



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON BRITT OLSON, VICAR ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, BALLARD
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 21, 2023
ACTS 1:6-14; PSALM 68:1-10,33-36; 1 PETER 4: 12-14;5:6-11; JOHN 17:1-11

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

I love the rhythm of the liturgical year which orients us to the birth, ministry, and passion of Jesus... followed by the birth, growth, and challenges of the early Church. Along the way we mark big events, the feasts and festivals that are spread like jewels along the chain of the history of our faith.

This Sunday we are suspended between two of the most important days in the Church calendar, Ascension, and Pentecost. You may be forgiven if you somehow missed the Feast of the Ascension this past Thursday. It always falls on Thursday, 40 days after Easter and in the midst of the work week. It is easily overlooked, but in other parts of the world, it is actually a national holiday. I even found it on the calendar my Farmers Insurance guy provides us every year!

While many of us wouldn't miss a Christmas or Easter service, Ascension and Pentecost fail to draw the crowds in quite the same way. It wasn't until 2015 that I first caught a glimpse of the power and meaning of these two days.

You see, I was raised without the liturgical year. In fact, I was raised without church or the Christian faith, or any religious faith at all. My parents are atheists who both rejected any form of religion. It wasn't until my senior year in High School that I was introduced to Jesus through C.S. Lewis and some Christian students at high school and at a Baptist youth group. Jesus turned my life upside down and redirected my priorities as I learned about his teaching and ministry in Scripture and through the lives of those who have followed him faithfully, including Martin Luther King Jr. I loved Jesus but wasn't that excited about church.

Many years later I attended an Easter Vigil at a small Episcopal Church in Salem, Oregon where I was serving as a campus minister. It was mystical, beautiful, full of depth and power and deeply tied to the vast history and tradition of Christianity. The Episcopal Church exposed me to the great riches of the Holy Trinity, the awe and wonder of worship, and the presence of God in the Eucharist.

But it wasn't until 2015 that my relationship to the Holy Spirit began to grow and deepen. It took a quirky, nearly dying congregation in Ballard to introduce me to the power and presence of the third person of the Trinity. For those who know some of the incredible history of the charismatic renewal movement at St. Luke's, Ballard you may be getting a little nervous about now. Fear not. Although some have the gift of a prayer language, sometimes called the gift of tongues, and the willingness to lay on hands for healing, they only practice it if asked to. Instead, what I have learned and experienced in this community is what we heard in our lessons from Scripture today.

The first chapter of Acts is the hinge between Ascension and Pentecost; between Jesus's ministry in the gospels and the witness of the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles. This is the critical period when Jesus leaves us physically and promises to send the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we will not just continue his message and works but spread the good news throughout the world into places and people groups that he never physically encountered.

At this moment, they don't have any idea what that will look like. In the pause between his ascension and the descent of the Spirit in tongues of fire at Pentecost the disciples are holed up in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. They are no longer the terrified and strung-out individuals whose lives fell apart at the crucifixion. They are Easter people, people of the resurrection, full of hope and courage, bearers of Christ's teaching and message, witnesses of the power of God to

defeat even death itself. But they are a little perplexed. They're not sure of the way forward and don't know what they are supposed to do next.

Even with the eleven disciples, Jesus's family and the faithful women, there aren't so many of them that they can't fit into one room. So they have a retreat. Then they form a strategic plan. They do a visioning process and a strength, weakness, opportunity, threat analysis so they can set measurable goals and objectives and assign a timeline and assign key responsibilities.

No? Did I get that wrong? Let's see, what does Acts say, "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." Jesus instructed them to wait and pray until the Holy Spirit guided and inspired them. The two angels at the Ascension asked them why they were just standing there, looking up to heaven. So they returned to Jerusalem, willing, ready, and probably nervous. The world was so big, and they were so few. God's call was overwhelming and they felt powerless. And it was all risky. Jesus preached, loved and healed and he ended up hanging on the cross. Was there a fiery ordeal ahead for them? How would they face the challenges ahead when they had already failed, denied and betrayed him at the crucifixion?

They had no idea what was coming next. They wouldn't have believed it, even if Jesus had told them. The powerful preaching that came out of uneducated fishermen; the miraculous translation of the good news into the many languages of every person gathered in Jerusalem; healings, conversions, prophesy and visions. The Day of

Pentecost explodes the gospel into the world and we who are here this morning are still propelled by that event. The Spirit continues to guide and inspire us forward into fresh expressions of God's vision and leads to challenges that our for-bearers in the faith could not imagine.

When I arrived at St. Luke's in 2015, I was appointed as the ¾-time Priest-in-charge on a one-year contract. The congregation numbered around 15 faithful members, mostly elderly and female. Looking back, I think I was the final "Hail Mary" pass from the Bishop. Once the church was the second largest in the diocese and the property covers ¾ of the block with 10 buildings, all of which were in a sad state of disrepair. In 2011, after a split over full inclusion of LGBTQ folks and various theological differences, only a few remained to continue worship and service to those who are hungry and homeless in the neighborhood. When I began there was no staff, no treasurer, no Vestry and only \$3,000 in the bank. It was the most extreme makeover parish I had experienced in 25 years of ministry.

What I soon discovered, though was that the Holy Spirit had never left St. Luke's. It was present in the faithful women in their 70's and 80's who got up every weekday morning at 5:30 to start coffee and breakfast for their neighbors in need. It was present in the way the property was being used to provide services to the homeless as well as a pea patch for neighborhood gardeners and worship space for other start-up congregations. And I began to feel it on Sunday mornings as we prayed and worshiped together, calling upon God to guide and strengthen us for the

ministry we are called to. Over and over again I was reminded that God was not finished with St. Luke's and that the Holy Spirit had more in store than we could ask or imagine.

Then the miracles (or coincidences) began to happen. Random people sent money to pay our bills. Families with young kids began showing up. A Lutheran pastor whose church meets in the evening turned out to be the best musician I have ever worked with and has been with us since my first Easter service. It wasn't magic. When a fire finally catches, it's only because someone has first collected, chopped kindling, and set the wood so that it will burn.

The first thing we did was to restart the prayer meeting. We gathered in a small room every week to pray for the needs of the congregation, the community, and the world. Now we mostly do it via Zoom! After the Bishop told us in 2017 that we had five years to figure out what to do with all our buildings and property, we started praying fervently for guidance.

Before we knew it, we had a team of members including an architect, engineer, project manager and experienced real estate professional. This September we're preparing to break ground on the first very affordable, family focused housing development in the Ballard neighborhood in over 25 years. In addition, we are in partnership to build a mixed-use apartment complex with a brand-new church space on land which will continue to be owned by the diocese.

Just saying this still blows my mind. We are here to witness to the astonishing power of God working through ordinary people under the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit. Although we are such a small church, for the past 35 years, we have fed an average of nearly 30,000 meals/year to the most needy and vulnerable in our community. In spite of the fact that most of the original members have died or are aging, we have a leadership team of younger members who have been mentored by these dear, faithful disciples of Jesus and are continuing to carry out the mission of *feeding people in body, mind and spirit*. Just this past month our redevelopment team passed on the first attempt the arduous City Design and Review Board public hearing, clearing the way for our building permit early next year.

All of us face times in life when things seem out of control or overwhelming. We lack the resources, skill, and strength to face the challenges confronting us. We feel powerless in the face of problems and obstacles that we are unable to fix. Maybe it's a relationship that is broken and we can find no way to forgiveness or reconciliation. Maybe life's circumstances have brought us low and we are drained of energy, vitality and hope. Sometimes we are anxious and afraid that our lives have gotten out of control, and we have no idea how to right the ship. Perhaps we are in deep grief over the loss of a loved one, a dream or our own abilities and agency. We may feel alone and broken down.

We hear the voice of Jesus calling us to follow him, but we don't think we have the strength or resources to do so. We've all been there. Some of

us are in that position today. We're not expecting a miracle. We just need the strength to carry on.

For some of us, that's why we're here today. We have come together in this room to devote ourselves to prayer; to reach out to God and one another; to receive the strength and comfort we need for the journey ahead. We will be lifted up by the music, worship and prayer of the community. We will be made one with God and our neighbor in the mystery of broken bread and a shared cup. The Spirit of the living God will come upon us as we are reminded of our baptism, that we are *sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever*.

Today we hear the voice of Jesus say, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses." As we go forth from this place, don't be surprised when the Spirit works in and through you in unexpected ways. Don't be amazed when God puts some very interesting people in your path because Jesus often shows up in the people we least expect. And be ready. You will be called to witness to the way that God has called you into new life, abundant life, life in the Spirit.

As the Psalmist exclaims:

"How wonderful is God in the holy places! The God of Israel giving strength and power to the people! Blessed be God! Amen.