

“Power from on High”
Joel 2:28-29/Luke 24:44-49

The passage of Scripture we just read recalls a post-resurrection appearance by Jesus to his disciples. It is late on that first Easter. The day had begun with the startling word from several women that they had found his tomb empty and encountered two men who told them Jesus was alive. Peter had gone to look for himself, found the scene to be as described, but did not see Christ and thus returned to his friends. Just prior to our reading, the eleven receive news from two other men who had been walking on the road to Emmaus that they had seen Jesus, too, adding that he had become known to them in the breaking of bread. The group was discussing all of that amazing news when the risen Christ appeared. They were terrified, but he showed them the wounds from his body and asked for something to eat. It is then that our passage begins.

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you,” Jesus says, “that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” He recalls what the ancient scriptures had said about how he would suffer and be raised, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations. He then says, “You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

During the Sundays of Epiphany we are reflecting on power from a Christian perspective. We began last week by recalling the moment Jesus washed the feet of his disciples during their last meal together, demonstrating that power comes from humble service. Today, we ponder Jesus’ last words in Luke as he says those men will be “clothed with power from on high.”

The promise Jesus names is the Holy Spirit. He had told them previously that he would send the Spirit to them after he had returned to heaven, a gift also anticipated in our Old Testament lesson. “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh,” God had said through the prophet Joel “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” In his parting words on that first Easter, Jesus reveals the time for that blessing is near.

“Power from on high.” That phrase speaks of our source, too, revealing that such authority comes from beyond ourselves. It is a power not dependent on our strength, either, but arises from God. Thus, for a few minutes, let’s consider how such power works through us.

Fred Craddock, a renowned scholar of the 20th century, helpfully commented on that teaching of Jesus by writing “The three New Testament writers who speak most about the Holy Spirit are John, Paul, and Luke. For John, the Spirit is the continuation of Christ’s presence in the church, leading, reminding, teaching, comforting. For Paul, the Spirit creates in us the Christian life and equips us with gifts for ministry. For Luke, the Spirit empowers the church for its mission in the world. Of the three,” Craddock contends “Luke’s [understanding is] the most unsettling, for...the Holy Spirit has moved the church into areas in which it otherwise would not have gone and into activities in which it otherwise would not have engaged. Power disturbs, and yet it is not usually until afterward in reflection that we relate disturbances to the Holy Spirit.” (Craddock, Fred. *Interpretation: Luke*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 292)

I like his description of how the Spirit takes the church and its people into areas they otherwise would not go and of how one often connects those deeds to the Holy Spirit after the fact. Such a perspective means there will be times when we are moving forward without knowing why, times when we feel led to respond in ways that run contrary to our first instinct,

and times when we act even if though the task makes us uncomfortable. Let me share with you accounts of such power that come from one of my favorite annual events at DPC.

In late spring each year, I moderate a joint meeting of our Board of Deacons and Session. Both groups are composed of women and men elected by the congregation to serve as officers yet mostly those two bodies work independently. The Deacons focus on caring ministries — visits, meals, and other tangible acts of connection-- while the Session deals with everything else. That does not mean Ruling Elders are uncaring; only that the roles are different.

In a typical year, there is only one time when all of the officers are together. Prior to COVID, it would occur after worship and include a meal. Before offering the blessing at that event, I tell the group they can sit wherever they want with one exception—each table has to include both Ruling Elders and Deacons. After the meal, our agenda consists of those women and men standing up one at a time, introducing themselves and naming the primary area of service as a church officer. And then, they share one highlight from that period of time.

The accounts that follow are different, of course, but year after year I hear of how their time as a Deacon or Ruling Elder led them to tasks they otherwise would not have done, acts of service that made them uncomfortable, but blessed in them even so. It might have been leading a worship service without any clergy at a local care facility or going to visit a member they did not know. It could have been participating in a mission trip or teaching a children’s class, walking up to a visitor after worship or praying out loud. In their own words, each described how they were blessed by a moment that would not have come had not they been elected a church officer; a time of service that began in the moment of ordination when we asked for the Holy Spirit to descend upon them. I don’t recall any officer using the language of our text, but all of those accounts describe times when they were clothed with power from on high even so.

On that first Easter, Jesus told his eleven followers to wait in Jerusalem until they had received that gift and there can be times we feel as if we must wait, too, until we have more information or more training, more experience or more Biblical knowledge before stepping forward. Yet the gift Jesus sent to those men, the same Spirit that we have received, too, enables all of us to act in faithful ways and to move forward, even when we cannot fully explain it.

Craig Barnes is the president of Princeton Theological Seminary. In an account published ten years ago, he tells of a day when, as a professor at Pittsburgh Seminary, he was driving across the border into Canada. He had been invited to deliver a couple of sermons at a church in Toronto and in the article, describes his conversation with a no-nonsense Canadian border officer. She asked first if the visit was for work or pleasure. “She looked tired,” Craig recalls, “perhaps bored, and wanted a straight answer to a standard question.” He answered that it was work-related as he was to be a guest preacher. “She asked me to describe the specific services I would be providing. ‘Preaching,’ I said again.” Upon hearing that reply, she shut the glass door to her booth, picked up a phone and after a brief conversation returned a few minutes later

“Let me get this straight,” she continued “You’re coming from Pennsylvania to a church in Toronto to preach tomorrow.’ I responded ‘Yes, that’s right.’ She was trying to figure out why a church in Toronto would need a U.S. citizen to do a job many Canadians must be qualified to do. I was a bit puzzled by that myself. But I was still stunned by her next question: ‘Why you?’ The question was stark and clear, yet it filled me with more existential angst than she could possibly know. Yes indeed, why me? This plunged me back into the most familiar confusion of all. Why am I called to preach the gospel? Surely better qualified people are available.

“It is amazing how fast the mind works in such moments,” Craig continues. “Within nanoseconds I remembered being a young seminary intern serving as the substitute teacher for

the church's adult Sunday class. I knew that most of those present were executives from a nearby multinational corporation. I spent the first 15 minutes...apologizing for being the one who would be their teacher. A man who was the CEO of the corporation eventually interrupted me to say, 'Craig, we're not here because you're the best qualified person for what you do. We are here because we believe you're called.' That memory has returned many times when I'm on the way to the pulpit and see someone in the congregation who's more qualified to preach than I am.

"So I said to the [Canadian border] officer, 'Why me? I have no idea. I just know that this congregation called me to be its preacher tomorrow.' She shrugged and told me to keep moving. I always have, but I take these questions along as part of my baggage." (Barnes, M. Craig "Checkpoint," *Christian Century*, September 20, 2011, p. 35)

What does it mean to receive power from on high? At least part of the answer is that the Holy Spirit will take us--individuals and this body of faith--into places and conversations we otherwise may not have gone. Yet an additional blessing is that we don't have to have an answer to the question of "why us" and instead can keep moving ahead, trusting that the Spirit will continue to go before us and perhaps in time make the reason clear.