

Empowered

John 14:25-27 Acts 1:6-8

I was thinking this week, that for centuries the church has marked seasons of the year and kept a calendar—it's the way God's people have marked time and lived in the rhythm of the year and it's the way we remember our story, the Christian story.

For example: Advent and Christmas, and then Epiphany 12 days after Christmas. Then we have the season of Lent and Easter. And then 40 days later, Pentecost, which this year is coming up on May 31st, the day we commemorate the Holy Spirit descending upon the church and we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our church. Most of the year, when we aren't in special seasons, is called "ordinary time." And there are colors to mark all of these seasons: blue at Advent, white at Christmas, purple at Lent, red at Pentecost, and then for ordinary time the liturgical color is green, which represents growth; it's growing time. We're in green & growing time now, until Pentecost on the 31st. According to the annual, regular church calendar.

Well, I think we might now have a new season for our church calendar: covid time. That could be a new liturgical marker. Or, instead of "ordinary time"

we could call this “extraordinary time.” Covid time. I’m not sure what the color would be, though. Maybe you could come up with some imaginative ideas for that.

In light of this, this morning, I’ll say: welcome to worship; we are in the 9th Sunday of covid time. We began on March 15th. And it looks like it’s going to last through Pentecost Sunday, and probably into this summer. But let’s hope that 2020 is the only year that we observe this particular season on the church calendar! It’s why we’re sheltering in place. So we don’t have another season of covid time.

As I thought about May 31 being Pentecost Sunday (and that’s where this whole silly thing began, in my mind), I thought we’d do something a little different this year. Instead of just talking about and celebrating the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, that we would take the next 4 Sundays to do a little study on the Holy Spirit. Sort of pre-Pentecost, and Pentecost emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the church.

And my hope is that this will inform our praying, and our preparations for when we return to public life, in stages of course—feeling empowered and informed for our new life as Jesus’ disciples.

This morning I'd like to begin with one of Jesus' promises of the coming of the Holy Spirit, from the book of Acts. With an accompanying reading from John's gospel that gives us another glimpse into the work of the coming Holy Spirit.

Following Jesus' resurrection, we are told that the disciples gathered together in Jerusalem. And in the first two chapters of the book of Acts it doesn't tell us what exactly they were doing; it simply says they were gathered together in one place, as Jesus had told them to. In Acts 1:3-4 we are told: "*After his suffering, Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the Kingdom of God.*" (Btw, I love it that he spoke to them about *the Kingdom of God*. He didn't appear to them and give a series of seminars on how to organize the church) "*While staying with them, (it continues) he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the father.*" And so, they did gather and wait for the promise. The promise being, the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And we don't know specifically what they did when they gathered, but we may confidently assume that they were praying together and worshipping together; and very likely they were also discussing everything that had happened: all the events of Holy Week, and then Jesus' resurrection appearances and the

things he was telling them; maybe scratching their heads wondering what it all meant: Christ has died, now he's risen, he's appeared to us and told us some strange things and exciting things. And Jesus told them to stay put and wait. Maybe here was the original stay at home order. Except a big difference being that they were able to gather in groups from time to time to pray and wait *together*.

And it struck me in reading the first two chapters of Acts that these disciples were not gathered together to have a strategic planning meeting, to plan the birth of the church and the early stages of the Christian movement. Jesus didn't give them a blueprint for committees and church organization, and the very first church cookbook of favorite recipes for their potluck gatherings. If anything, these men and women didn't know what the heck they were doing. And that's probably exactly why they were praying and worshiping—they wanted guidance and insight and wisdom. They desperately *needed* guidance and wisdom.

So, they didn't hold strategic *planning* meetings as much as strategic *praying* meetings; strategic *waiting* meetings. And I think this is instructive for us. Because I believe that we, today, need strategic praying as much as strategic

planning. We need to wait upon God for direction and wisdom. Especially now, since we are in new territory in the midst of this pandemic.

Planning and strategy is super important. And, at the same time, what we need is an abundance of praying and waiting on God, especially nowadays.

Because I think most people are desperate for God to show up and do something that only God can get credit for. I sure am.

We want God to show up, don't we?? And I think this pre-Pentecost and Pentecost story provides a nice little parable of where Christ's church is today, in some ways, and what God can do if we wait and pray. Because, even before covid 19 hit, we were in a transition time of worldwide culture shift. A historic unravelling of what has been—which actually began a few decades ago. This kind of culture shift and transition only happens every 500 years or so. And this covid 19 crisis has in some ways just put us squarely in the middle of it and made it obvious to us. If we were in denial about it before, it's impossible to be in denial about it now. Change has come; culture shift is here. As one of my pastor friends said he tells his congregation: shift happens. Even made a t-shirt for them to wear that says "Shift Happens" so people will be curious and ask about it.

Therefore, like the first disciples—which included men and women and their families, we are told—we need the Holy Spirit to come and empower us, and teach us, and lead us in new and fresh ways. And the Spirit did come—in power! We’ll get to that part of the story on Pentecost Sunday, the 31st. And I believe that same Spirit wants to come and empower God’s people today! We simply need to be willing to receive it. And even ask for it.

After all, Jesus said, “Ask, seek, knock... if you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father give *the Holy Spirit* to those who ask.” So, it’s assumed that when we ask, seek, knock, we are asking for... the Holy Spirit, among other things. And the Father will give the Holy Spirit, gladly!

What do we receive when we ask for the Holy Spirit? That’s what I’d like to talk about these next 4 Sundays. Let’s begin with a reading from John’s gospel:

John 14:25-27: Jesus said, *“All these things I have spoken to you while I was with you. But the counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”*

And now our second reading from the book of Acts. The believers are gathered together in Jerusalem. Jesus has appeared to them again, and is about to give them some instructions.

Acts 1:6-8: *“So when they met together, they asked him, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’* Comment: this is such an interesting question that they ask Jesus. After spending three years with Jesus learning from him and participating in his ministry, and having witnessed his death and resurrection, they ask him a political question. Because the question *“Now are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”* is the same as asking *“Now are you going to take us back to the glory days of king David!”* That’s what they’re asking. When David was king it was a time when Israel was at the peak of its national and religious life and influence. This is the pre-exile time we talked about last week. When Israel’s political boundaries were expanded, enemies were subdued, their military was large and strong, the temple was being built in Jerusalem, and there was great prosperity. Israel was the regional superpower. So their question to Jesus was: now are you going to restore us to that Camelot era when David was in charge?

We see from Jesus' response, it's the wrong question to ask. Jesus ignores their question altogether; doesn't even respond to it. And he points them in a forward-looking direction, and speaks of a different kind of Kingdom. It continues in Acts:

He said to them, 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority (when this other non-political kingdom will come in its fullness). But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'"

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Let's talk about what the Holy Spirit brings. Today I'm only going to focus on one of the gifts, or movements, blessings of the Holy Spirit. Over the next weeks we will look at others. What does the Holy Spirit give us? According to our text this morning, when the Spirit comes, the Spirit will give:

Power to be witnesses. There are other kinds of power associated with the Holy Spirit— power to be transformed from the inside out, power to employ special gifts, and so forth. But Jesus wants his disciples to know that first and foremost the power they will receive from the Spirit will be power to be his

witnesses. What this tells us is that right out of the gate, when the Holy Spirit descends, the Spirit is going to send them out. God's people are going to be sent out the door to bear witness to Christ and the Kingdom of heaven.

This is consistent with the character of the triune God. Our God is a sending God, consistently sending his people out to bear witness. It begins at the beginning, in Genesis, with Abraham who was called to be the father of many nations—not just one tribe, exclusively. This results in OT Israel's calling to be a sent people: In Isaiah 42 God says to them: "I have sent you to be a light to the nations." Israel's call was to be a sent people. A witness to the world, in deed and in word (and in that order!).

Dr. Darrell Guder, who was a professor at Regent College in Vancouver BC, wrote a great book titled *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. The idea being that God's people are themselves continually converted by the same gospel that they are bearing witness to in the world. In the book he says that witness and mission is not an activity of the church but an attribute of God: God is mission. Think about it: God **sends** Jesus—(this is the incarnation); Jesus **sends** the disciples out on short term mission trips from time to time during his earthly ministry; after the resurrection, Father and Son **send** the Holy Spirit; then the Holy

Spirit descends and the triune God **sends** the church out into the world. When we read the book of Acts, we read that after Pentecost, they were out the door! The Holy Spirit *sent* them.

So there is this constant sending movement of God toward the world. Therefore, because God is mission, the church is mission. It's not something we **do**, separate from other church activities; it's who we are, it's our identity. Everything we are and do is mission, because God, who brought us together as a church, is mission. So it makes sense that the power we primarily receive is the power to be witnesses to Christ and the Kingdom. The movement of God's people is always toward the world, in love. God so loved the world that he *sent* Jesus. And God so loves the world now, that he sends... us! You and me. We are empowered to be witnesses.

Now, it needs to be said that you and I are in a waiting time, and we cannot be sent out *right now*. But we can be prayerfully asking God to show us, over the next weeks and months, how he might be preparing to send us out to be witnesses, when the time comes. And, we can ask him how we can be witnesses right where we are! There are likely opportunities that will present themselves to

us to be “sent” (so to speak) where we are. Some of you have probably had those opportunities with family and friends since you’ve been at home.

Because notice: witness begins at home. Notice the outward progression in Jesus’ description of their witness (think of concentric circles): you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (that’s where they were), Judea and Samaria (he lumps them together as the next outward ring; I’ll talk about that in a moment), and to the ends of the earth.

In other words—if we translate this for our context, it’s as if Jesus was saying it to us, right now: you will be my witnesses in Edmonds, Lynnwood, Mountlake Terrace, Everett, to Seattle and Pullman and Portland, and to the ends of the earth.

Witness begins at home. It can begin literally at home, where you are right now, and at home in our neighborhoods and towns. I learned this saying years ago, and I can’t remember who said it so I can attribute it to them, but it’s right on: “The light that shines farthest shines brightest at home.” Witness begins at home.

And notice, as mentioned, that Jesus lumps together Judea and Samaria as part of their witness. This represented both friendly territory (Judea) and

unfriendly, even hostile territory (Samaria). Jews and Samaritans hated each other; they were sworn enemies. This is like Israel and Palestine as I've talked about before. What Jesus is saying is, you will be my witnesses among people who are like you, and who you like, and among people who are not like you and who you don't like. We don't get to choose who to love and serve. Our witness is to all, those whom God calls us to love and serve and bear witness to.

This reminds us of Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount, where he says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who make your life difficult." Earlier in that teaching Jesus says, "You are the salt of *the earth*; you are the light of *the world*" which includes everyone. He doesn't say "You are salt to your friends" or "You are the light to nice people." But to all. [Including the people who are protesting, or even flaunting, the stay at home order. We are called to pray for them.]

The Spirit empowers us to be witnesses.

And when the Spirit empowers us, it's good for us to remember that, well, it's the *Holy Spirit* who empowers us to be witnesses. We don't empower ourselves. This does not depend on us and our personal power, or our great ideas and strategic plans—any more than it depended on the first disciples' great

strategic plans. They didn't have any! Therefore, like the first disciples, we are called upon to pray and wait and ask, seek, knock, for the gift of the Holy Spirit and the empowerment that the Spirit will bring. To us, *and...* to those whom God is preparing to receive our witness, in whatever form it takes. *Because*, it's the Holy Spirit who empowers people to *receive* the good news. The Holy Spirit is the great evangelist.

The Holy Spirit is the one who prepares people to hear the good news, and empowers us to communicate it through our service, our love, our kindness, our grateful & simple living. And once in a while through our words. We might think it depends on us, or on a program or strategy. But it doesn't. That's the great news of Pentecost. Our calling is to pray and worship and wait, and to receive the empowerment and direction of the Holy Spirit to bless and love on those whom Jesus shows us to bless and love.

Jesus tells us, as we heard from John 14, that the Holy Spirit will teach us and remind us of everything Jesus said, so we don't have to fear or worry about doing anything on our own steam, by our own power.

So, friends, let me invite us to pray, especially this week. To ask for the gift and blessing of the Holy Spirit, for ourselves, and for our church. And especially

while we're at home, to be in listening mode for what the Spirit of God wants to reveal to us about our calling and our witness going forward. Session meets tomorrow (Monday the 11th, over Zoom), so pray for your elders, your spiritual leaders, who will be discerning how God is leading us forward in our life and witness.