

Ascension Sunday

I. Introduction.

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." You will be my witnesses in Knoxville, you will be my witnesses in Bolivia, and you will be my witnesses where ever I take you in my name. Today, we are witnessing the power of The Holy Spirit to move among us at Ascension and inspire us to take new steps of faith. We will baptize five new Christians, and we will commission 22 missionaries leaving today for Bolivia. This morning, I want to talk about the critical importance of living in the present moment of our faith and seeing clearly the blessings of God which are right in front of us. It's so easy for us to miss the way that God is working among us. One of my challenges when I go on a journey is not to become too focused on the number of miles that I hope to complete that day, on my destination rather rather than the journey itself. Sometimes I move along at a rapid, roadrunner pace and miss beautiful scenery by the side of the road. I'm grateful to my wife who will say to me, "Slow down,Howard there's something really beautiful off to your right. Let's stop at the next pull off and look... let's take it in." We are blessed.

II. Ascension, let's pull off the road for a moment and not worry about how long its going to take to get where we want to go today. Let's just stop, look and listen to what is happening here this morning. One of the things that some churches are concerned about right now is their appeal to young people, young adults and young families. We are grateful for the young people God is sending us. Two of the five people being baptized today are adolescents who have decided themselves to take this public step to follow Jesus Christ. One is a young girl who has carefully considered what it means to be baptized and two are young children of families who are committing to bring their children up in the faith.

Let's also consider the mission trip that is beginning today. When Father Brett and I began to dream about this trip, we had no idea of how viable it would be. Would there be enough interest for folks to go? And, if there were enough missionaries, would

there be enough funding to support the trip? God took care of all these concerns. Twenty-two of you stepped forward to be part of this team, although I would have to say that Haven crawled forward rather than stepped. Others, many others, started to fund raise and the rest is history. You all will leave today with your suitcases filled with gifts from Ascension and a willingness to meet a whole new part of The Body of Christ. We are blessed.

- III. Why does all this happen? It happens because this is how it always happens when Christians are willing to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and become empowered to do Christ's work in the world. That's exactly what Christ told his followers as he prepared them for his Ascension to the Father. I am going to leave you, but I m not going to leave you alone. In fact, you are going to be far more confident and alive in your faith after I'm gone then you would be if I had stayed. How could that be? Because I believe if Christ had stayed with them, they would always have been tempted to rely upon him for the miracles and the explanations. They would never know fully what it could be like to respond to the movement of the Spirit within them and choose to become empowered disciples. You see, our empowerment comes from stepping forward in faith, listening to what God is asking us to do, doing that very thing and then trusting that God will give us the resources to succeed. That is what has happened with this mission trip. That is what is beginning to happen under Father Rob's leadership in the area of The Great Commission. God is filling this place with life and light. This is what Jesus has told us...if we follow his lead and commit to grow in faith and reach out to others, God will send wonderful Christian brothers and sisters to walk with us. We are and will continue to be blessed.
- IV. The key idea here is empowerment. Christianity has never been meant to be a spectator experience. Christ has tried to make that very clear to those who have followed him. We are called to action; we are called to take risks over and over again in the name of Christ; we are called to minister to a broken world; and, we are called to demonstrate that Christ can and does create new things when our own lives are broken and shattered. Communicating Christ is not done without effort and commitment, and it cannot be done alone. The stakes are very high, but the actual tasks are quite straightforward. When we live into our new lives, we share ourselves with others..not only when it is convenient but whenever we can. We look for ways to spread the light of Christ. And we tell others about that light. For example, if our schedule permits, we take the step of volunteering in Vacation Bible School because we realize that the experiences that our children have here might well influence their spiritual

lives for years to come. When we are empowered by the Spirit, we give of ourselves generously and sacrificially. We give to God's work even if it means we cut down on how much we eat out or when we buy our next new car. We are empowered by Christ through the Holy Spirit to be a new people.

V. Conclusion.

Last Friday evening, we hosted The African Children's Choir for a concert here at Ascension. The children sang and danced and shared themselves with us. They were wonderful! Of all the songs that the choir sang Friday evening my favorite was entitled "You Are The Shepherd". In this song, a young girl sang the lead part in which she affirmed that God knew her in every way; God knew her before she was born; God knows her by name and God knows her voice. Not only does God know her, but God has chosen her and God is walking through all the rough patches of her life with her. I was deeply moved by this song and personally reminded of how faithfully God is present with us. I would like to share this song with you now. I hope it blesses you as it has blessed me. (Play song "You Are The Shepherd")

I also had the privilege of joining in a time of worship with the choir before the concert began. They sang "Alleluia" and many other Christian worship songs, prayed together and asked me to bless them. Before they went upstairs, their adult worship leader said to the children, "Just remember that everything you do tonight is for Jesus Christ" Gently he continued, "Do your very best and know that Christ is with you. God be with you tonight and bless all those who have come to hear us". The children knew exactly what he meant, and they shook their heads in affirmation. It brought tears to my eyes. Then during the concert, the young man who had served as worship leader shared his story. He'd never known his parents; his sister had carried him on her back until it became too hard and then she had abandoned him. The African Children's Choir had taken him in and cared for him...literally saving his life. Many of the children have similar stories. I want us to hear this...many of those children have been salvaged because of the Christian faith of those who have been led by the Holy Spirit to make a difference. In turn, the children in the choir ministered to us. This is what the Holy Spirit does-works through us to minister and care for one another. It is a reciprocal and mutually re-inforcing process.

This morning I would like to echo the words of my Christian brother from Africa. As you prepare for baptism, as you prepare to go to Boliva, as you worship perhaps dealing with some special challenge or trying to make an important decision in your life,

ponder what we have heard: “Just remember that everything you do today you do for Jesus Christ. Children of our Father do your very best and know that Christ is with you. God bless you in the moment of baptism; God bless you as you travel to a far away country. God bless you wherever God takes you to today and God bless those who will come into contact with you. Please remember my brothers and sisters that Jesus has known you since before you were born; that he knows you by name, he knows your voice and that he has chosen you to be his. Remember that Jesus Christ is your shepherd, that he will never leave you and that he loves you very, very much.

Amen.