in their own language, akeldama, that is, field of blood. For it is written in the book of Psalms, may his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it. and let another take his office. So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us, one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection. And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justice, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, you, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place. And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the 11 apostles. which is God's word. You think of all kinds of ways to illustrate, especially for children, the significance of the ascension, and one of the things that I tried back in a former church that I served was to take a helium balloon during a children's sermon, and tie a string, long string, to the end of the helium balloon. And when I taught them about the ascension, to give the impression of Jesus being taken up from among the apostles, let the helium balloon go, where it went, of course, to the top of the sanctuary. If things can go wrong in worship services, they typically do. So I did not anticipate the string breaking at the end of the helium balloon, disabling me from being able to retrieve the helium balloon from the top of the sanctuary where it stayed for the next three or four months until it fell down of its own accord. In the meantime, needless to say, it was a great distraction for not only children but also their parents in the sanctuary

who, during my sermons, would find their gaze going up to the ceiling, to the helium balloon. And it reminded me of something that distracted the apostles and something that can distract modern day Christians and that is being too fixated on how and why and when Jesus is going to return rather than focusing on the reason for his ascension in the first place and to be prayerful about being ready for his return whenever it should come. Well, the ascension is all about Jesus's kingdom, isn't it? When we say in the Apostles' Creed, each week, Jesus ascended into heaven. We're celebrating the fact that he went for his coronation. He went to be crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to be given the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth. So he went to his coronation, but his disciples, which were about 120 in number, not just the 12, but also a larger group among them, were still confused about what that kingdom looked like. And you can read their confusion in the question that they asked the Lord. Lord, at this time, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel? There are several misunderstandings inherent in that question. Jesus' kingdom is a real kingdom. He is a real king, but it's not a territorial kingdom, is it? It's not just over a sliver of land in the Middle East or a larger territory. But their question is not totally off base. He does have a real kingdom, and he is a real king, and he exercises real sovereignty from his throne in heaven. As we know, his kingdom is already, it has arrived, it was inaugurated during his earthly ministry, but at the same time it's not yet. It has not yet fully come in its fullness and power. So it's not an earthly kingdom and Jesus bent over backwards to remind his apostles that his kingdom was not of this world. If it was, then his disciples would fight for it, but it is not. So when would it come in its fullness? They were dying to know this. They had been disheartened by the crucifixion and disoriented by that, disappointed, depressed even. And three days later, they're full of joy again because he's been resurrected and he is vindicated he is everything he claimed to be and so they are filled with this enthusiasm and zeal They can't wait to tell the world about his kingdom but Jesus tells them that the question when will it come in its fullness is really none of their business and That's not what they're supposed to be fixated on. Rather, what they should do is be his witnesses in concentric circles, starting with Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and finally to the uttermost parts of the earth. Radiating out from Jerusalem, they are to tell the gospel to anyone who will listen, to announce it far and wide. But before they do that, they need to recognize that they in their own strength and power are not adequate for the task. They have to be empowered by him. And Jesus had told them it's only when he goes away that he will send in his place the Holy Spirit to continue his power and to continue his reign through his apostles on earth. So we're told he was taken up before them, and that's what you might call the divine passive. We're being told that God the Father is raising him up to heaven. So he's passing into heaven, into a cloud. Clouds are very symbolic throughout the Old Testament and also the New Testament. We're meant to think of the Shekinah glory of God, which is often manifested in clouds. So he comes in the cloud just like in Daniel chapter seven where the son of man approaches the ancient of days in the cloud and now he leaves the earth and goes into heaven and is enveloped in this cloud representing the Shekinah glory of God. And two men, as they appeared as two men, not the angels as we would picture them in Christmas stories and so forth with all the trappings of angels, halos and wings and so forth, they simply appeared as men. They have gleaming white robes and they speak with great authority, designating them as angels. Why are you standing around

looking into heaven? He is gone and He will return. And no amount of staring up into the heavens is going to bring Him down any sooner. You know, no amount of looking over that balloon in the rafters is gonna make it come down any sooner. Simply gazing up into heaven will not bring about the kingdom of God. So he tells them, or the two angels tell them to go about the business that Jesus has given them. And not to be too fixated on the how and the why and the when. So, these two men tell them that there is another coming and going that they need to be focused on. The Holy Spirit has to come, and then they, empowered by the Holy Spirit, must go. So Jesus has gone, he will come again, but in the meantime, they need to be focused on the Holy Spirit's coming, and consequently, them going out into the world to be witnesses. Between the Ascension and Pentecost are 10 days. So Jesus commissioned them to be his witnesses and told them that he would empower them through sending the Holy Spirit in order to do that, to be his witnesses. So they were to wait on the Holy Spirit How is the church supposed to spend that time waiting on the Holy Spirit? Well, certainly not idly. They're not supposed to sit around and twiddle their thumbs and gaze up into the heavens and be stargazers, but they are supposed to be about certain tasks. So what do they do while they wait? Well, at Presbyterian yesterday, there was a call to an associate pastor in our Presbytery that was presented and read as his usual practice. And the young man for whom the call was intended accepted the call and The search committee from the man's church was commended for the way in which they went about that search. And that was elaborated about a little bit. This church did not hire a consulting firm to measure the strengths and weaknesses of the church and kind of determine what kind of pastor do we think we need. They didn't go after a certain brand of pastor with certain marketable gifts, you might say, or a certain type of personality that might double the church's congregation size within a couple of years. but they did spend considerable time in prayer and in studying the scriptures together, and that was refreshingly simple and humble, and it was great to hear, and that method was commended to other churches in our Presbytery. Not that it's not important to do your homework demographically and determine what kind of pastor you think you might need, but not at the expense of simply using the means of grace. asking the Lord, regardless of what we think we need, what do you know that we need? What kind of pastor do you intend for us to have? And listening for the Lord's directions. Well, that's very much what this early church, this nascent infant church in the early days of Acts does. They search the scriptures and they ask the Lord for his help. So this church had its own search to do, and so it did so by prayer and searching the scriptures. In fact, we see this church devote itself to three things as it waits upon the Lord for the Holy Spirit to come. Those three things are obedience, prayer, and scripture. So we'll go through those as kind of my three points this evening. First of all, obedience. Again, these 120 believers were greatly, greatly encouraged by the resurrection. They couldn't wait to share the great news that this man, whom they'd followed for three years, was crucified, but he was no longer dead. What wonderful news. They couldn't wait to share that. Jesus was alive, but yet they restrained themselves. They don't go out and do it just yet. Why? Well, very simply because Jesus had told them to wait. He said, I'm sending the promise of my Father upon you, but stay in the city, stay in Jerusalem, until you're clothed with power from on high. So they needed a reminder about that. When will you receive power? When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, not a moment sooner. And to go out and get ahead of God, to get ahead of the Holy Spirit, and to do something for which they had not yet been empowered would have been to

fail. So they, then and only then, after waiting upon the Holy Spirit, being empowered, would they be enabled to go out and be effective witnesses. So they obey, they listen to the Lord, they restrain themselves, and they go back to Jerusalem to wait. But again, not simply to wait, not to be idle, not to twiddle their thumbs, but to devote themselves to certain tasks. So obedience is first. Secondly, prayer. They were told that they devoted themselves to prayer. They were intent on praying. They were resolute about praying. They prioritized prayer. It wasn't just one among many tasks that the church engaged in. It was the task. It was the number one thing, which meant there are trade-offs. If you devote time to one activity, you have less time to devote to other activities. Is it possible for a church to attempt to do too much? I think yes, if those tasks impinge upon prayer and ministry of the word. If they squeeze out these non-negotiables, prayer and ministry of the word, then it is possible to try to do too much. But they engaged in prayer, and it wasn't just that they each went to their own little private prayer closets and prayed by themselves. I'm sure they were doing that, but it was also a sense of corporate prayers. They came together, and we hear this together language used very much here. We're told all of them, all 120, every single one, with one accord, in total, complete agreement, not only praying together in the same room as we're doing right now, but also praying the same things, agreeing on what needed to be prayed for and focusing on those things. Who made up this group? Well, the apostles, obviously. The women were reminded by Luke that there were a certain number of women among Jesus' early group of disciples. Presumably, Joanna was there, Susanna was there, Mary Magdalene. And Luke points out that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was among this group. Note that they were not praying to Mary. They were praying with Mary to Mary's son. Mary was praying to her son, not as any kind of a co-redemptrix. So they were all praying together. Who else was there? Jesus' brothers were there. We remember that Jesus' brothers initially did not believe in him, did they? They were skeptical about Jesus. Those who know us best are usually the most skeptical about the things that we claim to be. A prophet is not accepted in his own home, in his own family. But what was it that persuaded Jesus' brothers of the truth of who he was? Well, the resurrection. They saw him dead, or they saw him alive. They were persuaded by that to believe in him. So the brothers of Jesus are there with this group as they're praying together. One accord, together in one room, praying the same things, agreed in prayer about what needs to be prayed for. They're praying for Jesus to send his Holy Spirit as he promised. The promise of God did not hinder their prayers. There's a certain kind of skewed logic in which we might say, well, God has promised to do this anyway, why bother asking him to do something he's already promised to do? But it's a wonderful, energizing to prayer to realize those are the prayers that are guaranteed to be answered, the things that God has promised to do, so that should give great impetus to our prayers, great enthusiasm to our prayers, to ask the Lord to bring about what he's already promised to do. And that's the logic that they followed. Charles Spurgeon, the great prince of preachers, the great English preacher who was so successful in winning so many to Christ, was once asked, what is the secret to your powerful ministry? And rather than listing half a dozen things that you might expect Spurgeon to list, Spurgeon took the person who asked him this question down into the basement of the church where he revealed that there were dozens of people on their knees praying during the worship service for the Holy Spirit to come and to move in people's hearts and to make the preaching and teaching of God's word effectual to the salvation of sinners and the building up of

God's people. And Spurgeon said that and that alone is the secret to any success that the Lord should feel free to bring to our ministry. That's exactly the same logic that the early church followed as they perhaps squeezed out other things on their agenda so that they could resolutely focus on praying and asking the Lord to do what he promised to do. They also prayed about who they should choose for the 12th apostle. As we know, Judas has hanged himself and has tragically gone the way of perdition, gone his own way, as is chillingly said in this passage Luke tells us, he's gone his own way. That's often presented as an admirable thing to do, go your own way, as Fleetwood Mac is saying. But if that means deviating from the path that God has called you to, going your own way is a path to perdition, and Judas found that out. Reading this passage made me ask the question to myself, why don't we pray more? Why don't I pray more? Why don't God's people pray more? There are all kinds of reasons, but I think two main reasons that I'll suggest. One is that I think we overestimate our own abilities and resources. We don't ask for things because, frankly, we don't think we need them. We think we're doing all right by ourselves. And secondly, we may doubt the Father's generosity to give us what we ask for or to give us better than what we ask for. I think both of these hindrances to prayer can be overcome by going to the gospel and going to Jesus daily and asking him to reveal his truth to us. The third and final thing that the early church focused on, to the exclusion perhaps of many other things, is scripture. They focused on obedience, prayer, and scripture. The church had a problem here. It only had 11 apostles, and that may not sound like much of a problem. Why not just go forward with 11 guys? Why did they have to have 12? We're told about the grisly end of Judas here in quite a bit of detail. But they need a replacement for Judas. You know, Jesus had chosen 12 men for a reason, right? 12 is a very symbolic number. In the Old Testament, the 12 tribes of Israel constitute the original people of God. Well, Jesus assembled a new Israel from the faithful remnant of Israel, didn't he? By choosing 12 Jewish men from the faithful remnant. And he promised these men that they would sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. To fulfill what Jesus said, not one of those thrones is going to be empty. So each of them needed to be fulfilled. How does the church fill this void? How does it choose another apostle to replace Judas? Well, it doesn't pick the richest, it doesn't carry out a personality contest, it doesn't pick the most popular, the most successful, or the one with the most business contacts necessarily. It first and foremost searches the scriptures for what to do. I recently visited a senior lady in a facility nearby and she's struggling with what to do for her future and my Counsel to her was to search the scriptures and to ask the Lord to reveal to her what he wants her to do very oftentimes We start with what we do know of God's will and we ask him to reveal what we don't know from God's will through that and he often does that as we study his word and expectantly pray to reveal his will to us and Well, Peter stands up in the midst of this company, this 120 people, and he shares an extremely high view of scripture. I love the way Peter puts this. For an uneducated, at least formally, fisherman, Peter has quite a bit of spiritual insight from having been with Jesus for three years. He says, It has to be fulfilled. The scripture must be fulfilled. Scripture's unbreakable and it's necessary, as Luke will tell us, that the scripture be fulfilled. Peter says, it came by the mouth of David. So the word of God has a human component. It was uttered by the mouth of David and by others in the Old Testament. But he goes on to say that it was not so much David speaking as it was the Holy Spirit speaking beforehand. So there's a divine component that speaks

through the human component. And they asked the Lord, what do we do? And they anticipate his answer expectantly by looking into the scriptures. And in the Old Testament, they found this. May his camp become desolate and May there be none to dwell in it, and then let another take his office. Now those scriptures from the Old Testament had original relevance to those to whom they were first addressed, but this early church discerned that that had modern application to their day as well. So through prayer and scripture study, it became crystal clear to them that they anticipated the Lord's direction, that they were to nominate two men who had been with Jesus from the beginning. Those who had been with Jesus for three years. Those who witnessed his resurrection, who saw it firsthand, who were among those people who saw it with their own eyes. And two men fill these criteria. One is Joseph and the other is Matthias. And they seem to be equally qualified. So which man will the early church go to? So they asked the Lord, show us which one. So they cry out again, having been directed by scripture, they now ask the Lord to reveal to them the one whom he has chosen to be an apostle. So basically, they left it up to providence. They left it up to the hand of God, who is providential over every turn of the dice, every casting of the lot, and they left it up to this. They cast lots and the Lord controls even that and he revealed to them through the casting of the lot that it was Matthias. As it says in Proverbs, the lot is cast into the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord. So the Lord controls even every small contingency such as that. There is no such thing as chance. The Lord records all of it. There's a story of the first pastor of the Rock Hill ARP Church, whose name was Dr. Rogers, who came as a seminary student. to visit and to preach at the Rock Hill Church 100 plus years ago, and they liked his preaching very much and decided to call him to be their pastor. Well, he wasn't convinced that Lord was calling him specifically to pastor the Rock Hill congregation. Around about the same time, he got another call from a different church, also wanting him to come and pastor them. Which one would he choose, or would he choose neither? Well, Dr. Rogers prayed about it. He prayed about it some more. He searched the scriptures, and he trusted the Lord's providence. How did he do this? Well, he took a hat. It's customary for men to wear hats in those days. And so he took a hat, and he took three slips of paper. On one of those papers, he wrote, Rock Hill. On the other slip of paper, he wrote Timbuktu or wherever the other church was. And on the third slip of paper, he wrote nothing. He left it blank in case the Lord was calling him to neither church. So he put all three slips of paper in a hat. He shook it up. He got down on his hands and knees and he begged the Lord to help him and direct him. And then prayerfully, he drew one of the slips of paper out, unfolded it, and it said Rock Hill. He trusted that as God's direction for him and he ended up being the pastor of the Rock Hill Church for 50 years. Now I don't recommend that method necessarily as a way to decide how the Lord may be leading you but it did show a great deal of trust even in the details of providence that the Lord will guide and direct specifically when we ask him to. When we search the scriptures with all our heart, when we beg the Lord to reveal to us what we cannot know otherwise, we need to trust that one way or another, he will reveal that to us, even in the details. He will make it undoubtable to us. And so this is what the early church does. It has lots of options about how it will spend its time, its energy, and its resources. but it does not waste those resources. It expends them in three directions. Obedience to the Lord's direction, prayer, and scripture study. All else can fall by the wayside, but they trusted the Lord and they used the means of grace in a mighty way, and we'll see the wonders that the Lord brought

about as a result. So with that in mind, why don't we devote ourselves for a few moments to prayer, this wonderful means of grace that the Lord has given us.