

Charged!
The Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker
“Camp Sunday”

Scripture

Psalm 68:1-10

Acts 1:6-14

“But 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.”

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” Vs. 8-9

One of the most meaningful memories we often have of our childhood perhaps involves us standing in place, looking at balloons going up in the air. We watched for as long as we can and wondered where they would end up.

Equally, one of the saddest memories a child might have is looking at one’s only balloon go up in the air, hoping the wind might just blow it back down, so we can get a hold of it again.

In the scripture reading this morning, we considered the events that took place on Ascension Day. Ascension Day is hardly ever celebrated in our churches.

At this point, the Easter ribbons have been put away and the trumpet is in the closet for next year. No lilies come with Ascension Day -- just omission.

For those who may not know, Ascension Day is usually celebrated on a Thursday. Yes, it is in our UCC calendar, with suggested scriptures and all.

But certainly, we don’t hear about the Ascension Day discount sales on TV; nor are we invited to Ascension Day dinners or BBQs.

In the Scripture this morning, we considered this mysterious Ascension Day. The disciples, including women, are gathered. At this point, Jesus had already died and was resurrected, so Jesus for all intents and purposes, had broken all understanding of what people considered normal.

Therefore, they felt that perhaps Jesus had come back to address the unfinished business they thought he left behind. They asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

The question to Jesus about the restoration of Israel is perfectly reasonable. The Messiah is expected to purify the land and rule over the nations. Is the time finally here?

Instead, Jesus gives them promises totally unrelated. First, he reaffirms that “they will receive power when the Holy Spirit had come.” Then, he states that he will “empower” them to be witnesses from where they were across the Roman World.

After that, Jesus is “out of here” - he is gone. The Scripture says that he was lifted up in a cloud, and they stood there watching him, as a child watches his balloon being lifted up by the wind...perhaps wishing it would blow it back down; perhaps just marveling at the fact that it is being lifted.

Then, two men in white robes stand next to the disciples and state that Jesus will return just as he left.

But, as Jesus left, there was a new commission to those he left behind. Whether you are in the camp of those who prescribed completely to the events of the Ascension, or in the camp of those who do not believe this ever happened, one thing is certain: We have been charged to become witnesses of this Gospel.

And this charge is one that we are living even until today. Today, a time when faith, belief and the gospel are distant terms in the minds of many. At a time when the cathedrals of Christian life are found in soccer fields and brunch...we have been empowered to be witnesses of the Gospel. Today, when the church is going through a rummage sale of some kind, we have been empowered to be witnesses.

We are filled today with the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the world at a time when no one is asking the faith questions. We all want to know, “Do you believe in the virgin birth? Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins? Do you believe that only Christians go to heaven?” But no one asks, “On what is your heart set? What powers you must rely on? What is the hope that gives meaning to your life?”¹

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: HarperOne, 2014) pg 144.

We are filled with the Holy Spirit to be witnesses today, when some say the church is dying. Some say many are voting with their feet.

We are filled with the Holy Spirit to be witnesses today, at a time of many uncertainties and indifference.

So, let it be so. Let us be witnesses. Let us live this gospel with confidence and passion. Because, thank God, we are not in charge of this “joint” of which we have just been charged to be witnesses and do God’s will. The rest is up to God.

May the God of Spirit lead us to be better witnesses. Amen.