

Sermon – May 21, 2023
“You will be my witnesses”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 1:6-14

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that continues our transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Welcome to the last Sunday in Eastertide. Next Sunday, we enter the season of Pentecost. Remember to wear those bright colors next Sunday and come prepared to receive Holy Spirit. I hope some of us will make time in our busy schedules to read a summer book and to come together to share our thoughts. There are two options, the Holy Spirit book by Dan Wilt and a book on the atonement by Josh McNall. Let me know if you are interested in joining the summer reading challenge.

On the Christian calendar today is Ascension Sunday, the Sunday we remember Jesus' ascension into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of the Father. Thursday evening on Ascension Day, the 40th day after Easter, a few of us gathered at Fairfield's and after overcoming a few technical challenges, we were able to hear the sharing of experiences from several people who attended all or part of the sixteen days long move of God at Asbury University. They shared as best they could put into words their own experiences with the fullness of God present in the

place of worship there. They told stories of healing. They shared testimonies of people who gave their lives to Jesus and were transformed. They shared words that described the rich worship and praise those present shared as they journeyed through those days and weeks. We caught a vision and hope for a new normal coming into our churches, a coming time when we will again find the fullness of God present with us in our churches and overflowing into our communities. We caught a glimpse of new wine filling new wine skins and a hunger for them to be given to us. And we heard how the spread of this move of God continues on campuses in the U.S. and across the globe as the 50,000+ people who came to Asbury returned to their homes and communities with new fire in their hearts. We will meet this afternoon to pray for such a move of God to be poured out on us.

Just before today's reading, Jesus told his disciples they are to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. They are not to head out in their own strength to carry out his last command, but are to wait for the coming of Holy Spirit, to wait for the promise of the Father, to wait until they have "been baptized with Holy Spirit not many days from now."¹ Jesus is leaving his disciples, but has cautioned them not to head out into ministry to carry out his command until they are baptized or filled with Holy Spirit. All these years later, as we hear Jesus' command and find our hearts stirred to go out and witness for Jesus, we are to hear Jesus's words in our situations and also wait for our baptism by Holy Spirit.

Notice the response the disciples have to Jesus' teaching about the coming of Holy Spirit. They ask him "if this is the time when he will restore the kingdom to Israel." They are asking one last time, as they sense Jesus is preparing to leave them, if the time has arrived when Israel will be restored as an independent nation and they will find themselves as important members of the new leadership in Israel. Jesus does not answer their question directly but tells them that only the Father knows the time for that event and instead gives them a promise and a command. The disciples will not bring up this idea again. Something will change for them, allowing the idea of a restored Israel to be replaced with a new hope for the kingdom of God. The promise Jesus gives them is that they will receive power when Holy Spirit has come upon them, and then Jesus commands them to be his witnesses starting in Jerusalem, then to all Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. Don't miss the sequence here: first they are to wait for their baptism in Holy Spirit and then they are to go out as they are led and share the Good News of Jesus Christ. First, they are to receive power; then they are to be Jesus' witnesses.

Let me share with us Isaiah 49:6. Here Isaiah says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” In the Old Testament, we find God, through the prophet Isaiah, reminding Israel they are to be His witnesses to the end of the earth. Israel does not accomplish this task and when Jesus comes, he begins the work of taking the Good News to all people. Jesus begins this work on the cross, giving all who will believe in him salvation through his atonement, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. Those who believe in Jesus are to continue his work. With the power of Holy Spirit, those who believe in Jesus are to go forth into the world as Jesus’ witnesses. What Jesus started on the cross, we who believe in him, once we are filled with Holy Spirit power, are to continue to the ends of the earth. If we will read the rest of the Book of Acts, we will discover that the book follows Jesus’ geographical structure for those who take up his mission and become witnesses. The first seven chapters show the disciples’ witness in Jerusalem. Chapters 8 – 11:18 describe their witness in all Judea and Samaria, and the rest of Acts describes the progress of Jesus’ disciples’ witness moving outward to Rome. Rome is the seat of the Gentiles, but the earth is bigger than Rome and the commission remains alive through believers today. Those who believe in Jesus have this same command today. They are to wait for Holy Spirit baptism and when they are filled, they are to go and witness to those to whom they are led or sent.

When Jesus has given this last command, the text tells us he is lifted up and a cloud takes him out of their sight. As we think about this little band of believers in Jesus looking up to heaven, we should recall the cloud that overshadows Jesus and his three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. The cloud that overshadowed them then was the shekinah glory of God. Here also is the cloud; it marks the presence of the glory of God. We see this cloud in many places in the Old Testament such as when it leads the Hebrews out of Egypt, when it sits on top of Mount Sinai when the Law is given, and when it fills the temple after Solomon dedicates the temple to God to such a degree that the priest cannot enter to minister.

I like how the disciples are looking into heaven or looking at the glory of God and miss the arrival of the angels, the two men in white who are messengers of God. Like the two messengers who witnessed to the women at the tomb and gave the resurrection message, here two angels also provide a witness to the disciples that Jesus will come again. There will be

another time when the cloud, the shekinah glory, the glory of God, comes again and with it, Jesus returns. That event is the Parousia, the return of Jesus. For now, the angels give the disciples another promise, one for a future time. They are given a promise that there will be a future time when the cloud and Jesus return. The time of Jesus' return is not known or shared as the Father sets the time. Until then, Jesus' disciples are to be Jesus' witnesses once they have received Holy Spirit power.

Let me suggest that as a body of Christ we want revival. We hunger for what was experienced at Asbury and has been experienced many times in the history of the church, a move of Holy Spirit and the transformation of lives. We hunger for a mighty work of God in our hearts and lives. We hunger for a move of God in the hearts of our families, our children, our friends, and our community. We hunger, maybe we pray, for such a move, yet we need something more as we have not yet experienced such a move of God.

If we open our Bibles to 2 Kings and read chapters 22-23, we will encounter one of the first accounts of revival in our Bibles. During the reign of King Josiah, the Law was rediscovered as they worked on repairing the temple. The Law was read, and its reading sparked revival. If we look at these disciples who have just witnessed Jesus' ascension, we will find they have just spent some part of three years with Jesus, hearing him teach, watching him heal, and learning about the in breaking kingdom of God. These disciples are now deeply connected to Jesus. They are ready vessels for the power of God and to be sent out as witnesses for Jesus. If we desire revival, we also must be those who are diligent in teaching God's word to people, ourselves first. We are to be those who are in the word growing in our knowledge of the word made flesh. Let me quote two great historians of revival. J. Edwin Orr said "that a theological awakening must precede a revival of religion." We have to be those who are awakening to what is in God's word for us to be open to revival. Similarly, Dr. John Mackay writes, "First the enlightened mind, then the burning heart. First a revival of theological insights, and then the revival we need."ⁱⁱ If we want revival, we have to be those who have their Bibles open and are pouring God's word into our hearts. We need to learn who Jesus is if we are to share him with another. We need to learn how to live as Jesus lived if we are seeking holiness in our own lives. If we are to grow into the image of Christ, we need to be those who know Christ. Then with that preparation, we can be those who, like the disciples, were praying and waiting on Holy Spirit. We should seek to be a body of Christ striving for enlightened minds and burning hearts.

Notice in Luke's Gospel that going out to witness is Jesus' last command, in fact, his last words. Jesus' last command should be our first concern. We who are followers of Christ are to be his witnesses in this place. What are we to do that we might be those who are carrying out our Lord's commands? We are to be prepared to be witnesses for Jesus in all the places we are led. We are to be those who are in God's word and are getting ourselves ready. We are to pray and wait for Holy Spirit. We need to become those who have warm hearts and good theology. We are to be those working to be ready to share what Jesus has done for us.

If we spend any time reading historical documents about missions in the Methodist Church, we will bump into a missionary named E. Stanley Jones. Stanley as a young man first felt a call into the ministry and decided to try to be a preacher. He diligently prepared his first sermon, but after a few words he found he had forgotten what he was going to say. He stumbled around for a few minutes but could not recall his sermon and in frustration and failure he left the pulpit and walked down the aisle to return to his seat. During that walk the Spirit impressed on him to tell those gathered what Jesus had done for him. Still feeling he had failed as a pastor, he stopped and went back to the front of the church and told the congregation his story, sharing what Jesus had done in his life, and then returned to his seat. After the service a young man came to him and asked that he might experience what Stanley had experienced. He too wanted to have God work in his life. So was born, not the best preacher Methodism has produced, but perhaps the best missionary. Stanley studied the scriptures to learn about Jesus in order to share who Jesus was and what a life looks like that follows him. Holy Spirit sent Stanley to the intellectuals in India where he influenced tens of thousands for Christ. Among those he shared Jesus with was Mahatma Gandhi, one who did not accept Jesus but was influenced by Stanley's witness.

Let me suggest that we also need to get ready to be witnesses for Jesus, to carry out his command to his disciples. What should we do? Join a Bible study, read our Bibles, talk with others about Jesus, and prepare our story to share what Jesus has done for us. We are to be ready to share what Jesus has done for us. And we are to pray for the promise of Holy Spirit and wait until he arrives and we have received the fullness of Christ to go with us as we go out to the ends of the earth sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with those we are led to by Holy Spirit. We are to be the body of Christ, the church, in this community, sharing what Jesus has done for us. If we are sitting here today looking into our hearts and can't find anything Jesus has done that we might share as a witness for Jesus, then let me invite us to come to the altar this morning and

surrender our life to Jesus that he may help us, change us, and lead us to be his witnesses to the end of the world.

Pray with me: Jesus, guide us to get our stories of what you have done for us ready to share with others. Holy Spirit, lead us to the words we will need and the people we are to share our stories with, right here, right now, so that they may come to know you as their Lord and Savior. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱ NRSV Acts 1:5

ⁱⁱ Fernando, Ajith. Acts (The NIV Application Commentary Book 5) . Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition