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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23
An Old Man's Dream

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

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “An Old Man’s Dream.” This title is based on our First Lesson — the quote from the prophet Joel. Joel says this about those good days when the Lord would pour out his Spirit upon *everyone*:

¹⁷In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and *your old men shall dream dreams*. (Acts 2:17, RSV)

The church believes that those blessed days have come. That is the drama and majesty of Pentecost: that the Holy Spirit came swooping down from heaven and really stirred things up on earth. Joel says that in these blessed days, old men shall dream dreams. So, here I am a’dreaming. I hope you are too. But these old men shall not be dreaming the dreams simply of their own imaginations. Rather, they shall be dreaming dreams under the influence of the Spirit of God. To use a phrase I want to lift up in this sermon, they shall be moved by “power from on high.”

Dreaming big dreams

As wonderful as our First Lesson is, I think it would have been even better if it had pressed on to the end of the story. I mean, I love our appointed reading with its mention of all those nationalities and tongues — Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, and so on — and I love its picture of the rushing wind and the divided tongues of fire and so on. Still, it seems to me that our reading missed its summit. It fell short of its great conclusion. Let me read that for you:

Then 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)

Three thousand souls, saved from sin and death! Saved from false gods and false notions, saved from straying around like sheep without a shepherd, because now they have found their true Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. What a marvelous day that was!

Three thousand people! Have we forgotten how to expect great things from the Lord? Have we so toned down our hopes and prayers that we reckon that they are modest enough that even a weak god can fulfill them? But we do not have a weak god. We have a great God! We have a God who is the Maker of heaven and earth. He sustains everything even this very moment. Why, he can work all day and all night and never be weary. His strength and his desire to help us are inexhaustible.

Next Sunday, Trinity Sunday, God willing, I will be preaching on our Lord's Great Commission. Our job is set for us by dominical command: we are to win souls to Christ and teach them the faith of the Church. We must never forsake that mission, nor let its grip on our souls become relaxed. In that sermon I mean to lay out my vision for a Sunday School with two hundred children, together with their families. I am thinking of a much larger church that we are now. I hope people do not dismiss my vision. I don't want us to dream small dreams. I want us to get to work on some large ones.

Power from on high

Well, what Saint Peter did in his sermon he did in the power of the Lord. I heard a story once about Bishop William Lazareth that after he had delivered one of his mighty lectures and the audience broke out in wild applause, Bishop Lazarus hurried over to his host and said, "What? What did I say?" He had not been talking from a manuscript but had simply spoken from the heart. He had been moved along by his subject. Likewise, I bet that if we could ask Peter how he won three thousand souls in one day, he would be at a loss for words to explain it. I bet he would have said, "*I did not do it. I could not do it. I am simply a fisherman from Galilee. I am not learned. I am not eloquent. I did not win these people, I say, but rather the Holy Spirit won them.*"

Another way to put the point is that Peter was filled with "power from on high." That is a phrase that Jesus had used just before his Ascension. He had gathered with his disciples. He had shown them his hands and his feet. He had invited them to handle him. He asked them whether they had any food. They gave him piece of broiled fish and he ate before them. He interpreted the scriptures for them. And then, just before he ascended to heaven, he told them this:

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 24:46-49, RSV)

Pentecost Sunday, which we celebrate today, is the fulfillment of this promise of power from on high. On that first Pentecost Sunday, Saint Peter and the other disciples were so filled with the Holy Spirit that their joyous witness to Jesus transcended language barriers and won many-a heart to Jesus.

That is my topic for today: power from on high. The disciples had it on Pentecost Sunday, to the blessing of many people. It is available to you and me

too, for it is the great gift of Baptism. When we turned to the Lord and were baptized, the Holy Spirit was poured upon us, which means that the power of the Holy Spirit belongs to us too. I do think that you and I are free to do some good things that we might not have imagined ourselves capable of. What I want to suggest to you is that you are stronger than you might think – that you have unsuspected power waiting to be employed for the good of Christ’s church and for the good of our world.

Power in ordinary life

Let’s begin to talk about “power from on high” by talking about power in ordinary life. Here I’ll share with you what I guess was a quiet and silly hope I had about my heart surgery last summer. I never told anyone, but I had a secret hope that following my surgery I would suddenly feel more powerful. I felt fine before the surgery, and I feel fine now. But I had somehow hoped that I would feel super-fine after my surgery. I mean, I thought to myself, well if *before* surgery I had a life-long “unfavorable configuration of heart vessels,” well, once that was fixed, maybe I would feel better than ever.

I was thinking along the lines of Samson, you know! I was thinking of the way his hair had grown long again and strength had return to him, even though he had been blinded and humiliated and forced to grind the meal by tugging that heavy millstone round and round. And then how his enemies had placed him between the two pillars of the building in order to mock him and jest at him, and instead, he had grabbed hold of those two pillars and pulled the whole structure down on himself and them all. Listen to the Bible’s description of that final deed:

³⁰And Samson [called unto the Lord and] said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life. (Judges 16:30, KJV)

Yes! That’s what I’m talking about! I had secretly hoped that after my surgery I would have more power to advance the cause of the church than I had ever had before.

And strangely enough, that *might* be so. I do not mean physical power, but rather power from on high, the power of the Holy Spirit. As for physical power, I am the same as I was before. I asked my surgeon about it. I said to him, “Look, I feel like the same old guy I always was.” And he said, “That’s because your surgery does not make your heart function any better. It simply eliminates a vulnerability in the circulation of your blood.” And I thought to myself, “Oh, is that all? Well, that’s okay.”

And it *is* okay. I feel I have plenty of physical strength for my job. What interests me more is that maybe I have more *spiritual* strength for my job. And maybe you have more spiritual strength too that you realize.

The shortness and uncertainty of life

Part of what might be an increase of spiritual strength for me is that my surgery has made me more mindful of the shortness and uncertainty of life. More than ever I think to myself, “Time’s a wastin’! We need to make some progress.” For example, earlier in this sermon I simply blurted out to you my ambition for a Sunday School of two hundred children here at Immanuel, along with their families. Well, I’ve *always* wanted that. I bet you have wanted it too. We love our Sunday School and our Children’s Choir and our teachers and our children, every one! When our Children’s Choir sang “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” a few Sundays ago, I was thrilled. I thought it was the best thing on earth that day! I was awfully proud of our little congregation and I believed that Almighty God was grateful for our ministry that day. So, we all want our Sunday School to flourish.

Again, I have always wanted a Sunday School of two hundred children, but before my surgery, I was quiet and patient about it. It was easy for me to say, “*Someday* we will do this. Year-by-year we are getting into better position to do this. *Someday* we will accomplish this.” Now, I think to myself, “Tomorrow is promised to no one. Jesus commands us to win people to him and teach them the faith of the church. He doesn’t say, “Do this tomorrow or next year.” He calls us to it today and continually. Maybe you would agree that it could amount to an increase of spiritual strength simply to understand that *now* is the time to be about the Lord’s business. This power from on high comes simply from taking more seriously the apostolic words:

...we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, “At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.” Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:1-2, RSV)

The Spirit

But this is our celebration of Pentecost, and so let me try again to explain “power from on high” — this time in terms of the Holy Spirit.

What many-a good father or mother could want for his children is that they somehow grow up in his spirit. To the degree that he is a good man, that he has learned to cherish his neighbors, to practice high integrity, and to humbly walk in faith, he might want that for his children too. They have their own lives to live, and their own context of duties and temptations, but he hopes that somehow they will carry themselves in life with something of his spirit.

So we can think of the Holy Spirit. It would sure be nice, I think, if you and I could become so intoxicated by the story of Jesus that we somehow come to resemble him in life. We have our own life to live and our world in which to live it — a world very different from that of ancient Palestine — and yet Pentecost salutes the possibility that Jesus can so live *in us* that this world has a chance to learn something about Jesus simply by watching us.

Timothy Cardinal Dolan

This past Tuesday evening, Carol and I went to a lecture by Timothy Cardinal Dolan at Concordia College Bronxville in which our charismatic local cardinal talked about the three most recent popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. His lecture was entitled “Soul-Head-Heart; The Three Popes.” For me, the most moving part of the lecture was his discussion of Pope John Paul II. Cardinal Dolan pointed to him as a renewer of the soul of the Church, indeed of the world. Especially I was moved by the description of Pope John Paul II at prayer. Cardinal Dolan said that he and others would arrive at a chapel ready for Mass at 7 a.m. But the Pope regularly arrived an hour earlier for prayer. People loved simply to be near him as he silently prayed. He would smile, he would weep, he would groan, he would smile again. You could picture that for him he had a map of the world before his imagination and he had the Bible in his mind and he had Jesus in his heart. And somehow, people looking on were strengthened just to see him lost in prayer. When 7 a.m. came, a priest would have to tell him that it was time for the Mass to begin. As he became old and frail, there was still “power from on high” in him because of his devotion to Christ.

You and I can become more devoted to Christ too. We can think about him more earnestly, ponder the stories of the Bible more deeply, practice looking at our world and our daily life more and more through the lens of our faith. In that way, we will acquire more of the Spirit of Jesus and will gain some power from on high.

Christ’s Promise

One of the most precious promises of the Gospels can be found in Saint Luke Chapter 11. It is a promise concerning the Holy Spirit. Jesus says this:

¹³“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the *Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13, RSV)

This is the marvel of Pentecost Sunday. This is why we celebrate this high festival. On this day we are saluting a spiritual possibility for us. We are saluting the possibility the heavenly Father will give the *Holy Spirit* to you, to me. Let us indeed ask for it. On Pentecost Sunday we salute the possibility that you and I can become better than we already are — indeed, that if we draw closer to Jesus, he

will draw closer to us, until at last we grow more and more to resemble him to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.