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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/8/2013, Ascension Eve
Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53
The Power of the Holy Spirit

PRAYER OF THE DAY

☐ Almighty God, your only Son was taken up into heaven and in power intercedes for us. May we also come into your presence and live forever in your glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON.....Acts 1:1-11, RSV

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. ⁴And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me, ⁵for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” ⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” ⁹And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

HOLY GOSPEL..... Luke 24:44-53, RSV

⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And behold, I send the

promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.”⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven.⁵² And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy,⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God.

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When Jesus was about to ascend into heaven, he comforted his disciples by speaking of power soon to come to them. He said that the disciples would receive newfound strength. Here then is my text. It is from Acts Chapter 1:

⁸But you shall receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you... (Acts 1:8, RSV)

This promise of power is repeated in our Gospel Lesson, from Luke 24:

⁴⁹And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with *power* from on high.” (Luke 24:49, RSV)

This Ascension promise of power is in full accord with an earlier promise of Jesus—an extraordinary promise of wonders to come. In his farewell discourse with his disciples, Jesus speaks of great works ahead for his disciples *because* he goes to the Father:

¹²Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and *greater works* than these will he do, because I go to the Father. (John 14:12, RSV)

In all three texts, we find the idea that there is an advantage for the disciples in Jesus going away. It is the advantage of power. It is the advantage of newfound strength. It is an advantage that comes from the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Church.

NOT JUST FOR THE YOUNG AND STRONG

Notice that this promise is not restricted to the young and strong. No Christian need think that the promise of power is for others, but not for oneself. Again, I bring to mind Sr. Elinor Brunngräber, of blessed memory. I have mentioned this conversation before, but I so cherish the conversation that I am glad to mention it again. When Sr. Elinor was in the hospital near the end

of her life, I admitted to her that I hesitated to urge some traditional pastoral advice on her. The traditional counsel was that she should use some of her time in the sickbed to pray for others. Here she was, sick and weak in bed. The Lord was laying her to rest. It seemed too much to ask her to spend some of her remaining strength on prayer for others.

But Sr. Elinor strongly encouraged me to stick with the traditional pastoral counsel. She said I should indeed urge her to pray for others. She said that she believed that there is something especially pleasing to the Lord about the prayers of someone who knows what sickness is and who can sympathize with others who are sick. So, though she was as weak as a kitten and her life was ebbing, she meant to go on praying for others. For me, this is a living example of the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has ascended, but has not abandoned us. Rather, he sends the power of the Holy Spirit to those who believe in him.

CONSIDER THE DISCIPLES

Consider the disciples, for example. As we have seen, Jesus promised them that they would do even greater deeds than his own. Did they? Yes, they did. In a double sense they did. In one of the disciples, the greater deeds of those who believe in Jesus were especially concentrated. I mean Saint Peter. Why, even the overcoming of death was not too much for that man. Earlier in this Easter Season, we saw how Peter was able to raise Tabitha back to life just as easily as Jesus had raised the twelve-year old girl back to life:

³⁹Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them. ⁴⁰But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive. ⁴²And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord. (Acts 9:39-42, KJV)

Peter's raising up of Tabitha here is so very much akin to the miracle earlier performed by Jesus.

³⁹And when he was come in, he saith unto them, Why make ye this ado, and weep? the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth.

⁴⁰And they laughed him to scorn. But when he had put

them all out, he taketh the father and the mother of the damsel, and them that were with him, and entereth in where the damsel was lying. ⁴¹And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise. ⁴²And straightway the damsel arose, and walked; for she was of the age of twelve years. And they were astonished with a great astonishment. ⁴³And he charged them straitly that no man should know it; and commanded that something should be given her to eat. (Mark 5:39-43, KJV)

Likewise, as Jesus healed many in his earthly ministry, so did Peter following the Ascension of our Lord. Why, even the shadow of Peter seems to have been enough to have healed folks:

¹⁴And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.) ¹⁵Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. ¹⁶There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one. (Acts 5:14, KJV)

So, Peter illustrates the truth of our Lord's promise that they should do great deeds because he – Jesus – goes away to the Father.

But beyond that, think of the accomplishments of the church as a whole. During his own lifetime, Jesus accumulated devoted followers, but, alas, he did not gather *many* of them. There were the twelve disciples, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, the centurion at the foot of the cross, Mary his mother, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and a few other women. Let's say that Jesus had maybe three hundred people who believe in him.

But, three hundred is a small number compared to the converts Peter gathered from just his first sermon. By the time Peter was done with that Pentecost sermon, three *thousand* people believed in Jesus:

⁴¹Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:41, KJV)

And beyond that, think of the millions upon millions of people in this world who have been won for Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit working in his witnesses. Chrysostom is especially eloquent in his admiration of the newfound power of the disciples:

Here again you will see the Apostles themselves, speeding their way as on wings over land and sea; and those same men, once so timorous and void of understanding, on the sudden become quite other than they were; men despising wealth ...nor any of the old hankering after the preeminence, but all virtue brought in them... [with the result that] the whole world should have eagerly come to be taken in the nets of twelve poor and illiterate men. For not by wealth of money, not by wisdom of words, not by any thing else of this kind, did the fishermen prevail; so that objectors must even against their will acknowledge that there was in these men a Divine *power*, for no human strength could ever possibly effect such great results.
(Chrysostom, Homily on Acts 1)

It is indeed a wonder of the Holy Spirit, that the Church as a whole has received power from on high to convert multitudes to Christ.

But let us speak not just of the Church as a whole, but also of you and me, individual Christians that we are. We too should take to heart the promise of Jesus that his Ascension, which we salute this evening, carries with it new power in our lives.

NOT ORDINARY POWER

Let's begin with this observation: Many of us are acquainted with power. In fact, some of us are like the centurion Jesus praised:

⁸The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. ⁹For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it. ¹⁰When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. (Matthew 8:8-10, KJV)

Power and authority have been entrusted to us. Sometimes, we ourselves marvel at the authority granted to us. I remember a really nice fund raiser for the National Symphony Orchestra, in which a drawing was made of all those who had contributed to the campaign, with the top prize being the chance to conduct the Orchestra in a rehearsal. I heard an interview with the winner in which he said it was the most awesome thing he had ever done—the way with a simple movement of his baton he could change the pace of the music and with his hand or a look he could cause world class musicians to play louder or softer. Well, that’s how it is in this world. Some people are conductors. They really are—not just for one rehearsal, but for a career. They conduct orchestras, they conduct armies and navies, they conduct Fortune 500 companies. People move at their word. They are entrusted with power.

But the kind of power I am talking about now is not the kind of power that comes from this world and its arrangements, nor the power that resides in us, in our bodies or in our minds, but rather power that comes “from on high.” Not all of us can be the conductor of the New York Philharmonic. Not all of us can be as strong as Samson. But each of us can have power in this world nonetheless. It is power that Jesus sends our way through the Holy Spirit.

A SWEET CHRISTIAN SPIRIT

I am speaking of the kind of power that comes from a sweet Christian spirit. There are some people in this world who are so big and strong that you could hardly knock them over with a tank. And yet if their old faithful grandmother says a word to them, they jump, because they honor grandmother so much. The good news of Ascension is that each of us has the right to say, “I want to be that kind of person—a person with some godly influence in this world—and I think I can do it.”

Indeed, we can do it! The highest form of honor that we can give our resurrected Jesus is to take him at word in this matter of the power of the Holy Spirit. He has ascended and sent power to his church in return. Let us claim for ourselves some of that power.

Here are a few dimensions to this power. First, it comes from the Holy Spirit, which means that it comes from the Church. For the Holy Spirit uses holy means to make us holy, and the chief of these means is the Church. So, a first point: If we would be stronger in spirit, let us turn with even more earnestness to the Church and to the means of grace. Let us meditate on Christ, and seek to live in his image.

Second, the power of the Holy Spirit is the power of love, for that is what the Holy Spirit is: It is the love that pulls this old world of ours along toward the Kingdom of God. When Jesus promises to send the power of the Holy Spirit upon the Church and so upon each Christian, we should take him at his

world and consider ourselves divinely authorized and capable of practicing love in this world that will put the world in mind of Jesus himself.

And third, the point of this power is the neighbor, that we should be useful in drawing others to Christ.

⁸But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria *and to the end of the earth.*”

We do not receive power from on high simply that we might endure tough times, but even more that we should have some influence on others, so that we help draw them toward the One we love, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.