



**Sunday, July 9, 2023**

**Speaker:** John VanderWindt

**Scripture:** Acts 1:4-11

**Sermon Title:** We are “the Church” – Empowered Witnesses

We have a great God, don't we? Praise the Lord. Let's try that again. Praise the Lord. [Congregation says, "Hallelujah!"] There we go. We gather today to praise our God, to celebrate what God has done, not only during the time that He was here, as we learned last week, where the book of Acts looks at what Jesus began to do and teach, but we celebrate what God continues to do and teach. So today we are again going back to Acts 1. We are looking at a number of verses there. We're going to actually focus on **Acts 1:4-11** but I'm going to read starting from verse one because the flow just works better. So I invite you to turn with me to Acts 1. We will read the first 11 verses.

**1** In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach **2** until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **3** After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. **4** On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. **5** For John baptized with[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with[b] the Holy Spirit.”

**6** Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” **7** He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” **9** After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

**10** They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. **11** “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You, Lord, that Your Word is living and active and speaks to us today as well as it did 2,000 years ago. Lord, we pray that You will open our ears and our hearts and that You will mold us to fit Your will. That we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, may live lives which are pleasing to You. And Lord, that we may be good witnesses for You. Lord, may the words spoken today be Your words, and may anything that's not of you, Lord, not be said. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Acts chapter one. We're looking at being the church and who we are as the church. We read last week that Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples talking about the Kingdom of God. And when you read this, Jesus, the God of the universe, spent 40 days with his disciples talking about the Kingdom of God. You may go back to the time of Moses where Moses spent 40 days before he led the Israelites out, speaking and in the presence of God, learning about God's plan. I sometimes wonder to myself, "What if I spent 40 days with just God? How would that change me? How would I have a better understanding of what God's will was for my life?" 40 days.

It says that he told him about things. Then in verse four, it says, "4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem... "

Remember, these are Galileans. They come from the northern part of Israel and Jerusalem is in the southern part of Israel. They didn't want to go to Jerusalem in the first place. I'm sure they were happy to get out of there. And Jesus says to them, "Do not leave... " Then it says, "... but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about."

This is almost identical to what Luke wrote in **Luke 24:49**. He says, **49** "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

So Jesus told him twice, "Wait until the promise from my father comes." Now, the disciples understood the concept of promise and promises from God. They understood that God keeps His promises but they also understood that God has His own timeline. The prophets in the Old Testament promised the coming of the Messiah. And yet, there were hundreds of years between the time God promised the coming of the Messiah until the Messiah came.

So I'm sure that the disciples were grateful when later on, Jesus said, "Stay here for a few days." I don't know about you, but I usually think few is like three, four or five. They waited ten. I think by day seven, you'd be going, "Okay, I know this is going to happen but, you know, any day now would be good." Right? But Jesus says, "Wait."

Sometimes for us, we also need to wait. To wait on the Lord for the promise that He has given. What does it mean to wait as a church? What does it mean to wait for what God is going to do through us? What does it mean to wait for the Holy Spirit to direct us into what we are to do? We are told to stay in step with the Spirit.

Not to go ahead and say, "Hey, Lord, here's what we're doing. Will you please bless this?" But to say, "Okay, Lord, what are you blessing? How may we join you in that blessing?" So He says, "Don't leave. But wait. Wait for the promise that the Father will give." That comes back to trust, doesn't it? Do we trust God when He says He will do this? Do we believe that He will do this as He said He would?

Then he goes on and he says in **Acts 1:5**, "**5** For John baptized with[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

This is not a new concept. As the disciples went through this, they would know this aspect of being baptized by the Holy Spirit for throughout the Old Testament, it talks about being baptized by the Holy Spirit. In fact, in a couple of weeks when we get into **Acts 2:17**, quoted by Joel, it says, **17** "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."

In **Isaiah 44:3**, it says, "**3** For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants."

In **Ezekiel 36 and 37**, there is a story of God saying that the Spirit is going to come and give life again to the Israelites. So they understood the concept of life coming from the Spirit and they knew that. But yet they came to this concept with their own thoughts of, "Here is what is going to happen." Because you'll notice in **Acts 1:6**, they say, "**6** Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

We've heard this question before. We know their concept is, "We had in our minds, "This is what God is going to do. We have in our minds that God is going to restore the kingdom of Israel just like he did in the Old Testament. The Old Testament talks about a descendant of David being on the throne forever so therefore, it makes sense that the Kingdom will restore to Israel, a descendant of David will be on the throne, we'll have the nation of Israel and it'll be great again."

Even after being with Jesus for three years, they did not get that the kingdom of God was different than their minds had made it up to be. Do we do that as well? Do we sometimes put in our minds, "Here's what we think it's going to be." And then find scripture to back it up?

Matthew Henry and his commentary in this says, "We often expound scripture by our schemes, whereas we ought to form our schemes by scripture, and not the other way around." Here Jesus is again saying to them in **Acts 1:7**, "**7** He said to them: "It is not for you to know... " It is not for you to know when this will happen.

As a child, when I was 15 or 16 - and I knew everything at that time - [congregation laughs] there would be times when my mom or dad would say to me, "You don't need to worry about that right now." I'd be like, "Hold on. I'm old enough to know. You can tell me. I can handle it." It's like, "No, just trust us. You don't need to worry about it. It's taken care of."

Jesus, in many ways, is doing that to the disciples. He's basically saying, "Do you trust God? If so, that means that there are going to be things that God is going to do according to His will that you do not need to know exactly how it's going to happen." This is that aspect of faith where you go through life and you say, "Okay, God is going to take care of this and it's okay if I don't know how. I'm going to trust that He will."

But that's a hard thing to do, isn't it? Especially when we think, "Well, I want to be part of this. I want to help make this happen." But God says, "Wait. When it's time, it'll happen. But right now is not for you to know what time that is. Here's what you are to do." Then He goes on in **Acts 1:8**, "8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

But you will receive power. You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. These disciples understood what power meant from God. They've lived with Jesus, they've experienced the power of Jesus, and they understood what it meant to have that power with them all the time. They also understood that the power was not theirs to lord over other people. But that power came in submission to God. That power comes not by claiming it but by receiving it. That power comes by saying to the Holy Spirit, "I completely submit my life to You. When I do that, I receive power."

As we will see in a couple of weeks, when we read Acts 2 about the Holy Spirit coming down and empowering these people, when you say, "Yes, Lord, I will submit my life to you," God gives you the power to do what He has called you to do. Because it's not always easy. The Christian life is not always easy. There are challenges and difficulties and things that we might not fully understand. But God says, "I will give you power to endure it and to live it and to be a witness to me and for me everywhere you go."

Notice it says that you will be my witnesses. This is not a command. This is not a, "You shall go and be a witness." It is simply a declaration. You will be a witness. Whether you want to be or not, you are a witness. Now think about that for just a moment. Imagine if you went to work on Tuesday and you wore a placard over top of you. You know, those big signs that you wear, right? You wear a placard on top and it says, "I am a witness of Jesus Christ" all day long.

Would that change anything you did during that day?

How many people like the old western movies? In the old west, you've got your ranchers. And what did the ranchers do to their cattle? They branded them, right? Now, I don't have a branding tool but I've got my fire stoker.



If you put this in the fire and you leave it in the fire long enough, it gets red hot. And you put this on an animal and it brands it. That means that no matter where that animal goes, everybody who sees an animal knows whose it is. That animal is a witness to the owner. Now sometimes, that's a really good thing for the animal because it can be wandering around and someone will see it and they'll go, "Oh, this one's a little lost but I know who the owner is. I will bring the animal back to the rest of the herd." Sometimes though, it may be where you get other people who are like, "Oh, I know that rancher. I don't particularly care for that rancher so I'm gonna take one of his herd."

So even though the animal is branded and it knows it, there are times when there is danger for this animal. But everybody knows, as soon as they see the animal, who the animal belongs to. When you think about this as a person, if you are branded by the Holy Spirit, what does that mean? Does that mean that as you walk down the street, it should be evident that you are God's? As you do everything in life, is it evident that you are God's? In order to do that, we have to be different from the rest of the people.

Right throughout Scripture and the New Testament, it talks about this aspect of putting off of the old life and putting on the new life. Just like when you get branded, that part of the cow that got branded, that hair is dead and it ain't growing anymore. But there is life in that piece, in the sense that everybody knows who it belongs to.

In **Ephesians 4:20-24**, we read this, "**20** That, however, is not the way of life you learned **21** when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. **22** You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; **23** to be made new in the attitude of your minds; **24** and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

In Ephesians 6, we talk about putting on the armor of God. In **Colossians 3:5**, it says, "**5** Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature..." And then in **Colossians 3:9-10**, it says, "**9** ... since you have taken off your old self with its practices **10** and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

Do we live in such a way that people know? St. Francis of Assisi says this, "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching." There's another saying which you may have heard. It's been accredited to him. It says, "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words when necessary."

You are a witness. Now when we talk about witnesses in court, they are eyewitnesses. Right? They have seen the event. Here in Acts 1, it says, "Jesus says, 'You will be my witnesses.'" This is to the disciples. This is to those who are around him. These are the people who have been with Jesus. They have seen what Jesus has done. So they are to testify the truth about who Jesus is. So you are a witness just by your life. And then I guess we get to determine, "Am I being a good witness or am I not being a good witness?" But it is also to testify and to share the news of what God has done.

But we have to be clear about this. This is not an, "Okay, I need to act a certain way. This needs to become part of who we are. The way it becomes part of who we are is to hang out with the Holy Spirit.

Imagine this branding tool.



When it is put in the fire, it gets hot. Then this branding tool is able to do what it's supposed to do. But if this branding tool is outside of the fire for a while, and then you go to say, "Here it is." It won't do a thing. You can go through all the actions of trying to brand that cow but it ain't gonna do anything. Just like as we see in a couple of weeks, the Holy Spirit comes in fire. We too need to be in the fire. If we are going to be effective witnesses we need to keep our branding tool in the fire. Then we can be witnesses for God.

Then it says, "You will be my witnesses." And it starts in Jerusalem. As I said earlier, the disciples did not want to be in Jerusalem. Think about this for just a little bit. The disciples, before they came back to Jerusalem, said, "Lord, we don't want to go there because we know something bad's going to happen." They get there and think of the memories that they have over the last couple of months. The obvious one is Jesus being crucified. Yes, He was resurrected but let's not forget He was crucified. The crowds all hated Him. But let's think about some of the other memories too. Peter is thinking about denying him. The rest of the disciples all ran away in His time of need.

Here they are being told to wait in this place where all the pain has happened. And Jesus says, "Wait." Because Jesus also says, "I am going to restore the city of Israel."

**Jeremiah 3:17** says this, "**17** At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts."

God says, "I am going to begin my healing and my forgiveness in the city of your pain." That is where you are going to be the first witness. In that place of pain. In the place where you have fled, I am going to begin the healing of forgiveness there. As people see your healing, you will be my witness to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then He says, "In Judea and Samaria. Remember these are Galileans. They're from the north. People in Judea did not have a whole lot of respect for the Galileans. They kind of saw them as, "Half backward, hick town people who just really didn't have life together." And here Jesus is saying, "You're going to start there. Start in the place where I've put you and in the people who might not necessarily appreciate what you have to offer."

Then He includes Samaria. Samaria is this area of mixed race people. These are the people who, during the time of the Exodus, remained in that area and they married non Jewish people. So they were seen as the worst of all kinds. You can see that in the stories of Jesus where He interacts with the Samaritan woman and the parable of the Good Samaritan, how the religious Jews were like, "We ain't getting close to you." Jesus is saying, "In those places of ethnic and racial differences, you are called to be my witness. In those places of economic and social differences, you are called to be my witness because I came for all people."

Notice how He says, "You are going to be my witness." How do we do that? If we turn to **Matthew 28**. At the end, it says, "**18** Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

How do you make disciples? You be a witness. Jesus is talking to His disciples who have just spent three years with Him. When we talk about making disciples, it is this aspect of spending time with other people so that they may see who you are, and from that, they may understand who God is. So here, Jesus said, "You're going to be my witnesses in the place of your pain, in the place where I've called you, even if it's uncomfortable." In that place of reconciliation with everyone.

Then it says, "... to the ends of the world." Sometimes I think within the church, we often like to say we're going to do missions. Let's send somebody across the world and let's not worry about our neighborhood, or city, or our province, or country. Here Jesus says, "You need to begin at home and you work outwards." That's the way to churches too. The church is an expansive organization which begins in the place where it is located. That's where it needs to be its greatest witness. Then from there, it expands until it gets to the ends of the earth.

And at that point, Jesus is taken up into heaven. In Matthew 28, we read that He promises that He will be with us always. Here He promised to come into the Holy Spirit. So we know that even though physically He has left, His presence is still among us. We can be comforted in that.

Then there's this great scene. You can imagine. Just put yourself there for a moment. You're talking to Jesus and all of a sudden, Jesus starts going up and you start following Him. Then a cloud comes in and hides him. Now, I think for most of us, we would be doing the same thing. It's like, "Okay, when the cloud moves, will we still be able to see Him? How far can we watch?"

If you've ever seen the rockets as they leave on television, it's like, how far can we see them until you can no longer see that small dot and it disappears? So I think for us to say to the disciples, "You know what, guys, He told you He was leaving. He'll be back." I think I'd be standing and looking up too.

Then in **Acts 1:10-11**, it says, "... when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. **11** "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."



There's a couple of things in here which are showing God's glory again. It says that Jesus was hidden by a cloud. Think back in Scripture of the times that God uses the cloud. Think of Moses and the people of Israel. God gave direction through the cloud. When they built the tabernacle and when the temple was built, a cloud came and covered it. When Jesus met on the Mount of Transfiguration with Elijah and Moses and the disciples, a cloud came and covered Him. A cloud is often seen in Scripture as God's glory.

The Shekinah glory of God is often visualized in a cloud. And here as Jesus is ascending into heaven, we see God's glory. God is being praised by the glory of Jesus's work and His ascension into heaven.

That's one piece. But the other piece is this. When they say, "Guys, why are you looking up into the sky? Jesus just told you to do something," He said, "Go and be an eyewitness. Go and tell other people about what you've seen. Go and continue the work that He began to do and share it with everybody around you. Start in Jerusalem. And by the way you're gonna have to wait a little bit. God's got His timing and you need to wait for God's timing."

What He is saying to them is, "Be a witness." He is saying to them, "Live in such a way that people want to know what's going on." **1 Peter 3:15-16**, which are the verses for our first week says, "**15** But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, **16** keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

We are God's witnesses every day, all the time. But it's not in our own power. It's in the power of the Holy Spirit that He enables us to be as witnesses. And the more we surrender and spend time with Him, the more we reflect Him.

Think back to Moses spending 40 days with God. When he came back down the mountain, they asked him to put a veil over his face, because he glowed so brightly. Moses reflected the glory of God. And in that, he was God's witness. May we too reflect the glory of God in all that we do so that people around us will say, "Hey, can you veil it a little bit? It's a little bit much for me." To which you say, "Hey, that's great. Let me just hang out with you. If I need to cover my face for a little bit, that's okay. You'll get used to it. And pretty soon you'll want the same thing. Because I live with such a reason that people ask for the hope that's within me."

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You for the power that You've given us through Your Holy Spirit. Lord, You've called us to be witnesses. Lord, help us to make sure that it is a true experience of who we are in You and not just going through the motions. Lord, may we be authentic witnesses for you. Starting at home in that place of pain. It may be in a place where we don't want to be, maybe in a place where, Lord, you have placed us to work on reconciliation of some sort. Lord, we know that in your power, we can do that. Lord, we are thankful and grateful that You are with us throughout the ages. And then Lord, we can celebrate Your return. May we live in anticipation of your return and that we may totally reflect You and Your presence. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*