

7th Sunday of Easter June 5, 2011

Acts 1:1-11 “We are Christ’s Witnesses”

Do you remember what you were doing last Thursday? I remember that I was not working that day; Thursday is my usual day off from work. I did my obligatory run to the Safeway store for bagels and bought ingredients for a birthday cake. Then I picked up Bayley from a morning exam, after which it was such a beautiful day I began to work in the yard. I cut grass, watered plants, and attended to some other projects. Then in the evening I fixed dinner for my family, after which I had a quiet evening at home.

The same Thursday, approximately 2000 years ago, Jesus ascended into heaven. His apostles were not fishing that day. Rather, they went to the place Jesus told them about, and he again showed himself alive to them. There he gave them final instructions, after which Jesus began to visibly ascend into the sky until he disappeared behind a cloud. God’s plan for our salvation through Jesus was complete, and soon the apostles’ work in that same plan would begin. Your presence here today is the result of their work from 2000 years ago. Just as they received power to become Christ’s witnesses, so God’s Holy Spirit empowers us to be Christ’s witnesses in the world today. But let’s back up a moment...

I have chosen as my text today the Acts reading from this past Thursday, the Ascension of Our Lord. The letter was written by Luke, and the recipient is Theophilus. The way that Luke has written this letter, you could very well be the recipient of the letter. Listen to the first verses of Acts 1 and imagine that Luke is writing to you:

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Today, you are Theophilus. This Greek name means, “lover of God.” Theos translates God, and phileo translates love, just as in the city name, “Philadelphia,” which is the city of “brotherly love.” You are a lover of God. You love God, and God loves you. You came to love God because God first loved you by sending Jesus to become the Savior of the world. Jesus willingly chose the way to the cross, and he underwent the spiritual suffering that accomplished our forgiveness of sins. He took our sins upon himself at the cross, he felt the full wrath of God for our sins, and he gave up his life into death when his sacrifice for our sins was complete. On the third day he rose again from the dead, and for 40 days he showed himself alive again. Paul summarizes some of these appearances in 1 Corinthians 15 when he tells how Jesus showed himself alive again to Peter, the apostles, 500 of the brothers at one time, James, and Paul. We can also include his appearances to Mary Magdalene and to the women, and to the two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. There was no doubt in their minds – Christ is Risen!

Just as Jesus taught his apostles at that time by the Holy Spirit, so Jesus continues to teach us through the apostolic scriptures written down for us by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When you read from God’s Word, you read about God’s love for you in Christ. What you have learned already about Jesus is just a part of all that Christ wants you to learn about his work and love for you. We study God’s Word our entire lives so that we will know God’s love for us better, and so that we will love Jesus more deeply.

One thing that Jesus taught his disciples is that the heavenly Father was going to send the Holy Spirit to them. They did not know it at the time, but the promised Holy Spirit would be arriving a week from

today, and of course we will be hearing more about their reception of it next Sunday on the Day of Pentecost. The promise of the Holy Spirit was not just for the apostles, but it is for you and me, too.

So when will you receive this promised Holy Spirit? Wait, you already did! Are you washed in the waters of baptism? The baptism with water and the baptism with the Holy Spirit are tied to each other just as the body of Christ is tied to the bread in communion, and the blood of Christ is tied to the wine in communion. The reception of the Holy Spirit is tied to the water of baptism just as a large glass of ice tea is not complete unless it contains a glass of ice. The reception of the Holy Spirit is tied to the water of baptism just as graduation from high school comes with a high school diploma. Baptism with the Holy Spirit and the water of baptism are tied to each other as one, and because of your baptism into the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit with forgiveness of your sins.

Jesus says you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. The Holy Spirit empowered the faith and the witness of many witnesses in the Old Testament. For example the Holy Spirit empowered Joseph's witness when he forgave his brothers who years earlier sold him to some traveling Ishmaelites. Joseph interpreted the situation by the Holy Spirit – "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good – to save the Jewish people and preserve the line to the Messiah. On another occasion, Joshua the son of Nun showed the Holy Spirit was on him when he led the people of Israel into the Promised Land to defeat it, even though they as a nation seemed insignificant before the Canaanites in the land. Joshua led the people by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the walls of Jericho came down and the people conquered the land. Still another time, King David showed the Holy Spirit was on him when he witnessed to his servants after the death of his baby which was born to Bathsheba. David fasted and prayed that God would save the baby. However, when the baby died, he surprised everyone by getting up to eat. While his servants thought that was strange, David's reply was, "Why should I continue to fast and mourn? The child cannot return to me, but I will go to where the child is." The Holy Spirit empowered their witness of God's power, grace, and resurrection victory.

You have received this same powerful Holy Spirit, and therefore you are now witnesses to others of the victory Jesus Christ has over our sins, death and the devil. When you were baptized, God forgave your sins, gave you faith to trust in Jesus, empowered you with the Holy Spirit, and made you a witness.

There are some people today who seem to have the Holy Spirit because of their faith in Christ, but who give a poor witness because of their belief that they can figure out the date for the end of the world. Jesus said that no one knows that time; and in Acts 1 Jesus says to the apostles, "*It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.*" Aside from the problems with Harold Camping's misguided prediction about the end of the world a couple of weeks ago which did not happen, he has lost sight of what our responsibility is as we prepare for Christ's return on the date that only our heavenly Father knows. There are three things to keep in mind.

First, Christ visibly left this world after his resurrection because his work was complete. God became flesh and blood in Jesus in order to keep the 10 Commandments perfectly as our substitute because we are unable to keep the commandments due to our sinful nature. Jesus took our sins upon himself in the time of his death as a sacrifice for our sins, thus fulfilling all the Old Testament sacrifices offered to God for sins. Jesus took our punishment for sin as a substitute for us, and the sign of that punishment was when God forsook his Son when he was hanging on the cross with our sins. Jesus suffered, died and was buried. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead, victorious over death and the grave. Through faith in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. After Jesus showed himself alive again to his disciples, his work was complete, and so he visibly left this world and returned to his heavenly Father.

The second thing to keep in mind is that Christ will visibly return in God's time – "Every eye will see him." Just as Jesus visibly left this world, he will visibly return. There will be no secret appearance of Jesus to some people, no rapture of believers from this life to heaven, no more life in this world after Christ returns. When Christ returns, all believers will go to heaven and the unbelievers will go to hell. No one knows when Christ is going to return, and no one can date that return as if there are clues in the Bible or computer programs to compute it. The important thing to remember is that Christ is returning, and we must always be ready, and we must help other people to be ready, too.

This brings us to the third thing to keep in mind. Christ continues to do his work in us until he returns again. We are Christ's witnesses "from Jerusalem, to all Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Instead of trying to date the end of the world and leave other people with just a message of condemnation or divine judgment, we are to tell people about God's love and forgiveness and grace. We are Theophilus, that is, "lovers of God," who know the reality of our own sin, but who also know that God has loved and acted for us in Jesus who won our victory over sin, death and the grave. We are Theophilis, and we are God's instruments of love and grace in the world. We are Theophilis in the family when as a father, mother, son or daughter, or brother or sister, we share Jesus' love in our words, witness, and behavior. We are Theophilis in our church when we share Jesus' love in our words and witness. We are Theophilus in the workplace where people can see Christ in us through our witness in word and behavior. We are Theophilis wherever we are in this world, because the Holy Spirit is in us through our faith and baptism into Christ. And where you give a witness of Jesus Christ, you will have success – because you have received power – the Holy Spirit.

God never expects us to do something without giving us the tools. When Jesus ascended into heaven, his work was completed, and ours had begun. We are Christ's witnesses, and those who have the Holy Spirit are his witnesses to the world today. You have that Holy Spirit through faith and your baptism. You have received power. Just as you are loved by God, go and share Christ's love with everyone you meet.

soli deo gloria