

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Acts 1:1-11, “Sent Ones”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 5/16/2021**

The disciples had been on a roller coaster ride of emotions.

They followed Jesus down the streets lined with palm branches,  
people chanting his name.

They heard Jesus make cryptic predictions about his own death.

They were there when Judas betrayed him with a kiss.

They were conspicuously absent for his trial  
and his execution (perhaps aside from Peter,  
but he had his own issues).

And then they were confronted with Christ in the flesh once again.

The same... but not the same.

Perhaps things were finally beginning to make sense again?

They must have thought back to the first sermons they heard Jesus preach  
in Galilee, “The time has come, the Kingdom of God has come near.

Repent and believe the good news.”

The message of the Kingdom’s arrival permeated Jesus’ teaching:

it was the back-drop for every parable,  
the framework for every teaching on ethics,  
the hope for those who were hopeless –  
the Kingdom of God is like this!

And for 40 days after the resurrection Jesus continued to teach about  
the Kingdom of God.

The disciples had certainly seen many signs and wonders

that *anticipated* the Kingdom’s arrival,

but had not seen accomplished the kinds of things  
written about in the Scriptures that were to take place  
on the great and terrible day of the Lord.

That would be a day of wrath for the enemies of God,

a day of darkness and bloodshed for all who oppose the Lord,

a day when Israel was set back in its rightful place

as the chosen nation of God with all other nations  
bowing down to them.

But none of those things had happened.

So it was with good reason that when they met together, they asked Jesus,  
“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”  
Is it going to happen now?

This question is a cousin to the car-ride classic, “Are we there yet?”

And, as has been his custom all along, Jesus disappoints them once again.  
“He said to them, **“It is not for you to know the times or dates  
the Father has set by his own authority.”**”

What a let-down, right?

After all they have been through and seen,  
after all those sermons they had heard,  
they still don’t get to see the Kingdom’s arrival  
in all it’s glory? Nope.

There was still work to be done. In fact, *Jesus* was still doing work.

Luke begins the book of Acts describing the Gospel of Luke as  
as account of all that Jesus *began* to do and teach.

The book of Acts is about the continuation of that ministry  
through the church by the empowerment of God’s indwelling Spirit.

The great surprise that Jesus brought was that in his person,  
the Kingdom of Heaven *was* at hand, it *had* come near,  
Jesus is the embodiment of God’s own presence  
and therefore God’s Kingdom reign had arrived  
in the presence of Jesus.

But while the kingdom had *already arrived*, it had not yet arrived in full.

The joy of this is that God is inviting us to join in with him—  
the kingly rule of Christ has *already* arrived  
in the lives of those who love him,  
but has not yet arrived as a fully apparent reality  
to all people.

Jesus was in effect telling the disciples,

“You get to join in God’s Kingdom life,”  
when he spoke to them the next sentence:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;  
and you will be my witnesses

- in Jerusalem (the symbolic center of God’s chosen people),
- in Judea (the larger arena of Jesus’ ministry)
- in Samaria (the outcast neighbors who never did anything right),
- and to the ends of the earth (everywhere else they could get to).”

Hearing this, they asked,

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”  
Because it has to happen sometime, right?!?”

In his response, Jesus reveals that the Kingdom promises of Israel  
were not only focused on Israel,  
for now the Spirit of Christ would be offered  
to all nations of the earth.

The proof of this came in the action of verse 9 –

“Jesus was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud *hid him*  
from their sight.”

The details of this brief verse emphasize the fact  
that Jesus was not going to be physically present for these next steps.

The disciple’s job now was to wait in Jerusalem for the gift  
that Jesus had promised, the baptism of the Holy Spirit,  
which we will look at next week on Pentecost Sunday.

The story of these Spirit empowered disciples  
leads us right up into the present day.

We continue to reach out toward the ends of the earth –  
which sometimes means reaching across the street  
to our literal neighbors (and sometimes nurses!),  
and other times it means reaching out  
to around the world.

But in large part we need to recognize that *we* are the ends of the earth Jesus  
spoke of. We are the outcome of this promise being fulfilled.

Along the way, there have been some true pioneers  
who understood the vision of Jesus.

St. Patrick was one of those people, born as Patricius about AD 385  
on western edge of the Roman Empire  
in a part of Britannia we now call Scotland.

Patricius' early years were spent in relative comfort  
in a family of Roman citizens.

His parents nominally Christian, like many thousands who had  
become Christian because it was fashionable to do so.

Their casual indifference to genuine faith would not sustain the boy  
when at sixteen he was kidnapped, taken to Ireland and sold as slave.

Little did Patrick know at such a young age  
that he would be used by God to bring the true gospel of Christ  
to the very people who captured him.

But rather than a watered down retelling of the story,  
let's hear about it in Patrick's own words.

The following comes from the *Confessions of St. Patrick*.

Scholars have speculated that St. Patrick penned this work  
in defense of his good name, after having his character attacked  
by people in power:

I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful, an  
utterly despised by many. My father was Calpornius, a deacon, son of  
Potitus, a priest, of the village Bannavem Taburniæ he had a country  
seat nearby, and there I was taken captive.

I was then about sixteen years of age. I did not know the true God. I  
was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people,  
and deservedly so, because we turned away from God, and did not  
keep His commandments, and did not obey our priests, who used to  
remind us of our salvation. And the Lord brought over us the wrath of  
his anger and scattered us among many nations, [I might object to  
Patrick's characterization of God here] even unto the utmost part of  
the earth, where now my littleness is placed among strangers.

And there the Lord opened the sense of my unbelief that I might at last remember my sins and be converted with all my heart to the Lord my God, who had regard for my abjection, and mercy on my youth and ignorance, and watched over me before I knew Him, and before I was able to distinguish between good and evil, and guarded me, and comforted me as would a father his son.

Hence I cannot be silent, nor, indeed, is it expedient, about the great benefits and the great grace which the lord has deigned to bestow upon me in the land of my captivity; for this we can give to God in return after having been chastened by Him, to exalt and praise His wonders before every nation that is anywhere under the heaven.

In the land of his captivity, Patrick was compelled by God's grace  
to exalt and praise God's wonders before every nation  
that is anywhere under heaven.

View's of God's wrath aside, he got it.

He understood what it meant to be included  
in the mission of God to the world,  
to be a Spirit empowered witness  
in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and in all the earth.

Now that's not the *way* that most of us share in the ongoing work of Jesus.

But it can be the *heart* we have as we live our lives.

A heart focused on God's love for our neighbors,  
even when (or maybe especially when)  
they are neighbors who haven't treated us well.

Such a Spirit is sorely needed in the land of Israel today,  
where fighting, hatred, and violence fill the streets.

Such a Spirit is needed in our own land,  
where truth is exchanged for lies,  
and division is bubbling just under the surface.

What does the arrival of God's Kingdom  
mean for us who are filled by the Spirit today?

We can explore that question more next week.

For now let's take some time to sing together, asking God to open our eyes  
to see what God is doing in our world through the work of the Spirit,  
to understand meaning of this table together, and then to share in this meal.