

Acts 1:12-26
(Psalm 133; Luke 24:44-49)
“Preparing for the Mission”

Introduction

When Jesus commissioned his disciples – and through them the church – he warned them that they could not make disciples of all nations unless they first received God’s great promise: his promise that the Spirit of the risen, conquering Christ would fill them and empower them to be his witnesses to the entire world. That warning is as true for us today as it was when Jesus first gave it. Next Sunday we begin our annual celebration of mission. Our mission conference is not merely one of many things that we do here at Cedar Springs, but rather is central to our self-understanding. The one unifying theme of the Bible is “God on mission.” We are called to join him on mission, the mission of making disciples here in Knoxville and around the world, in the power of his Spirit.

But if the gift has already been given at Pentecost, don’t we automatically have the Spirit by virtue of being members of Christ’s body, the church? The answer is: Yes and no. If I am born, then I have lungs and am able to breathe deeply of the air that I need for life. If I am truly in Christ, then the breath of the Spirit now courses through me, giving me the life and power of God. But what if a child struggles to breathe and fails to thrive? Or what if an adult has a lung disease such as emphysema that prevents him from getting the oxygen necessary to work and exercise and move around? This is the state of so many Christians in our day. They seem unable to draw sufficient spiritual breath to be or do what they know they have been called to be and do.

How do we, in a sense, go back and learn those first lessons from the early church in preparing to receive the Spirit of God in power, so that we might live the transformed lives we long to live? Even in the book of Acts, we see those who receive the gift of the Spirit seek fresh fillings of God’s power over and over again.

In our text, we see the first band of disciples, a group of men and women already transformed by spending forty days with their resurrected Lord, and who have been commissioned by him to carry his message to the ends of the earth, now sent back to wait patiently in Jerusalem for God to pour out his Spirit. Is there anything in the way they waited that might be instructive to those of us who long for greater apprehension of the Spirit’s power, greater fullness in our own experience of the life of God at work within us?

Most striking to me as I read this familiar text from Acts is the unity that marked these disciples, who had been bickering with each other all the way up to Jerusalem over which one of them would be the greatest, and who had turned tail and abandoned Jesus the moment he was arrested. Now, they are forged together in a band of brothers and sisters who worship and wait “in one accord,” committed to biblical “first things.” Note five of these essential commitments that set the stage for the coming of the Spirit in power.

Body

1. They were united in their commitment to Jesus Christ (1:12f).

There is no half-hearted obedience here. Jesus has told them to return to Jerusalem and wait, and that is exactly what they do. Jerusalem is not their home; most are Galileans. To remain in Jerusalem will be inconvenient and dangerous. But they immediately return in obedience to Jesus' words. Here is the first, and perhaps the chief, reason that so many of us fail ever to know the power and joy of the Holy Spirit at work through our lives: we simply have not established a pattern of obedience to Jesus Christ. We call him Lord, but seldom bow the knee to him when what we desire is in conflict with what he calls us to be and to do.

How often have you and I missed the great blessing in store for us if only we had been with God's people when the fire fell? God comes in power to his people at those appointed times and places, especially extraordinary times of prayer. But how few are ever present when the fire of God falls, because we are too busy doing other things, chasing other dreams.

2. They were united in their commitment to one another (1:12f).

They are not merely individually obedient, each seeking his or her own place to wait alone for the Spirit to be poured out. They are committed to one another and so they seek the face of God together. Certainly we need times of solitude with the Lord, as did Jesus when he arose early in the morning, while it was still dark, and went out to pray, or when he spent the night alone in prayer. But such times must be in counterpoint to time spent in community with other believers, seeking the face of God, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises, and doing what we can to prepare the way of the Lord.

Where have you built this kind of intentional community into your life? Do you have a Christian soul-friend, or a small group of soul-friends, who know your heart and are walking with you through life?

3. They were united in their commitment to prayer (1:14).

Too often our prayer meetings consist of nearly everything but prayer. However, they devoted themselves to prayer, just as – following the outpouring of the Spirit – they will once again devote themselves to the daily pattern of prayer (Acts 2:42f).

If obedience is the supreme behavioral mark of discipleship, then united prayer is its supreme relational mark. Do you desire to spend time together with others in conversation with the Lord?

4. They were united in their commitment to Scripture (1:16).

They have obviously been searching the Scriptures together to understand the promise for which they are waiting, and to understand God's purposes for them. These disciples, some of whom will become authors of New Testament Scripture, spend their time immersed in the Scriptures. So, Peter stands up in the midst of them and begins to explain from Scripture what has happened to them and what they should be doing while they await the coming of the Spirit. So also should we be interpreting the times and making our plans based upon God's Word.

5. They were united in their commitment to the mission (1:21).

They realize that when the Spirit comes, their mission will begin in earnest, and they want to be ready, with leadership in place. So, they establish what should always be the basic requirement of Christian leadership: namely, that one who leads should have walked a long time with Jesus, should know him well and be able to tell others of his life, death and victory. They realize that, in the end, the choice is not theirs, but the Lord's, so they cast lots, asking God to give them the one of his own choosing. Once the Holy Spirit is given at Pentecost, we never again read in the Scriptures of casting lots, because we now have the very wisdom of God dwelling within us and leading us.

Conclusion

Soon, the fire will fall, and these disciples will never be the same. Soon, the wind of God will fill them, and they will sail forth to call those from every tribe and language and nation to new life in Christ. *That same commission has been passed down through the ages to us, with the same warning that we will never be able to fulfill the task entrusted to us or know the joy offered to us unless and until we are filled with God's Spirit.*

The means are the same today as they were then: God waits for us to be united in our commitment to Christ and to one another, united in our commitment to prayer and Scripture, and united in our commitment to the mission he has entrusted to us. Though the world does not realize it, the world is waiting for the church: all who long for peace and joy and love, all who long for meaning and significance, for beauty and truth, are actually longing for us finally to be the community Christ wants to make us through the gift of his Spirit. The world waits, and the Lord waits for us to unite together in the mission that that he has willed to accomplish only through us.