

“MARCH OFF THE MAP!”

Text: Acts 1:8 for 10/21/2018

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. (Acts 1:8)

More than 300 years before the time of Christ, Alexander the Great was marching across Asia Minor. Under his leadership was the greatest army ever assembled to that time. They conquered every enemy they faced. No one could stand up against them. When they reached the Himalaya Mountains, the leaders on the front-line came back to Alexander filled with concern. “We have marched off the map,” they said. “We should go back to where we know.” They had literally marched off the known map of that time. But Alexander said to them, “Mediocre armies always stay within the known areas. The great armies always march off the map.”

Alexander the Great wasn't the only conqueror to give the orders, “March off the map!” In one little verse today, we hear Jesus, the One who conquered death, give that same order to his army. Today our Savior gives us the command to, “March off the map!” As we consider our Commander's marching orders from Acts 1, we will find that our Lord encourages us: 1) to march together as a Spirit-led Church; 2) to march together as a risk-taking Church; and 3) to march together as a reproducing Church.

Before giving the orders to march, our Savior makes a promise. He says, **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.”** We need the Spirit's power if we are to truly be a Spirit-led Church, because it is the Spirit who gives us direction. The Holy Spirit provides the Church with an understanding of what we should be concerned about. That understanding does not come naturally. We see that truth in Jesus' disciples. They were taught by Jesus for three years. They witnessed his resurrection. Over a period of 40 days he had made it crystal clear to them that he had conquered death. But as Jesus prepares to ascend back to heaven, what are the disciples concerned about? They ask Jesus, **“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel”** (Acts 1:6)? Their heads are stuck in the sand of worldly power and possessions.

Without the Holy Spirit, that's you and me too. On our own it is impossible to comprehend spiritual things or know their importance. Like those first disciples it is so easy to let our personal ideas about what the church should be doing interfere with what the Lord wants done. Programs can become more important than people; beautiful buildings can become more important than souls won for Christ; organizations can overshadow our Lord's orders. That's why Jesus sends his Spirit. Working through the Word the Spirit sees to it that we are not left spiritually wandering or wondering. The Spirit leads us to see Jesus as our Savior and to recognize that our role on earth as Christians is to be witnesses of our Savior. It is important to march together as a Spirit-led Church because the Holy Spirit leads us to remember what our Lord has commanded us to do.

And not only does being a Spirit-led Church provide direction for our marching; being a Spirit-led Church gives us confidence to march. Christ says, “You will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” Look at the impact that the Holy Spirit's power had on those disciples. Just a few weeks earlier, one of those men fled naked in the Garden of Gethsemane and another one crumbled under the questioning of a servant girl. All of them abandoned the Lord Jesus. But later, given the Spirit's power, those same disciples were changed from frightened cowards to fearless confessors. Empowered by the Spirit they would even perform miracles such as driving out demons and curing diseases. But the greatest demonstration of the Spirit's power was not seen in

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outward miracles. The Spirit’s power was seen in the effect their message would have on human hearts and lives. Remember that first Pentecost Sunday? Led by the Spirit, the disciples preached to the crowds assembled in Jerusalem. By the Spirit’s power, their message took hearts that hated Jesus and turned them into hearts filled with love for the Savior. That’s power! That’s amazing power!

That same amazing power of the Spirit has been given to us. We have the gospel which is the power of God for salvation. But sometimes times we forget that, don’t we? Sometimes we underestimate, the power the Holy Spirit gives us in the gospel. Sometimes, like Jesus’ disciples hiding behind locked doors, we tremble in fear at the boldness of Jesus’ enemies in the world. We forget that God has placed into our hands and hearts the raw power of his gospel, a gospel that is no less capable of creating and sustaining faith today than it was almost 2000 years ago. As a Spirit-led Church we have the power to pour water on a baby’s head and apply God’s Word and know that another child is brought into God’s kingdom. As a Spirit-led Church we have the power to offer bread and wine connected to God’s Word and know that a sinner is assured of being in a right relationship with God. As a Spirit-led Church we are equipped with the tools necessary to bring down the devil’s walls, to cut through hearts of stone and let the Spirit lead people to faith in our Savior. Fellow soldiers, we can march together confidently as a Spirit-led Church because we are guided by God’s Spirit and equipped with God’s power.

As a Spirit-led Church, we can also march together as a risk-taking church. Jesus brings that thought to mind when he says, **“You will be my witnesses.”** Why is being a witness a risky business? Look at the disciples. As they witnessed about Christ and for Christ, their lives were immediately at risk. They were tortured for even mentioning the gospel message. They were tried, imprisoned, banished, and finally executed for simply talking about Jesus. It’s no surprise that the Greek word for “witness” is where we get our word “martyr.”

But it is not only the external threats that make witnessing risky. At least, here in our country there aren’t too many people who will imprison, torture, or kill us for speaking about our Savior. More than likely, the bigger risks we face as witnesses come from internal threats. As individual witnesses for Christ, we face the fear of failure. Will I say the right thing? Will I embarrass myself? Will I embarrass my Savior? Will I walk away with more questions about my own faith? Faced with those risks we often adopt the fearful attitude of that servant who buried the talent his master entrusted to him instead of putting it to work.

And just as much as the fear of failure is an internal threat, the fear of success can also make us regard witnessing as risky. At times, do we find ourselves acting like those soldiers who came to Alexander the Great and said, “We should go back to where we know”? Witnessing can lead us to places we’ve never been before. Witnessing can take us out of our comfort zone. Increasingly, the people moving into our neighborhoods are different from us. What will reaching out to them mean for our congregations? Are we willing to change the way we do ministry, as long as it is within the parameters of Scripture, in order to reach the people whom God puts in our cities, neighborhoods, and lives?

Sure, there are risks, but haven’t we seen how God blesses us when we take risks in his name? Consider the congregations in our synod who are working with Hmong, Vietnamese, and Sudanese

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people living in their communities – people who in some cases just walked right into their churches! Was reaching out to a new group of people taking a risk? Sure it was. It has forced our church body to look at ministry from a different perspective. It has prompted us to develop a new ministerial training program called Pastoral Studies Institute, which helps train leaders from other cultures to be pastors. And there was one of the bigger risks we deal with on a regular basis—it took money. But look at what God is doing through those risks. He has led several men from these other cultures to become full-time pastors in our church body. Some have been used by God to spread the gospel to others in their own communities. Others are scattered out around the United States. Still others have gone back to their home countries to reach out with the power of the gospel. God moved us to take a risk and now thousands of people from other cultures are marching together with us as a Spirit-led Church.

Do you think God wants us to be a risk-taking church? Listen again to his orders: “You **will be** my witnesses.” Jesus doesn’t negotiate with us. He doesn’t ask for our input. Christ is not overly concerned about whether or not being a witness is what we had in mind. He leaves no option. We will be what he makes us to be: witnesses. Fellow soldiers, let us march together as a risk-taking Church because that is what our Savior calls us to be.

What does a Spirit-led Church and risk-taking Church become? It becomes a reproducing church. On the tail end of his marching orders, Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses **in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**” Within a few days of Jesus speaking these words we find them starting to be fulfilled. Led by the Spirit, and taking a risk by witnessing to a potentially hostile crowd, the disciples saw first-hand how God made his Church a reproducing Church. On the day of Pentecost, Christianity became a worldwide event. People from Arabia, Africa, Italy, and Greece were all there to hear Peter’s Spirit-led, risk-taking witness of Christ. And they believed. Three thousand were added to their number that day. Not much later we find Peter testifying before the Jews at the temple in Jerusalem and before the Sanhedrin. Philip began the witness to the Samaritans and also witnesses to a man from Africa. Paul witnesses in Asia, Greece, Italy, and many of the islands in between.

Today, the testimony of those eyewitnesses of Christ continues to go out. Christ’s Church is still a reproducing Church. When a mother sings, “I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb” to her baby, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When a pastor tells his congregation, “Through Jesus, you are forgiven,” God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When a grandfather witnesses to his grandchildren from his deathbed, “I’m going home to my Savior,” God’s Church is a reproducing Church.

But God’s Church isn’t just reproducing in our homes, churches, and neighborhoods. The testimony of the gospel continues to go out literally to the ends of God’s earth. Whenever the gospel message is translated into new languages, which is what happens through our WELS Multi-Language Publications, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. Whenever we take the gospel into new countries like Ethiopia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When we send young people around the world to teach English as a Second Language classes and they use that opportunity to share their faith with the people around them, God’s church is a reproducing church. When we use the Internet to make Christian resources available to people all

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over the world, God’s church is a reproducing church. We are able to see that God’s Church is marching right off the map!

Fellow soldiers, by God’s grace we are part of that march. May we continue to march together as Spirit-led Church, as a risk-taking Church and as a reproducing Church. By God’s power may we march together right off the map! Amen.