

When the Spirit Comes - 5

May 20, 2012

Acts 1:1-11

from Psalm 47

All Sing: ***Earth and heaven repeat the cry, 'Glory be to God on high.'***

Leader: Clap your hands, all peoples!

People: Shout to God with loud songs of joy!

Leader: For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared,

People: a great Ruler over all the earth,

Leader: who subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet,

**People: who chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom God loves.**

All Sing: ***Earth and heaven repeat the cry, 'Glory be to God on high.'***

Leader: God has gone up with a shout,

People: the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.

Leader: Sing praises to God, sing praises!

People: Sing praises to our Ruler, sing praises!

Leader: For God is the Ruler of all the earth;

People: sing praises with a psalm!

Leader: God reigns over the nations;

People: God sits on his holy throne.

Leader: The princes of the people gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.

**People: For the shields of the earth
belong to God, who is highly exalted!**

All Sing: ***Earth and heaven repeat the cry, 'Glory be to God on high.'***

Paraphrasing from Acts 1:1-6, and reading from Acts 1:7-11

After his resurrection, Jesus showed himself to the disciples and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. When the disciples asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But when the Holy Spirit comes on you you will receive **power** to be my **witnesses** in **Jerusalem**, and in **Judea**, and **Samaria**, and to the **ends of the earth**."

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

1 John 5:1-5, 9-12

^{5:1} Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ² This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³ This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴ for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

⁹ We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. ¹⁰ Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Will you pray with me... May the words of my mouth...

Well, this week we're continuing to explore our journey as Spirit empowered witnesses, starting in Jerusalem, where we are, moving on out to Judea, our family, friends and associates, and now going on to Samaria.

So like we looked at Jerusalem and Judea, and what it meant to the disciples, let's look at Samaria.

Three weeks ago we started with them witnessing in Jerusalem, the religious identity and center of their lives. The last two weeks we've lingered in Judea, a familial as well as national identity. But, when the Spirit comes you will receive **power** to be my **witnesses** in **Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ...**

Woah! Samaria? We may recall some of the stories of Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman, the parable of the Good Samaritan. His stories and actions were socially scandalous, for good Jews had no dealings with Samaritans.

Let's suppose that Hiram is a shopkeeper in Judea, perhaps even in Jerusalem. However, but his sister with whom he was very close, was married to a man in Galilee and now lives up north. His sister sends word that her son, Jacob, Hiram's favorite nephew is going to be married and that of course they would hope he and his family can attend. Well, of course. It means shutting down the shop while he is gone, but for his nephew Jacob, there's no question. He will just have to do it. It is typically a four day journey, traveling either through the

eastern territories, or up the Jordan valley. Unless he were to go through Samaria, there was a route through Samaria that would only be a two day journey.

When the shop is closed there is no income. 2 day journey, or 4 days? Since the shorter journey would take him through Samaria, he chooses the 4 day route. So he goes, travels 4 days to attend the week long wedding celebration, money is getting a little short and when it is time to return... he has the choice a 2 day journey, or 4 days? - and again, though it means a business loss of another 2 days he chooses to avoid Samaria.

Such was the tension between Jews and Samaritans. So what was the tension all about? Where was, and who were the people of, Samaria? Geographically Samaria is the region north of Jerusalem, and south of Galilee. Part of what is now called the West Bank, occupied by Jordan in 1948 and reclaimed by Israel in 1967.

When the nation of Israel split about 930 BC, after the death of King Solomon, the northern tribes established a worship center on Mount Gerizim in the city of Samaria, rather than worshipping in the Jerusalem Temple. Samaritan worship typically took place in the open, on simple open-air platforms built on high places rather than in the elaborate buildings and courtyards of Solomon's Temple. They considered themselves to be the faithful descendants of Abraham, and were concerned that Solomon's construction of the Temple had perverted Israelite worship.

210 years later, 722 BC, Assyrian emperor Shalmaneser conquered and exiled the northern ten tribes of Israel and dispersed them throughout the empire. People from other conquered nations were also dispersed and some were re-settled into the former territories of Israel, intermarrying with each other and with any locals left behind in the exile; typically the poorest and least able to contribute to the empire.

Such exiles would have come with their own religious heritage and traditions. However, the prevailing concept in those days was that gods were local, and it is even recorded in 2 Kings 17 that one priest was sent back to lead the new residents in worship of the local god. However, those imported heritage and traditions were also practiced alongside, and adapted to, what was left of the local tradition - including the tradition of worship on Mount Gerizim in Samaria.

From about 722 BC these 'foreign influences' had lived in the former lands of Israel, north of Judea and were called Samaritans.

When the Judahites were permitted to return to the lands of their ancestors, after their own 50 years of exile in Babylon, the foreign influences had only been there for 50 years, but the people living in the northern territories had been there for 175 years, nearly nine generations.

The Samaritans considered themselves to be the true descendants of Israel... offspring of the few Israelis who were left behind in the Assyrian dispersion. The Judahites, the Jews, considered them dirty, mixed blood, pagan influenced, rebellious scoundrels.

Jews and Samaritans generally had no dealings with each other if they could help it. Jesus, on the other hand traveled through their territories, healed in their lands, and spoke with them as if they were included in God's plan for salvation.

Samaria. Frankly, this is where the rubber meets the road, when we follow the leading of the Spirit, when we fulfill the instruction of Jesus, to share our witness with folks who are unfamiliar, whose life and culture may be different, with whom we are less comfortable. It is also where too many Christians draw the line and say "Enough is enough, Lord. I'll follow you in Jerusalem and Judea, I'll witness for you in the church and among my friends, but not Samaria!"

When the Spirit comes you will receive **power** to be my **witnesses** in **Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**

Where is our Samaria? Yours and mine. We may have some differences among us, but I suspect we have some common overlapping Samaritan territories.

How many of us have been up to the High School? It's truly a different world to many of us. Now, I really like teenagers, but when I recently went on the campus for a concert I felt I was in an alien world. I was seated in a clump of folks from First United Methodist, but it still felt a bit foreign. For our teenagers that is there Judea, and that may have been my life 40 years ago, but now it seems like Samaria.

How many of us sub-consciously route ourselves around the northwest section of town, Lincoln Avenue? I admit that I sometimes make a conscious choice to intentionally drive through that part of our town

simply to remind myself that it is still part of our city even if it feels like Samaria. On the other hand we have teachers in this congregation who are there every day, for whom it is part of their Judea.

When I see busses of migrant workers there is a part of me that feels distant, and yet another part of me that wants to connect with some kind of positive gesture recognizing our common humanity before God. 'Samaritans' who may not speak the same language as I do, but for whom Christ gave his life, just as he did for me.

Charley has worked to organize this summer mission trip to Daytona, working among poor citizens, as a witness in Samaria. Some of our youth are understandably hesitant to go, it's Samaria, for heaven's sake! We are all more comfortable in Jerusalem and Judea! But when the Spirit comes you will receive **power** to be my **witnesses** in **Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria**, and to the **ends of the earth**.

The Spirit empowered purpose is not to witness in Jerusalem, or Judea, or Samaria, **or** to the ends of the earth; **and** to the ends of the earth.

"And," not "or."

Jerusalem is where we start, to the ends of the earth is where our witness is to go. If we don't keep going, if we don't keep moving in the direction of the purpose, it doesn't really make sense that the power of the Spirit would continue to flow. Perhaps so many churches struggle with institutional survival precisely because they've dammed up the flow of power – receiving, but not going out and applying the power of the Spirit as witnesses. Sure in Jerusalem, and even Judea... but Samaria?

A couple of months ago I had someone in my office who told me that in their opinion I did too much in the community, that my first priority was to meet the needs of the flock; those in Jerusalem. Really? I thought my priority was to be a witness in Jerusalem, AND Judea, AND, Samaria, AND to the ends of the earth! Stopping short of God's purpose that we witness in Samaria, and on to the ends of the earth, means that we might as well never started at all.

Being a witness doesn't necessarily mean doing something large and dramatic, it could be a simple word that crosses cultural and social barriers to express our oneness through Christ. When Gail and I were at a Chinese restaurant last week and as we were checking out the

little boy who hangs out there with his family had just woken up from a nap. I asked his name, and his mother translated to him my question in Mandarin, or whatever language they commonly use. We exchanged names, and a high five, and a smile spread across his face. His mother also told us her name and the relationship changed from restaurant owner and customer, to friends who know each other's names. Nothing huge and dramatic, but a witness in Samaria.

May the actions of our lives witness to the love of God within us, in our Samaria, as well as in our Jerusalem and Judea! **Amen!**