

YOU SHALL BE MY WITNESSES

The Book of Acts of the Apostles takes place at the very birth of the church. As the book opens the Disciples are meeting with Jesus. Acts is one of only two books where the risen Jesus appears outside the gospels. In the opening verses it says that Jesus met with them a number of times over a period of forty days and spoke with them about the kingdom of God. He told them to remain in Jerusalem and that they would receive the Holy Spirit in a few days.

That's where today's passage picks up. The text says the Disciples gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" That's an important question for the Disciples. The conception of the Messiah by the people in that day and at that time was that he would throw out the hated Roman oppressor, release the captives, and restore the Kingdom of Israel. They had their own agenda.

I sit on the board of the Alabama Presbyterian Children's Home for the second time in my career. One time in the past, when I was sitting on the board, I was riding to a meeting down in Talladega. I was carpooling with Robin Palmer who is the pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church. Now, we often did that to save gas and time. While we were doing that, as ministers are want to do when they get together, we would "talk shop". We shared with one another some of the challenges and opportunities we face at our respective churches.

One time while we were making such a trip, Robin said something that stuck with me. She said, "I sometimes ask God why. Why did you call me into ministry in the Presbyterian Church at this time? As the church is in decline- as the church appears to be dying? Why did you call me into ministry?" That question has haunted me for some time. It mirrors some thoughts that I have had off and on for my entire career.

I guess it touched a nerve with me because at the time I was feeling down and it had really gotten acute at that point. You know the attention of the church often gets fixed on things other than the gospel. Maybe it was just that I was getting close to turning 50 at the time, and I get that because I'm getting close to turning 60 now. I'm beginning to realize that more than half of my life is probably gone. I sit back and I ask myself the kind of questions that go with that. What have I really accomplished? What have I really done? What difference have I really made?

Then I realize that, like the disciples, I have had an agenda. I look at how many hours I've spent working on buildings and talking about budgets and talking about attendance. I have done every bit of it because I thought that it would help the churches I serve. Nevertheless, I can't escape the thought that all this time something is missing.

Something just doesn't feel right. Is this really what it's all about? Is this really what I'm supposed to be doing? Creating programs? Presiding over church dinners? Or is there more? Am I supposed to be doing something more meaningful? There must be more to it than this. There must be a secret ingredient that I'm missing- some message that I've missed.

Well, I find some answer in this passage. Jesus answers the Disciples, "It is not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

First, it isn't for me to know the future, nor is it for me, or Robin, to know why we were called into the ministry at this time and in this place in history. I was born in 1964. I had no choice in the matter. That's when I arrived. Why I was called into this time and into this place is a mystery to me. But I was called into this time and into this place. I'm here now. For some reason God needs me to be here, now. By his Grace, perhaps, I'll figure out what that call is exactly.

If you're struggling with who you are, what your place is, why you were called into this time and in this place, what it is that you were called to do, I give you the same message. It may not be for you to know the times and the places set by the father. You were born when you were born. You came into the community that you came into. The issue is to figure out what your call is exactly.

Secondly, I get from this passage is that I need to realize that whatever I do can only be done through the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the things that I think is going on in the modern church has been our belief that somehow our success or failure is within our own power. If we just work hard enough, if we just create the right program, or build enough on to our building, everything will be okay. It won't.

We've been studying Emotionally Healthy Discipleship and a part of that curriculum has been to teach us what our limits are. We have limits. There's only so much that we can do. Only God is all powerful. We're expected to minister within the limits that we have. That's okay. We have to come to terms with that.

I have always believed that I was called into the ministry by Jesus Christ. Yet, I have spent so many hours over the last twenty-five years talking about things that Jesus didn't say much about. It's time for me to focus on what Jesus is calling me to do.

Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." "Don't worry about what I'm doing! This is what you should be doing." You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the

earth." In my case, he's calling me to be his witness here in the Tennessee Valley- here outside of Athens in Harvest, Alabama.

I plan to take a fresh, new look at the Gospel. I don't want to waste any more of my life talking about other stuff. It's time that I focused on the gospel of Jesus Christ, spreading his message. I'm going to trust that God will work through that. I'm going to use the years that I have left to witness to the risen Lord. And I'm going to trust that God will work through that. That's what the Disciples did, and it worked pretty well for them.

One of the reasons that I pushed the Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Program was that I wanted to invite the rest of you to come with me on this journey. So, let me ask you a question. Do you feel stuck? Are you tired of the same old thing? Are you tired of waiting? Are you waiting for God to do something? It's our time to do something. We can't fix it, but we have work to do. We need to be God's witnesses in Harvest and in Athens and in Madison and beyond. Witness alongside me to the risen Lord. If you don't know how, I'll show you how. If I don't know either, we'll figure out together. Let's focus on the right stuff. Let's be his witnesses.