



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Southwestern MN Synod Sermon Series Mission Statement *Summer 2022 + Sermon by Bp. Dee Pederson*

“God places us in cities, farms and towns together under one prairie sky.”

Acts 1:1-8

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering^[a] he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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.”

One of the givens of GPS systems is knowing your location. Somehow, that little computer that you hold in your hand bounces information up to a satellite, and pinpoints exactly where you are.

- Bishop Dee remembers, “The most remarkable example of this I ever experienced occurred when I was visiting my parents in the Northwoods of Wisconsin and got a call from our daughter’s friend - that she had misplaced her phone. Because she was on our family phone account, I was able to receive a map that appeared on MY phone showing me that her phone was located in a room on the 2nd floor of the building she was working in in Minneapolis. And – just like that, her phone was located!!!”
- These days, GPS is essential as Synod Staff navigate from Redwood Falls to congregations - from Hendricks or to St. James to Sauk Rapids, to figure where we are and where we are going.
- As they say, location, location, location!!

In the reading we just heard from Acts, chapter 1, LOCATION is important! After Jesus rose from the dead, he told his followers to stay in Jerusalem – the place where they would receive God’s promised power of the Holy Spirit. It was in Jerusalem, then, that they had gathered when this conversation with Jesus took place. So, what do we know about Jerusalem?

- The prophets pointed to its role in the story of salvation.
- It was the center of religious power – the place where the Temple was located.
- It is the city to which Jesus “set his face” as he walked what he knew would be the way of the cross.

- And it is the place from which followers would be his first witnesses and carry his word to the “*ends of the earth.*”

Jesus was clear: their witness was not to stop with Jerusalem! It was to go on to other very specific locations: in all Judea and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

- Judea – Also known as “Judah” or the Southern Kingdom - this is the area surrounding Jerusalem.
- Samaria – was the area beyond, the place of the Northern Kingdom. Associated with it are centuries of division and suspicion. But Samaria was an area Jesus frequented and he made it clear that he was going there to minister with those considered outsiders.
 - Think of the story of the Samaritan woman at the well – someone Jesus was not supposed to associate with, or
 - Or consider the “good” Samaritan – those were two words people would never put together because Samaritans were not known as “good.”
- The ends of the earth: In that time, Rome was pretty much as far as people could imagine traveling – and Rome represented oppression, the seat of power, ruling over the people with an iron fist.

So now, Jesus was sending his followers to some of the very places he himself went, crossing barriers of Jew & Gentile, clean & unclean, whole and broken; often crossing over “to the other side” to bring welcome, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation and sending his followers to do the same.

In fact, then, following from this reading in the Book of the Acts of Apostles, that is exactly what we hear:

- Paul and his travelling companions bring the good news of Jesus to places like Jerusalem, Samaria, Antioch, Cyprus.
- Or think of the locations he visited by naming the churches to whom he sent letters: Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Rome.

As his letters clearly show, those communities were not identical. They were unique – each with their own gifts and challenges and circumstances.

We wonder sometimes how those people like Peter or Paul could bring the good news the way they did?! But their witness was empowered in the very way Jesus promised it would be: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.* And so, they did!!

Friends, the Good News is that the same power of the Holy Spirit is with you as your congregation worships each week. As our synod mission statement says, you are among the 229 congregations *God has placed in the cities, farmland, and towns of this synod - together - under one prairie sky.* Bishop Dee reflects that, “It is an honor and a privilege to be able to travel across this synod, preaching in congregations, speaking, meeting with leaders, and getting to know you better over the past 10 months of serving as your bishop.”

Our congregations are different from each other – as different as the churches that gathered across Judea, Samaria, and much farther over 2000 years ago! Because some of our congregations are:

- Located in open country, like Scandian Grove - surrounded by cornfields and soybeans, with granaries dotting the landscape.
- Many are located in towns – like Tyler, Darwin, Cottonwood, & Madelia.
- Some were organized in larger cities, like Marshall, St. Cloud, & St. Peter.

- One of our congregations is 2 years old, and some are celebrating 150 years of ministry.

Each and every one of our congregations has been planted by God in that particular place that shaped its history, its customs, and its ministries. And so, the ministries undertaken in Worthington are going to be different than those going on through Glenwood Lutheran. Each congregation does God's work and lives out being the hands and feet and love of Jesus in your own community. So, I wonder:

- What is it that is unique about your congregation and its ministries?
- What would be missing in your community if the ministries of your church were not there?
- And how is God calling you into the new future we find ourselves in?

Those would be some great conversation-starters for after worship, at home, in a Bible study, or in a church council meeting. I give thanks to God for the unique ministry God has given you in the city, farmland, or town where YOU are located, where God planted you!

At the same time, Jesus has given us all the same commission; because there is some way in which God is sending you – just as Jesus went, and just as Jesus sent the earliest followers - to places that are going to stretch you a bit!

- There is a sense in which we begin in “Jerusalem” – the place where we are comfortable with our faith, maybe the place where our church gathers for worship – whether that be in person or online!
- But then that Holy Spirit starts sending us to “Samaria” – to “crossover” to the people and places that are new and unfamiliar even when they are across town, maybe the people you label as “those people”, maybe even people with whom we think we have nothing in common and even disagree. And we are sent to do this in a larger culture that is increasingly divided upon

itself. How do we live out hospitality, welcome, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation when we feel like we are not equipped, or don't know how to do it?

This is where we cling to the promise of our awesome God: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”* WE depend totally and fully upon the power of the Spirit!

Some of you may have been part of a confirmation ministry that included memorizing Luther's Small Catechism. If so, you may remember the meaning of the 3rd Article of the Apostles' Creed – one of the most comforting parts of the catechism!

“I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with good gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the one true faith.”

“I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort....” Maybe that is what Jesus was talking about: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.* That Holy Spirit came upon you in Holy Baptism, as you were washed in the water and the word and claimed as God's child. And there is nothing in this world, nothing that you can do, to make God go back on those promises. They are there for you forever! And these are promises that we want the whole world to know.

St. Paul said, *how are they hear without someone to bring them the good news?!* And so the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit upon the earliest believers -upon you and me – and that same Spirit sends the church today, as it always has - from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth!

You and I and our congregations are part of this great commission. You and I are “witnesses.” That might sound scary! But think about it: What does that mean? A “witness” is someone who tells what they have seen or heard. And when it comes to Jesus and the power of God.... I have a hunch that is something every one of us can do! If you are hearing these words right now, you are here because the power of Jesus has touched your life in some way.

So, for example, you may have the opportunity to say to someone else something like:

- “I remember how God was with me through that surgery.”
- “I can tell you how God was with me in my grief.”
- “Let me tell you how the Spirit gave me the heart to forgive someone who wronged me greatly.”
- “There was this time when I did not know which way to turn. But I can tell you God gave me what I needed through prayer.”

Maybe those opportunities will come to you in your community, in your family, with a friend, or when you meet someone you did not know. I don’t know HOW those moments will come, but I know they will. They will be moments when you will be able to bear witness to the grace, healing, life, forgiveness, and freedom that you have received in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And as those moments come, we trust those beautiful words from St. Paul said, “*By the power at work within us, God is able to do far more abundantly than all that we can ask or imagine.*”

Thanks be to God for sending those first followers of Jesus in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Thanks be to God for sending the Holy Spirit to US today, right where we’re planted in cities, farmland, and towns. Thanks be to God that we are planted – TOGETHER – under this one beautiful prairie sky!