



May 9, 2021

A Change in Leadership
Pastor Vern Christopherson

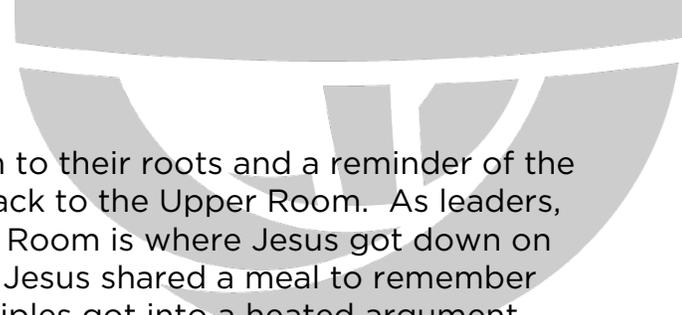
Acts 1:12-26 NSRV

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. ¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus — ¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." ¹⁸(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. ¹⁹This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and 'Let another take his position of overseer.' ²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us — one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection."

Most of you probably know that I've announced I'll be retiring from pastoral ministry in the fall. Any number of you have been kind and gracious in congratulating me, wishing me well, expressing gratitude for the time we've spent together, and for the remaining months we still have left. You should know, the feeling is mutual. I'll always treasure my years at Zumbro and I'll miss you when I'm gone.

Beyond these comments, however, there have been a few comments along the lines of: "What are you thinking? You're not old enough to retire!" And then some additional comments too: "You're not *really* retiring! You'll find something else to do!" But perhaps my favorite comment has been this: "You think you're busy now! Just wait till you retire!"

We'll discuss my retirement further down the road, but for now suffice it to say that changes in leadership are bound to happen - whether in the church or politics or business. We get a picture of this in our lesson from Acts. As I read and reflect on it, I hear some possible leadership lessons. Many of those lessons started with Jesus in Luke and are now continuing in Acts.



The first lesson? The eleven disciples need a return to their roots and a reminder of the need to serve. After Jesus' ascension, they head back to the Upper Room. As leaders, we often find comfort in what's familiar. The Upper Room is where Jesus got down on his knees and washed his disciples' feet. It's where Jesus shared a meal to remember him by. Ironically, after the meal was over, the disciples got into a heated argument over which one of them was the greatest. Imagine that – leaders squabbling over who's got the power, and why. Clearly, there are still more lessons for these emerging leaders to learn.

A second leadership lesson from Acts: they devote themselves to daily prayer. As Jesus is ascending, he tells them to wait for power from on high. He's pointing ahead to Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. They're not going to be able to lead on their own.

As they're waiting – did you hear it – Luke mentions there are women in their gathering too. This might not seem like a big deal to us, but it was for Luke's first readers. More than any other gospel, Luke highlights female disciples. It's a hint that Jesus' followers will be breaking some traditional barriers.

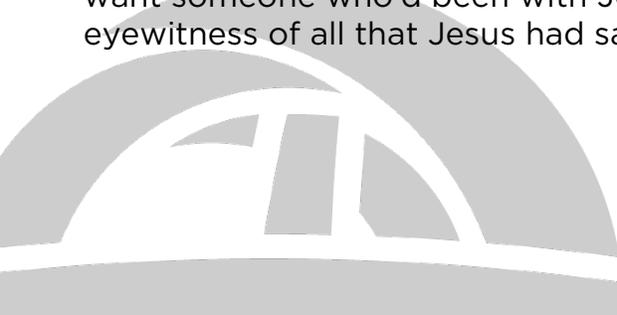
Luke goes on to say that the number of believers is getting close to 120. Why is that a big deal? Because Jewish law required 120 males to form a legitimate synagogue community. After the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., the synagogue became the center of their religious life. Luke-Acts was written after 70 A.D. Luke is picturing a time when the temple is gone, and this fledgling gathering of believers is on their way to becoming legitimate. And much of their life is grounded in prayer.

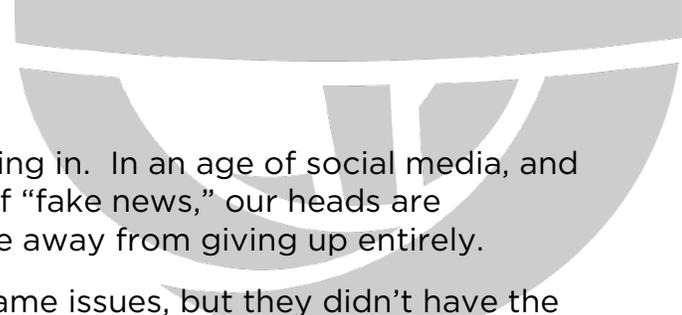
A third leadership lesson: they regularly tell trustworthy stories to shape their community. Some of these stories are uplifting, but not all of them. Peter, who denied Jesus during his trial, gets ready to address the group. He says: "We need to replace Judas. Our number must be Twelve." This is not some sort of lucky number, of course. It's a fulfillment of scripture. Jesus told them early on that their first outreach would be to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Unlike so many leaders today, Peter openly discusses the downfall of Judas. There's a not-so-subtle warning cautionary tale. The stories told by Jesus' followers need to be believable.

Ever since Judas' betrayal, people have speculated: Why did he do it? Was he at odds with Jesus' direction for the kingdom? Was he impatient, trying to force Jesus' hand? Was it merely for the 30 pieces of silver? We'll never know for sure. But Luke, by including this story, is doing some truth-telling of his own. Everything is not wonderful for these disciples. No, the possibility of denial and betrayal has been with the church and its leaders ever since the beginning.

As the disciples consider Judas' replacement, they set forth their main criteria. They want someone who'd been with Jesus from the beginning; someone who was an eyewitness of all that Jesus had said and done.





Why is this important? Think of the world we're living in. In an age of social media, and competing news sources, and all sorts of charges of "fake news," our heads are spinning. We're often only one *breaking news* cycle away from giving up entirely.

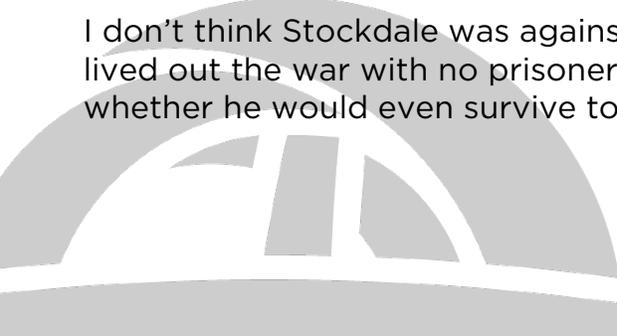
The first century undoubtedly had many of these same issues, but they didn't have the same technology. What are we supposed to believe? Aren't you glad for cellphone recordings, security cameras, and bodycams on our police officers? More and more, it seems, we need to see things to *believe* them. Judas' replacement will not simply be filling a slot, Luke says, he'll be someone who's walked with Jesus. He'll be sharing a word that is trustworthy and true! That's what leaders are supposed to do.

This first-century call committee narrows down the choice to two candidates: Barsabbas and Matthias. There may have been more names to begin with - we don't know. But they ended up with two. Human nature being what it is, we tend to like choices. We like to be able to contrast and compare. Tall or short? Farmer or business owner? Young or old? Galilean or Judean? Serious or amusing? Decisive or reflective? Trustworthy or not?

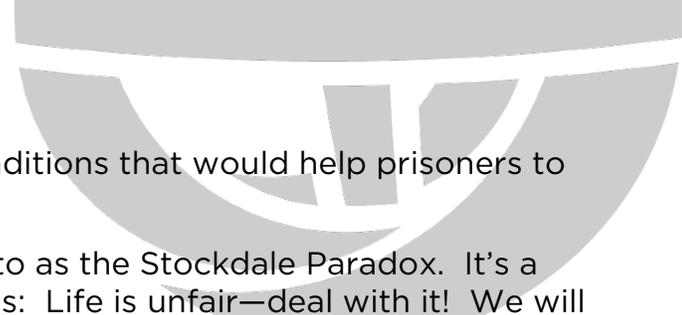
What happens next? How will they decide? They cast lots. Literally, they either flip a coin or spin some dice. Casting lots was common in biblical times. They used it for everything from finding fault, to dividing up the land for the twelve tribes, to selecting an individual for leadership. Honestly, we almost cringe when we hear it. It sounds superstitious. But they firmly trusted the Lord would guide the casting process. Would you believe, various churches used this same process down through the ages, including the Amish. That said, I'm pretty sure Zumbro's call committee isn't going to be flipping any coins. So, how will they go about making their decision? What criteria will they use? That's not really my question to ask, but it might be one you want to consider - and ask for yourself.

Leadership is important. The task of selecting our leaders is vital. How these leaders have faced challenges along the way is critical. One of the first business books I read was *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. It was about leadership in business, but the lessons were definitely helpful in my work as a pastor.

One of the stories in *Good to Great* was about Admiral Jim Stockdale, the highest-ranking U.S. military officer in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prisoner of war camp. Stockdale was in the camp during the Vietnam War from 1965-1973. He was tortured over 20 times. Despite the intense suffering, he devoted his time to encouraging prisoners to find a way to hang on under intolerable conditions. This might sound counterintuitive, but Stockdale came to see that the prisoners who struggled the most were the optimists. They were the ones who said: I'm going to be out by Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or spring. Thanksgiving would come and go. Christmas would come and go. Spring would come and go. And after a while, they lost all hope. And many of them died of a broken heart.



I don't think Stockdale was against hope per se, but he tried to put it in perspective. He lived out the war with no prisoner's rights, no set release date, and no certainty as to whether he would even survive to see his family again. He shouldered the burden of



command, doing everything he could to create conditions that would help prisoners to survive unbroken.

Stockdale's efforts eventually came to be referred to as the Stockdale Paradox. It's a no-nonsense approach that goes something like this: Life is unfair—deal with it! We will all experience disappointments and crushing events somewhere along the way, setbacks for which there is no “reason,” no one to blame. It might be a disease; it might be an injury; it might be an accident; it might be losing a loved one; it might be getting swept away in a political shake-up; it might be getting shot down over Vietnam and thrown into a POW camp for 8 years.

What separates people, Stockdale maintained, is not the presence or absence of difficulty, but how you deal with the *inevitable* difficulties of life. Here's the paradox: *In wrestling with life's challenges, you must retain faith that you will prevail in the end and you must also confront the brutal facts of your current reality.*

This sounds a little like what's happening to those early followers of Jesus. The events surrounding them might not seem fair, but there's no sense sitting around feeling sorry for themselves. Jesus had predicted that one of them would betray him. Sure enough, it happened. It was Judas. One thing led to another. Jesus ended up on a cross. Afterward his followers caught a few fleeting glimpses that he came forth from the tomb. It wasn't much to go on. And no sooner did they start believing it, than he was gone.

Now what? They had to be wondering: Can we be the leaders Jesus asked us to be? They returned to their roots in the Upper Room and got a reminder of the need to serve. They immersed themselves in prayer - every day. They told trustworthy stories to shape their little gathering of believers and to keep Jesus' memory alive. One step at a time. First up, they needed to get their number back to Twelve.

Friends, any number of challenges can and will come during your journey of faith. One of those challenges may be a change in leadership, though that's hardly on par with cancer or an accident or the loss of a loved one. In wrestling with life's challenges, you will do well to keep the Stockdale's Paradox in mind: *you must retain faith that you will prevail in the end and you must also confront the brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might happen to be.*

As you hold these things in tension, wait and trust for power from on high. God has not forgotten you. You are not alone. The Spirit will come and give you whatever strength you need to get through it. And hopefully, you might even find yourself stronger in the end. Amen.

