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"Just what I needed"

Psalm 47  
Ephesians 1:15-23  
Luke 24:44-53

I imagine that most of you are familiar with the lectionary, which gives recommended readings for the various Sundays in the church year. Over the past 5 years I have almost always preached from the lectionary, but I thought long and hard about breaking that pattern for this Sunday.

Why? Well, because of the Gospel reading: Jesus' last day with His disciples. It is a perfectly acceptable reading for Ascension Sunday (which we celebrate today) but it seemed a bit questionable for our last Sunday in Gainesville. I didn't want anyone to think that I would be making a comparison between Jesus' ascension and our relocation!

In the end I decided not to change the reading. Ascension Sunday is an important day in the church year, as we come to the end of the Easter season and prepare for Pentecost which is next Sunday.

Jesus was preparing His disciples for what was to come, for the time when they would be on their own yet not on their own. His physical presence would no longer be with them, but His spirit would be. I think it is safe to say that they probably had no idea what would happen after Jesus ascended, they had no idea they would be anointed with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and sent out into the world to boldly proclaim God's message of love and forgiveness.

If I had been one of the disciples, I think I probably would have been terrified. They had spent the past 3 years with Jesus. He had turned their world upside down, I wonder if they could even remember the life they had lived before they knew Jesus. And now they were going to be left alone...

Remember after the crucifixion, they had locked themselves together in a room, afraid of what would happen to them? That was only a few weeks ago. Remember the disciples were at such a loss that they didn't know what to do, so Peter suggested that they go fishing, except they didn't catch anything?

What would happen after Jesus left them again? Would they go back and lock themselves behind the biggest door they could find? Would they try to see if they could get their old jobs back?

Turns out they did none of those things. "They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple, blessing God."

But they didn't panic. They were not frozen in fear. They gave thanks to God, they were filled with joy, they blessed God's name. And God blessed them. He sent His Spirit to them, and they went out into the world and did amazing things as witnesses to the Good News.

Who would have guessed? Do you think Peter ever imagined all that he would do in Jesus' name, or was he afraid that he would fail again when the chips were down?

If you had been there, would you think that this small group of 12 – oops, make that 11 – disciples would have ever made a difference?

God did. God saw something amazing in them. He saw beyond what they were and what they had been. He saw what they would be... and God's vision was much better than anything we could have imagined.

The disciples had already begun to see it themselves by the time Jesus left. They knew... no, I take that back... they didn't *know*... they *believed*... they believed that the best was somehow still yet to come. They trusted that although they could no longer see Jesus with them, they were not alone.

And so they gave thanks. They rejoiced. They were continually in the temple blessing God.

They put themselves in line with generations before who had rejoiced and given thanks and praised God. We heard this in the Psalm for today

Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy. ... Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.

When faithful people want to be involved in something that lasts, they get involved with praise and worship of God.

Of course that wasn't the end of the story. Going to the temple and giving praise was an important part, a crucial part... but they couldn't stay there. I don't know of any of the disciples whose calling was only to offer praise to God in the temple. Jesus' final words to them even indicated this

“so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

After that they would be sent out to proclaim and live the good news, but they were to wait until they had received God's spirit.

At the end of today's gospel reading, we are left poised on the edge of a new, exciting chapter in the lives of the disciples. They weren't sure what was going to happen, but they knew that they had been promised God's spirit would be with them.

God knew what they needed in order to be able to continue to spread the good news. Jesus instructed them plainly: “Wait until you have been clothed with power from on high.” It was the

reassurance that they needed to be able to continue to live in hope even after Jesus had returned to heaven.

It was just what they needed, at just the right time.

And that has been the story of God's people for generations. God has given to them what they have needed, at just the right time. The timing hasn't always *seemed* right, but looking back we can see with clearer eyes and realize God has been faithfully guiding us.

There is a wonderful piece of theology in the Methodist tradition called "prevenient grace" which says, simply put, that God is at work in our lives long before we realize it.

Presbyterians have a similar piece of theology, but we called it "predestination" which unfortunately scared people because it seemed to do away with free will.

Whatever we call it, the experience is this: God is in control, in a good way, not like a puppet master controlling us with strings, but perhaps more like a director or a coach who tries to show us the right way to do things, but at the end of the day it is up to us to do them.

And here we are again today, at a similar point.

The disciples in the gospel reading were getting ready to enter a new chapter in their lives as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. And so are we.... you and I are preparing to enter a new chapter. First Presbyterian Church of Gainesville, Florida and First Presbyterian Church of Gallipolis, Ohio are poised to begin something new.

Looking back over the past 5 years I can see that we have covered a lot of ground together. I came across a lot of pictures this week, and it is amazing to see how fast some of the Youth have grown and changed... but of course they aren't the only ones.

I have been greatly changed over these past 5 years as well. I have learned a great deal, both through successes and failures. 5 years ago I left Princeton Seminary with a theological degree and very little practical experience. I leave Gainesville today with countless lessons learned about the grace of living in a community. I have seen faithful people work together to accomplish wonderful things. Tracey and I have received wonderful support through some very difficult times, and we have been simply overwhelmed at the love that has been shown to us and Ethan.

A little over 3 years ago my father moved to Gainesville, and he too was warmly welcomed into the community. When Tracey and I were up north visiting family for Thanksgiving, my Dad was invited to the home of a member of our congregation to share in their celebration. That too was a wonderful gift.

5 years has come and gone too quickly... but there are many more years to come. Each congregation that I serve in the future will owe a debt of gratitude to FPC/Gainesville for their care and nurture of a new pastor.

And now we, like the disciples, are ready to receive God's commission anew. There's a fork in the road we have been walking together, and the timing may not seem quite right... but we trust that God has guided us to this point and will continue to be with us as we travel this life He has given us.

This is not the end of the road. It is not the end for us as we head to Ohio, and it is certainly not the end for FPC/Gainesville. I know without a doubt that God will continue to work in and through this congregation. I believe God will bless those who seek Him, to know Him, and to follow Him... and so I remember Jesus' words:

“so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”  
“Stay here in the city”.... He could have just as easily said “Stay here in downtown Gainesville”

“until you have been clothed with power from on high” – Well, this congregation has been clothed with God's power for well over a century, so I do not have to pray that God's spirit would come to this place... God's spirit has already been here for many, many years. Instead I will pray for a renewal of strength, a double portion of faith, hope, and love to continue to live and work as God's faithful people.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

I say to you now: I have heard and seen and experienced your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you... and I will remember you in my prayers, and hope you will do the same until our paths cross again either in this life or in the life to come, we know that this is not goodbye, but “until we meet again.”

Amen.