

Called to be a Community of Witness

Our first reading is from the book of Acts, chapter 1, verses 1 through 11, which can be found on page 118 in the New Testament section of your pew bible. Acts, chapter 1, beginning with the 1st verse. Listen for God's word to you.

Acts 1:1–11 (NRSV)

¹ In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church. **Thanks be to God.**

Our second reading is from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 16 through 20, which can be found on page 34 in the New Testament section of your pew bible. Matthew, chapter 28, beginning with the 16th verse. Listen for God's word to you.

Matthew 28:16–20 (NRSV)

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church. **Thanks be to God.**

Any parent who has ever been on a road trip with their children has heard the question, “Are we there yet?” And that’s the question that the disciples were asking at the beginning of the book of Acts when Jesus, who had been raised from the dead, appeared to them and spoke to them for forty days about the kingdom of God. The disciples wanted to know, “Are we there yet?” Is this the time? Are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

The expectation, of course, is that God was going to carry out the grand plan, God was going to bring about the great renewal. God was going to restore Israel as the top nation ruling over the rest of the world as promised in the book of Psalms and the prophets. And all the other nations were going to be judged for their wickedness. This is what the disciples had signed up for. They believed that Jesus was the messiah who was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. They believed, they were witnesses to the fact that God was at work in and through Jesus bringing about God’s kingdom and possibly the restoration of the whole of creation.

Jesus, with his extraordinary grace and welcome and love and mercy towards others, with his healing power and his visionary teaching, he

would become the true king of Israel and restore the kingdom of David. He would restore God's people Israel. And all the evil and hatred and oppression of the other kingdoms of this world would be no more.

But then Jesus died a violent death. And they hadn't expected it. They hadn't expected Jesus to be captured, condemned, and crucified. They hadn't expected the wickedness of the world to win. Had they been wrong? Was he not the messiah? Would he never claim the throne?

But then, on the first day of the week, the first day of the new creation, Jesus rose from the dead. And for forty days, he appeared to his disciples and spoke to them about the nature of the kingdom of God. And so, they were wondering "Does this mean that our dream of restoration and renewal for Israel is now back on track? "Are we there yet? Is this the time when God is going to make everything right again?"

I like the way that NT Wright looks at this text. He says that many people, when they look at Jesus' answer, they think that Jesus is saying, "No, no, no. We're not there yet and it's not for you to know." As if Jesus were saying, "You're dreaming of an earthly reality and I'm telling you about a heavenly one. You're thinking about this world, but I'm preparing you for

the next. What counts is not what happens in this world of space and time, but where you're going to spend eternity. I'm going to go off to heaven, and you must wait down here, until I come to bring you up there, and in the meantime tell everyone how to follow me there."

From that point of view, the answer to "Are we there yet?" Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now... is "No, we're not going there at all, actually." But that certainly is NOT what Luke means.

The clear trajectory we get in scripture, including in the book of Acts, is that God's kingdom is indeed coming in and through the work of Jesus, but not by taking people away from this world, but by transforming things within this world, by bringing the sphere of earth into the presence and under the rule of heaven itself. When Jesus says, "It's not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority," what he is saying is that they won't be given a timetable. They aren't going to have a sense of where they are on the calendar of God's unfolding purposes.

Then he says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses from here in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.”

You will be my witnesses.

What does that mean? Quite simply this: in the resurrection (and the ascension, which is about to happen), Jesus is indeed being enthroned as Israel’s Messiah and therefore as king of the whole world. He is the one at whose name every knee shall bow, as Paul puts it in Philippians chapter 2, verse 10.

And think about it this way: in the ancient world, when someone was enthroned as king, that new authority would take effect through heralds going off throughout that kingdom declaring the good news that we have a new king!

So, the heralds would go off to the far reaches of the kingdom to announce the new king and ask for (or demand really) everyone’s glad allegiance.

In a sense, that's what Jesus is telling his disciples to go and do.

It's like Jesus is saying: "You're asking about the kingdom? You're asking when it will all come about, when Israel will be exalted as the top nation, with the nations of the world being subject to God and you will be restored as his chosen people? Well, in one sense it has already happened because in my resurrection, God has shown that the kingdoms of this world and evil in particular, will not prevail. The kingdoms of this world tried to kill me and my movement, but look, I am alive. And in just a moment, I will ascend to my throne. I will be seated at the right hand of God, to rule and to reign. So, you don't need to ask when will this come about. Ask instead, "How can I share the news and with who?" The world doesn't know it yet, but it will. And it's going to take some time and you will just have to wait for the time when the whole world is visibly and clearly living under God's just and healing rule. It is here already, and it is yet to come."

And that's where we find ourselves, living between the already and the not yet. And, like the disciples before us, we are called to be Christ's witnesses, from here to the ends of the earth. We are called to live as

heralds, not of someone who may become king at some point in the future, but of the one who has already been appointed and enthroned.

The power and the Spirit that came upon the disciples in Acts chapter 2 is the same power and spirit that is at work among us. And we saw what the disciples witness accomplished on that day of Pentecost.

Jesus says start where you are, then spread the news in Judea, Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. Spread the news. That's how we will begin to see God's kingdom emerge throughout the world. It will emerge as God works through God's people and God's people begin living God's vision. So, spread the news. One day that kingdom will come, fully and finally. In the meantime, you have a job to do.

And this is what we find in the gospel of Matthew: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Notice the great promise right there at the end. We are not alone. Christ is with us. Christ, who is enthroned above, is present among us, empowering us with his spirit, calling us to live and work and proclaim to all the world around us, the good news of his loving reign.

This is what it means in our Book of Order when it says that *“the church is called to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God’s transforming grace in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Let me read that again. *“The church is called to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God’s transforming grace in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

We have the privilege of proclaiming the good news of God’s transforming love. It’s not about us. It’s about God and God’s desires for us and the world. We are to point beyond ourselves through our words and our work to Christ as king and to Christ’s kingdom. We are to announce the good news of God’s liberating love; calling all people to a new way of life, trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and inviting them to join

in following Christ's way, bearing witness to God's reign through acts of compassion, our work for justice and peace, and our care for creation.

God sends us, the church, to show compassion in the world; to feed the hungry, to care for the sick, to visit prisoners, to free captives, to shelter the homeless, to welcome strangers, to comfort those who mourn, and to be present with all who are in need.

These acts of compassion, done corporately or individually are our Christian witness, the work of the church as the body of Christ, our participation in Christ's compassionate ministry.

As his witnesses, we are called not only to minister directly to people's immediate hurts and needs, but we are also called to confront and challenge systems that perpetuate human misery.

God sends us, the church, to work for justice in the world, to exercise our power for the common good, to seek dignity and freedom for all people, to promote justice and fairness in the law, to overcome disparities between rich and poor, and to bear witness against systems of violence and oppression.

In the face of **hunger and poverty**, what are we to say? What are we to do? What is our witness?

In the face of **oppression and persecution**, what are we to say? What are we to do? What is our witness?

In the face of **bullying or bigotry**, what are we to say? What are we to do? What is our witness?

In the face of **physical or sexual violence**, what are we to say? What are we to do? What is our witness?

In the face of **drug abuse and addiction**, what are we to say? What are we to do? What is our witness?

In the face of **depression and mental illness**, what are we to say? What are we to do? What is our witness?

In the face of people's deepest questions about life, and love, and death, and God, and evil, and life after death, what are we to say? What are we to do? What is our witness?

To people who feel lost and alone, what are we to say? What are we to do? What is our witness?

We can't fix everything. And sometimes there is nothing we can do and nothing we can say. But even in those times, it's important that we stand with people and we let them know who and what we represent; whose ambassadors we are.

What is the truth that we live and proclaim? That the God who loves us, forgives us. That the God who loves us, claims us as his own and calls us to a better way of life; a way of living and acting and being in the world that benefits all people and has the power to transform not only our lives and the lives of those around us, but all creation itself.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.