

Acts 1:8

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.

March off the Map

I.

More than 300 years before the time of Christ, Alexander the Great was marching across Asia Minor. He was leading the greatest army that had ever been assembled up to that time. Every enemy had been conquered by this army—no one could stand against them. Finally, the army reached the Himalaya Mountains. After reconnoitering the area, the front-line officers came back concerned to confer with Alexander. “We have marched off the map,” they said. “We should go back to where we know.” They had crossed a line—from the known to the unknown. Alexander listened to them and said: “Mediocre armies always stay within the known areas. The great armies always march off the map.”

Alexander the Great wasn't the only conqueror to give the order: “March off the map.” In the verse for our sermon today Jesus, the One who conquered death and Satan, gave those same orders to *his* army. The Savior gives us—his soldiers of the 21st century—the command to march off the map.

II.

Notice, however, what Jesus says *before* sounding the command to march. He makes a promise: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8, EHV).

Jesus' promise gives us direction. The Holy Spirit gives the Church an understanding of what we should be concerned about. That's not something that comes naturally. The disciples who first heard these words from Jesus had walked with him for three years. They had witnessed his resurrection. He appeared to many of his disciples—the Eleven as well over 500 others—during a 40-day period, making it crystal clear that he had conquered death.

But what were *they* concerned about? With heads still stuck in the sand they asked Jesus: “Lord, is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6, EHV).

Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that's still you and me—and our church body. On our own it is impossible to comprehend spiritual things or know their importance. Like the first disciples it is easy to let our personal ideas about what the church *should* be doing interfere with what the *Lord* wants done. Without the Holy Spirit it is easy for programs to become more important than people and beautiful buildings more important than bodies won for Christ. Organizations can trump the Lord's orders.

That's why Jesus sends his Spirit. Working through the Word the Spirit sees to it that we are not left spiritually wandering or wondering. The Spirit leads us to see Jesus as the Savior and to recognize that our job on earth is to be witnesses of the Savior. It is important to march together as a Spirit-led church because the Holy Spirit leads us to remember what we are commissioned to do.

Not only does being a Spirit-led church provide direction for the marching—it gives us *confidence* to march. Our Commander—Christ Jesus—says “You will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8, EHV).

Certainly the Holy Spirit's power had an impact on the disciples. Weeks earlier one of those men had fled naked in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was taken into custody. Another had crumbled under the questioning of a mere servant-girl in the high priest's courtyard. *All* of them abandoned the Lord Jesus.

Later, having been given the Holy Spirit's power, those same disciples were transformed from

frightened cowards to fearless confessors. Empowered by the Spirit they could even perform miracles like driving out demons and curing diseases.

The greatest demonstration of the Spirit's power, however, was not to be seen in outward miracles, but in the effect their message would have on human hearts and lives. Led by the Holy Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost the disciples preached to crowds of people in Jerusalem. Under the Spirit's power, their message took hearts filled with hatred of Jesus and turned them into hearts pulsing with love for the Savior. *That's* power! Amazing power!

That same amazing power of the Spirit has been given to us. We have the gospel. It is the power of God to salvation. Sometimes we forget that, don't we? Sometimes we underestimate the power the Holy Spirit gives us in the gospel. We act like the disciples hiding behind locked doors on the first Easter Sunday—sitting around and wringing our hands about the boldness of Jesus' enemies in the world.

There are over 7 billion people in the world today. That means that in our world there are more unbelievers alive today than have been alive at any other point in human history, and we act like we're ready to throw in the towel and quit. We forget that God has placed in our hands and in our hearts the raw power of the gospel—a gospel no less capable of creating and sustaining faith today than it was in the first century.

As a Spirit-led church we have the power to pour water on a baby's head and apply God's Word and know that another child is brought into God's kingdom. We have the power to offer Jesus' body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine of the Sacrament and know that a sinner is assured to be in a right relationship with God. We are equipped with the tools to bring down the devil's walls, to cut through hearts of stone, and let the Spirit lead people to faith in our Savior. We can confidently march together as Christian soldiers because we are guided by the Spirit of God and equipped with the power of God.

III.

After he promises the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says: "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8, EHV). That was risky business for the disciples. Many were tortured for even mentioning the message of the gospel. Some were tried, imprisoned, banished, and even executed simply for talking. It is no surprise that the Greek word for witness is equivalent to our word "martyr."

In our country there isn't much risk to being thrown in prison, tortured, or killed for speaking about the Savior. Sometimes the biggest threats *we* face as witnesses for Christ come from the inside. We face the fear of failure. Will I say the right thing? Will I embarrass myself? Will I embarrass the Savior? Will I walk away with more questions about my own faith? Faced with those risks we often adopt the fearful attitude of the servant who buried the talent his master entrusted to him instead of putting it to work.

Just as much as fear of failure is an internal threat, isn't it also true that fear of *success* can make us regard witnessing as risky? At times we act the way the soldiers of Alexander the Great did when they said: "We should go back to where we know." We start to realize that witnessing can take us to places we have never seen before. Witnessing can take us out of our comfort zone. People move out of our neighborhoods and others move in. Some of them might be different from us. What will reaching out to them mean to our congregation? Can we afford to do it? Are we willing to change the way we do ministry—as long as it is within the parameters of Scripture—in order to reach them?

Risks are there, but we can see how God blesses us when we takes risks in his name. Various congregations in our Synod are working with Hmong, Vietnamese, and Sudanese living in their communities. Sometimes it all started just because someone walked into their church one day. Was reaching out a big risk? To be sure it was! It has forced our church body to look at ministry from a different perspective. We developed a new ministerial training program called Pastoral Studies

Institute to help train church leaders from other cultures.

God has led several men from these cultures to become full-time pastors in our church body. Some have spread the gospel in their own communities. Others have scattered out across the United States to witness to people of their culture. Still others have gone to their countries of origin to reach out with the power of the gospel. God moved us to take a risk. And now, thousands of people from other cultures are marching together with us as a Spirit-led church.

Does God *want* us to be a risk-taking church? “You **will be** my witnesses” (Acts 1:8, EHV). Jesus does not ask for input. There are no negotiations to be made. He is not overly concerned about whether or not being a witness is what we had in mind for ourselves. He leaves no option. We will be what he makes us to be: witnesses. March together as Christian soldiers to take risks in witnessing because that is what our Savior has called us to be.

IV.

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, EHV). A risk-taking, Spirit-led church becomes a reproducing church.

Almost immediately after giving this marching-order we see it happen. Led by the Spirit, taking a risk while witnessing to a crowd that had recently chanted “Crucify!”, the disciples saw first-hand how God made his church a reproducing church. Within ten days of Jesus giving marching orders, Christianity became a worldwide event. People from all over the known world were there in Jerusalem to hear Peter’s Spirit-led sermon. 3,000 were added to the number of believers that very day, and spread out to the four corners of the known world when they returned home with the same message. Peter witnessed before the Jews at the temple in Jerusalem and before the Sanhedrin. Philip witnessed to Samaritans and an African. Paul witnessed throughout Asia, Greece, Italy, and the islands in between.

The testimony of those who were eyewitnesses of what Jesus did continues to go out today. Christ’s Church is still a reproducing church. When a mother sings “I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb” to her child, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When a pastor tells the congregation: “Through Jesus you are forgiven,” God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When a grandfather witnesses to his grandchildren on his deathbed, “I am going home to my Savior,” God’s Church is a reproducing Church. Those situations are our “Jerusalem.”

But God’s Church isn’t just reproducing in our homes and congregations and neighborhoods. The testimony of the eyewitnesses of Christ continues to go out very literally to the ends of God’s earth. Whenever the gospel is translated into new languages, which is what happens through our WELS Multi-Language Publications, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. Whenever we go into new countries like Ethiopia, Vietnam, and the Philippines with the gospel, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When we send people around the world to teach English as a Second Language and they wear their faith on their sleeves, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When we use the Internet to make Christian resources in Spanish available to people all over the world, God’s Church is a reproducing Church.

We are able to see that God’s Church is marching off the map. God grant that we continue to take risks as a Spirit-led reproducing Church, and keep marching right off the map. Amen.