

“Coming and Going”

New Testament Lesson: Acts 1:6-14

**First Presbyterian Church
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The Session – which is our church council – met via Zoom on Tuesday with members of our Tuxis Confirmation Class. We have six young people who have completed the class and are ready to join the church. As I listened to those meeting with Session give their Faith Statements, our scripture passage for today come to mind.

Specifically, the part where it says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses” The power that our young people displayed and gave voice to in their statements is none other than the power of God working through them. One of our young people put it this way, saying:

“The church is where our family and friends come from, where we pray and spread the word of God and give to those who need the hand of God. We give time to the church, and how we help the church is by spreading the Word of God. We are responsible for the future of the church.”

Another said: “I believe in the church and the community of Christ and wish to serve and spread the word of the Lord now and forever.” And still another made this declaration, saying, “I devote myself to the church and its teachings (and) fellowship.”

Now, I only used quotes about the church, so not all the confirmands are represented here. But I know they all share a similar faith in God, a love of Jesus, and a devotion to the church, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And in fact, it’s the same Holy Spirit that Jesus will come upon his disciples.

In our scripture reading, the disciples are all gathered together with the Risen Lord before he is taken up to heaven – to be our Lord and Savior forever, at the right hand of God – and they ask him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replies, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”

Interestingly, the Greek word used here for “power” is *dynamis*, where we get the English word “dynamite.” The type of power Jesus sends us through the Holy Spirit is robust and earth-shaking. It’s a power that can topple earthly kingdoms and clear a path for God’s kingdom. That’s what Jesus is up to, both in his coming and in his going – he’s clearing a path for God’s kingdom to arise. In coming to earth as the Son of God, Jesus spent his earthly ministry clearing a path for God’s kingdom to arise.

And now, in his ascension into heaven, the Risen Lord is empowering us to continue clearing a path for God's kingdom to arise, empowering even the youngest among us, especially the youngest among us. For as one confirmand said, "We are responsible for the future of the church." If we, as the church, are responsible for giving rise to God's kingdom, what type of kingdom are we talking about here?

What are the kingdoms of the world based upon? Anyone? Let's have a little sharing today. Use the Participant Panel to raise your hand. What are the kingdom's – and governments – of our world based upon?

Power and money, right?!? And yet, is that the type of kingdom Jesus has in mind? No. But it's the type of kingdom – the type of government – we have. It's been that way since before Jesus comes again as the Son of God and it will be that way until Jesus returns as our triumphant Lord and Savior. And in the meantime – in these in between times we find ourselves in – it's our job, our calling as Christians to bring about a different kind of kingdom, a kingdom not based on power and money, but on love and peace.

Jesus mentions specific place where we are to use his Spirit of love and peace to overcome the abuses of power and money. He mentions Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the Roman Empire. Jesus says to his disciples – us included – that "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," which at that time meant the entire Roman Empire.

So, the first place Jesus sends us in clearing the way for God's kingdom to arise is Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where Jesus had been crucified and where people were looking for his disciples, for good or ill.

Jerusalem represents our familiar places, where people are looking for Jesus, or at least looking to use for his Spirit of love and peace to prevail. We're talking about our homes, our families, our close friends, that's what Jerusalem is for us.

Anything you can do to bring the spirit of love and peace to your home and family and friends will go a long way in clearing the way for God's kingdom – God's blessing and grace and mercy. And all that is needed is a kind word, a helpful attitude, a forgiving heart, in your homes, and among your family and friends.

The next place Jesus sends his disciples – us included – is Judea and Samaria. Judea literally means "land of the Jews." It represents our traditions and our family histories, your set way of being. And Samaria represents people who are different from us. As it says in John 4 (vs. 9), "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans," a prejudice that Jesus came to overcome.

Jesus is sending us into those places in our lives where contention and differences arise, and calling us to use his Spirit of love and peace to tear down those contentious differences and build up God's kingdom.

And then ultimately, Jesus sends us to the ends of the earth, which in his time, was represented by the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire represents power and money. Where are the Roman Empires in our lives – those places of complacency and complicity when it comes to the abuse of power and money? I mean, we all live in a society – a world – where power and money are too often used to hurt and control people. Clearly not the type of society – the type of kingdom – that God seeks to build up.

We all have at our disposal a certain amount of power and money, even if it's the currency of trading favors, what Jesus would call giving the shirt off your back. So even though we're not in charge of the system, we can make a difference.

For instance, children and youth have power and influence over their younger brothers and sisters. Bosses are over their employees, and parents over their children. Also, the wealthy, they too often Lord their power and money over the poor. Sadly, it's the ways things are in this fallen world of ours.

But it's not the way things will be! And it's not the way we are called to be. We are called to act differently compared to the world. We see this where Jesus had been taken up into heaven and two angels appear and direct his disciples to look at things differently -differently than how things are in this world of ours.

"Men of Galilee," they say, "why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, and he will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." In other words, Jesus, was taken up in a cloud right before their eyes, will return through the clouds right before our eyes. Those things that cloud our vision in this world will dissipate and disappear – things like anger and prejudice, neglect and injustice, greed and violence, laziness and resignation, – all of this will dissipate and disappear the more we turn our gaze toward Jesus, and what he taught us.

And as the angels said, Jesus is not in some far-off place like heaven, but rather we are to look for him right here on earth. Wherever we extend and lift up the Spirit of love and acceptance, of care and justice, generosity and kindness, inner strength and imagination there is Jesus, bringing into view even now God's glorious kingdom, through us, his faithful disciples.

As Christians, we are called to give witness to the reign of Christ, the kingdom of God, by having the presence of mind and the faithfulness of heart to let our words and actions and attitudes be guided by his Holy Spirit of love and peace.

So, as we go through the week ahead – and all our days – let us be looking for those opportunities to part the clouds of our fallen world with our acts of love and peace, so that others might glimpse the kingdom of God coming into view, coming into reality, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.