

Empowered

Acts 1:1-11

Introduction

In order to get yourself into the proper mental framework for what I want to communicate this morning, I need you to envision three images.

First, picture one of those big balloons from the Macy's Thanksgiving parade. Picture it the day *before* the parade -- before they blow the helium in it. See it there on the ground? All flat and empty? Now picture the workers hooking up the helium tanks, and watch the helium being injected. See how it fills the balloon? See the balloon gradually rising off the ground until it is completely filled and ready to take on the parade route? That's image #1.

Second, picture a college football locker room on game day. It's time for the coach's pregame pep talk. There is a nervous anxiety in the air. This team is a good football team, but they are playing the #1 team in the nation today on national TV. Gus Johnson and the Fox Sports crew are there. The coach gets the team's attention, and he shows them the news clippings he has gathered all week. These clippings talk about how this team is over-rated, how they are 15 point underdogs, how there is no chance for them to win. Notice how the team is becoming more focused, more intense. And then the coach concludes with a "*Win one for the Gipper*" line, and the team rushes out the door and onto the field. They are in a frenzy, and psyched to win this game.

Third, picture the old TV show, "The Incredible Hulk." There is the main character, the calm, mild-mannered scientist who had to fake his own death because of the laboratory accident that left him with this horrible secret. Now he roams the countryside, looking for a cure to the anger that rages within him. He is an ordinary looking guy. You wouldn't be suspicious of him for any reason if you were to pass him on the street. And yet, whenever he gets angry, this quiet, peaceful, little guy begins to change. The first thing you see is his eyes, and then his chest expands and rips his shirt. And then his pants leg. His skin changes color and he becomes the *Incredible Hulk*.

Our text for today is a familiar one. It is one of the three readings every Ascension Sunday. In it Jesus relates His final instructions to His disciples just prior to His ascension into heaven at the end of His earthly ministry. He tells his disciples to "*Go and make disciples*" and then he tells them to go back to Jerusalem, back to the upper room, to wait until the Holy Spirit comes.

He promises them that, when the Holy Spirit comes, something amazing will happen. They will receive power.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

I had you picture those three images at the beginning of the message because I see reflected in them an infilling of something – a power of sorts – that is indicated in this passage of Scripture. There is a “before” and an “after” and the two are radically different.

This morning, I want to make **3 statements** about the impact that this empowering has on those of us who call ourselves the people of God.

STATEMENT #1: THIS EMPOWERING IS A TRANSFERABLE POWER

Zero in on the phrase “. . . *you will receive* . . .” at the beginning of this text.

But **you will receive** power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

If they were going to receive it, it goes without saying that they did not have it at the time this statement was made. It was yet to come. Somehow, through some means, the power they needed to be witnesses for God was going to be *transferred* to them.

- Jesus told them that the agent through which all of this was going to occur was the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit comes, you will receive power . . .

In the whole scheme of things, God had never empowered his people in this way. Not in the wilderness. Not during the exiles. Up to this point in time, the power of God had only been demonstrated by God Himself. But now, God was saying to His people:

"I give you the power to do the things that I have been doing."

I am going to share a rather embarrassing moment with you right now. My first “real” car was a 1975 Olds Cutlass. Two door. Dark brown exterior. White interior. Bucket seats. Eight-track tape player. I still owned it when we first moved to Springfield in 1986. I loved that car.

- At a particular point in time, we sold that car. We didn't trade it in. We ran an ad in the paper and sold it to a lady who promised to take good care of it and love it. When it came time for the sale, we had to go to a notary and “transfer” the title of that car from my name to her name. Prior to that moment, the car did not belong to this other lady. After that moment, it was hers.
- The moment of transfer.
- For a couple of months after that date of transfer, we would see the car parked along the street just off Lagonda Avenue. The kids would always say “There's our car!” But it wasn't “our” car anymore. It had been transferred to someone else.

At a particular date in history -- a date we call “Pentecost” -- God transferred that power to His people. The Holy Spirit came, visibly and powerfully, and filled His people.

It was now their power. God still had power -- that's not the point of this illustration. But now His people were empowered, too.

As you read through the book of Acts in particular, you see many ways in which that power was evident in His people. They had definitely been empowered.

Some churches teach that each of us need to experience a separate date of transference in our lives. I don't read the text in that way. I see it saying that when the Holy Spirit came, all of God's people received power -- all of God's people for all time.

- That means you and me, too. We have, by virtue of our status as the people of God, been empowered by God to witness. Just as the first disciples had been on Pentecost almost 2000 years ago.

STATEMENT #2: THIS EMPOWERING IS A TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER

Pay attention to another "you will" phrase please, the one that reads "*and you will be*":

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; **and you will be** my witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

This is another powerful statement about a future event -- a transformational event that all who are the people of God can expect to experience in their lives. *You will be* . . .

In the late 1970s, John Ritter starred in a movie called "Hero at Large." The movie was about a production company that hired Ritter and about 100 other actors to do public relations appearances to promote a new superhero movie they were going to produce. These actors would dress up in a superhero costume and stand in malls and sign autographs for the kids. And each night, a bus would pick them up and take them home, where they would resume their boring, humdrum lives.

- One night, John Ritter still had his costume on when he stopped by a little Mom and Pop grocery store to get some milk. He a trench coat on over the top of the costume, so no one saw it.
- While he was in the store, the place was held up. The crook pulled a gun and demanded all the money. John Ritter saw it over the top of one of the shelves.
- Without thinking he took off his overcoat, and jumped out in the open in costume in typical super-hero style. The robber is so stunned that he ran off without shooting, leaving the money behind.
- John Ritter goes home, thinking that the incident is all over. Except that the cashier called the police and the TV news to report what happened.
- Ritter gets caught up in the hype of what he has done, and begins to go out every night looking for crimes that he can thwart. And he finds them. Dozens of them. And the citizens all report to the police and TV news what they have seen.
- One night, though, the bad guy shoots, and John Ritter is wounded. He is discovered, and the hopes of the people are dashed when they find out their superhero is only an out-of-work actor living out a fantasy. He is so embarrassed and hounded by the people in town that he has to move.

- As he is leaving, he comes across this major apartment fire. Several departments are there, and there are scores of people lining the streets. All of the sudden one lady screams, "My baby! He's still in the building." John Ritter hears the location and hears the fire captain tell his crew that they cannot go back in to rescue the child because the fire is too bad.
- The next thing you see is a figure running across the top of the neighboring building. They shine a spotlight up and discover that it is . . . John Ritter, in costume. He races into the building, finds the kid, and brings him to the window. The firemen send a ladder up and bring the kid down. But before Ritter can get out, there is a major explosion and the crowd gasps. And watches in silence.
- Finally, one man in the crowd says, "I'm going in after him." And another. And another. The firemen try to stop them, but the men fight them off. And finally out they come with John Ritter. And the crowd cheers.

The point of the story is that this little, insignificant, out-of-work actor really did become a superhero. It is possible for that kind of transformation to occur. And it does. He is changed.

What is the power that changes him? It is not some kind of radioactive bug bite. He wasn't born on the planet Krypton. I suppose it was compassion. It never really is clear. Only that something happened. Something which changed him.

The Bible **is** clear about what makes the changes in the people of God. It is this power that we have been highlighting. The power of God at work in the people of God.

The power that God has poured out on each one of us who are His people is the kind of power that changes lives. It makes a difference in them. Sometimes dramatic differences, sometimes gradual ones. But the power is always a transformational one. Especially as it empowers us to be God's witnesses in this world.

#3: THIS EMPOWERING IS A TRANSLATABLE POWER

And now notice the last phrase of the verse, please:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witness **in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.** (Acts 1:8)

I use the word "translatable" to suggest that what we have received we have to reinterpret for those people to whom we communicate it. We have to put it into terms that have meaning for them.

Follow the progression. We receive the power. It changes us. And then we take it into all the world -- all the places we go.

Specifically, the text describes those places we go as Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth. Jerusalem was a city. Judea and Samaria were countries.

The ends of the earth was, obviously, the rest of the world. Almost like concentric circles -- an ever widening path reaching out from where they were.

- My Jerusalem is my most immediate circle of influence. It contains my family, my neighbors, the people in the places that I go. Our Jerusalems are all different. They are unique to us. Your first and primary responsibility to be a witness for God is right there in your Jerusalem, right there where you live life each and every day.
- My Judea and Samaria is the surrounding area. Places you might regularly go, but not necessarily every day. Places where you knew the people, or at least had quite a bit in common with them, but didn't necessarily hang out with them all the time.
- The ends of the earth ... This is everywhere you go. To the ends of the earth. We went to Germany two years ago on vacation. We saw people on that vacation that we will never see again. Did we represent Jesus Christ well before them? It is also our work in missions and outreach.
 - Did you know as a part of this church you are in Egypt, the Philippines, Malawi Africa.?

APPLICATION

Because Jesus ascended you have been empowered by God to be a witness there. The power to do that has already been given. The Holy Spirit has come at Pentecost. But Jesus had to leave first.

What all of this means is that we can represent God in each and every circumstance of our lives. There is never a time when we can legitimately say, "*Gee, I don't know if I can do that.*" Of course you can. You have been empowered to be God's witness!

Folks, think of the ramifications of that statement. One of the surest ways that Satan tries to defeat God's people is to convince them that they "*can't*" do something. *Oh, I could never do that!* That's a lie. I don't care what it is, you have been empowered to do it. Don't you ever say, "*I can't.*" That is a blatant denial of the power of God at work in you.

You may not want to. You may not have the time. Those are different issues. But you can do it. Don't ever deny that.

Amen.