

For the Sundays of July and August, your preachers will offer sermons from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The reason for this is that when a church is in transition it is helpful to return to its mission, and the basic text on the church's mission has always been the book of Acts.

When we find the disciples in today's text, they are on the mount of Olivet staring at the clouds. Jesus had just promised that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. "Wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit," he said. Then he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

After his ascension, though, the disciples just kept looking at the clouds. I imagine them like puppies staring up at the door when their owner leaves. You know how dogs cock their heads when they get confused, thinking, "Surely, he's coming back. You don't think he left us in charge, do you? That can't turn out well." Finally, two angels show up to tell the disciples to cut it out and stop staring at the clouds.

So, they returned to Jerusalem as instructed, and eventually made their way back to the Upper Room. I think they loved that room. It was the place where they had a last supper with Christ before his crucifixion. Perhaps the same place they returned in despair after the crucifixion, and maybe the place where the risen Jesus found them hiding in fear from the world around them. It was their safe place, where they nurtured community and found belonging and sanctuary. Thus, it makes sense that they would now return to that Upper Room to wait for Jesus to return. We are told that they were joined by some of the women, Jesus' brothers, and Mary the mother of Jesus. And for a while, the text says, they "devoted themselves to prayer."

When we are in a season of transition, and unsure about the future, it is tempting to just stare at the clouds and focus on what has left us. But the angels will never let us keep our focus on what we can no longer see with us. So, we use this time better by devoting ourselves our prayer where we find holy visions for our future. Seriously, if even Mary, the blessed virgin mother of Jesus had to pray to see a future, so do we. It is in prayer that heaven and earth reconnect, and we find the power to keep moving.

That is part of what happens when, like the first disciples, we return to the communion table. Here we gather in this safe sanctuary after what may have been a hard week. We come for a taste of God's grace and pray for the Spirit to lift us up to see the Christ who is still leading us.

But the disciples eventually grew weary of prayer and turned their communion into a committee meeting. Peter stood up and said, "Our first order of business is that there only eleven of us. We've always been known as the twelve, but after the unfortunate matter of Judas, we're down a disciple. And we can't be the eleven. I move we hold an election to fill the vacancy in the office of disciple." So, two men are nominated, and the honor of being the new twelfth disciple falls to Matthias - who is never heard of again in the New Testament.

About the time the stated clerk writes Matthias' name in the record, the Holy Spirit responds to the disciples' prayer by descending with the rush of a mighty wind that pushes them out of the Upper Room. No longer are they looking up, are looking back, or looking at themselves as the twelve disciples. Now they have to look out at the world around them - no more in fear, but now in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the opening words of the Bible we are told it was this same Spirit, wind, the holy Ruach of God that once hovered over the waters, shoving aside the darkness and chaos, creating light and beauty in its place. When the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea to leave slavery and embark on a great unknown future, it was again the Ruach of God that parted the waters of that sea, allowing them to move ahead into an adventure with freedom. When the

prophet Elijah was carried up into the heavens by this whirlwind of God, his mantle fell to his disciple Elisha who again used it to part the waters and carry on without his mentor. And now this holy wind falls upon the disciples, empowering them to leave the place of prayer to fulfill Jesus' mission to the ends of the earth.

These men are literally on fire with flames above their heads. They start speaking languages they didn't know they knew. And they are transformed by the Holy Spirit from being confused and fearful to becoming impassioned witnesses of Christ's ongoing work.

The church now celebrates this as Pentecost, as we did last month. But our society has never known what to do with this event, and it hasn't caught on as a holiday. You probably didn't get any Happy Pentecost cards in the mail or had to travel to celebrate it. No one is worried about the commercialization of Pentecost. When it comes to Pentecost, the world has said to the church, "You can have it." But does the church really want it? It means the Holy Spirit of God is going to keep pushing us forward.

Pentecost is the birthday of the church, but let's be clear about what was born with this event. It was not just another institution. And it was never meant to be just the launching of a new religion. What was born was a movement. Not our movement, but the movement of the Holy Spirit among us empowering us in mission.

It is striking that after Pentecost not only do we not hear about Mathias, but we don't even hear about the twelve as disciples again. Now they are called apostles, which means those who are sent out as witnesses of the redemptive work of Christ.

This word witness is so important. We tend to make it more about us, and our work, than the work of Christ. The church's social witness in the world is not about what we do, as if the ascended Christ told us to fix the world while he's gone. To be Christ's witness in society is about participating in what Jesus is still doing among us. The church can't save the world, and in fact, it is often part of the problem in society. Christ is still the Messiah from God. The job description for saving is filled. And isn't that good news. You don't have to try to be Jesus! Whenever we try to take over as Messiah, the church inevitably becomes mean, and the world doesn't need more mean messiahs trying to be witnesses.

Ask any courtroom judge, and they will tell you that the last thing a witness should do is make stuff up or take over for the judge. The witness sees and testifies to what was seen. So, to be a witness of Christ is to see and testify, through work and word, to what Jesus is still doing. That is why we devote ourselves to prayer and communion, but it is also why we go into the inner city and to distant fields of mission. It's why we care for those who needs are pressing, why we go to the hospitals, to the homebound, and to those without homes. It is why we devote ourselves to the pursuit of justice in the world. In all of those places we see Jesus working just as he is at this table, or in our fellowship.

When Jesus ascended into heaven and sat on the right hand of his father, it was not because he was tired, but to continue his work of salvation from a throne of power. I have a friend who's an Episcopal priest who says, "The ascension means Jesus is now working from home," Yes, but only if we realize he is working through the Holy Spirit who empowers us to stay on the move with Jesus who has so much more salvation to unfold.

So, when we are confused and uncertain about our future, like the disciples once were, let us remember that the church is not a victim to social disinterest in religion, demographic trends, transitions in pastoral staff, viruses, or whatever comes next. The church has power. This is not the power to climb up into the clouds and know the mind of God. We still have so many questions. It is not the power to govern society, which historically has never worked out well for the church. It is certainly not the power to take over for Jesus.

Our power is to be sent, to keep moving, and keep finding new ways to witness to the truth by which we live - the Savior is not done. But if you want to see Jesus at work, you have to keep moving. Amen.