

Sermon: Power From On High

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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One of the gifts of being a pastor of a church and I would think of coming to church regularly as many of you do is the calendar that it frames our lives with. In the secular calendar of our country we have these inflection points that mark our lives over the course of the year – New Year’s through winter and the Super Bowl, Valentine’s Day, first official day of Spring, the end of school, Memorial Day, summer, Labor Day, the start of school, Halloween, Thanksgiving and then Christmas in all its secular-ness.

But when you stay tuned into the church and when you are writing sermons as a pastor you’re on a different calendar which begins not at the new year but on the first Sunday in Advent preparing for the coming of Christ, then Jesus birth on Christmas, the season of Epiphany where he is revealed more thoroughly for who he is through the winter months, then the penitential season of Lent as we accompanying Jesus into the wilderness, leading up to the high holy days of Holy Week and Easter and then we are in His resurrection season for 40 days until this past Thursday when there is Jesus’ ascension into heaven and 10 days later, next Sunday, Pentecost, which becomes the season of the church year that brings us all the way to the end of the church year at the end of Nov before we set back into a new Christian year, all determined by his life and presence.

It’s a different frame to overlay over the course of your year, the story and the teachings, the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the scriptures that hold his presence up for us and invite us to frame our lives by him... for our

deepest human fulfillment is found not in the things we buy or the money we make or the things we have on our calendar to do but by Him who is our way, truth and life. And this time right now in the Christian calendar is a particularly important time because of what the Ascension and Pentecost speak to us.

At Easter and for 40 days thereafter Jesus appeared to his disciples and many other people, at one point the scripture says he appeared to 500 people. He appears in a glorified bodily form and then – boom - the appearances stop. The way the disciples explained it, was what Judy read to us this morning – that there was this moment when Jesus... and this is where language fails us but they say he “ascended into heaven”, or you could say was drawn into another dimension or if Jesus was fully God and God is Love then Jesus’ bodily material was transfigured into love-force. But it’s something like that that concepts cannot capture. SOMETHING happened, Jesus no longer appeared resurrected and we call it the Ascension. But before that moment he said something to the disciples that was very important. He said – “go back to the city and wait, for I will send the Holy Spirit and you will be **clothed with power from on high!**” And THEN he ascends. They are all standing there looking up into the sky until they hear a voice “uhm, what are doing look up there, do what he said, go into the city, dudes!” Don’t just stand there looking up for some airy-spiritual rescue to save you, c’mon off you go right back into the thick of things and wait... for what? “To be clothed with power from on high” of course!

And spoiler alert, that’s exactly what happens at Pentecost 10 days later, the disciples are “clothed with power from on high”. And even now when we baptize someone we believe there is some conveying of the Holy Spirit’s power from on high that happens; that at some level or another John Howland has now

received something of that power from on high just as we too have who have been baptized. And what in the world does that mean for John and for all of us baptized folks, to be clothed with power from on high? Well, that is a very good question cause it's not just any power it is specifically the power that comes from Jesus' Holy Spirit.

So the power that comes from on high is not power that gives a kind of strength so that we can be stronger than other people and dominate them. That is not what is given. The power from on high is not a power to rule in the halls of power, to become a great politician and powerbroker in Boston or Washington, that's not the power given. Nor is the power from on high special knowledge so that John can get into Harvard or MIT and be the smartest guy ever (which we all know he is of course!). The power from on high is not power to climb the social ladder and get a great job and make a ton of money. Sorry about that John. It's not power of position so that you are safe and protected from all harm because you are now favored by God... that's not how the power from on high works. All we have to do is see what happened at the end of Jesus' life to know that whatever power they are talking about such strength, knowledge, domination, success, protection, favor and victory is not what it's about. I know, it's disappointing isn't it? Shoot man, I like all of those things... a lot, I like them!

So then what is the power from on high that was given at Pentecost and promised at baptism if not that kind of power. Well, quite simply it's not power OVER but power FOR... power. For. the sake. of others.

Jesus' whole life was given for the sake of others and that's "the power from on high", that's what the great Christian revelation was all about: that God's power, even God's Greatest Power Ever is not power over but power for. The

original sin is that we humans, made in the image of God, grabbed ahold the power given us and turned it in towards ourselves and against others when the power is meant to be for the sake of others... because, quite frankly, we're talking about the power of love and that's what love does. What is given from on high and what I encourage you to look for, John, in your own life now is something that looks and feels like this – the power to offer a healing word to someone who is hurt, wounded, broken, cause healing power is the power that comes from on high. And it's the kind of power that gives you courage to be truthful in the face of deception, truth blesses people while lies curse and truth is something of the power from on high. And it's the power to turn the other cheek and to respond with goodness when those around you are responding with something less, that's the power from on high, the power for good. You won't be able to control other people with the power from on high – it specifically doesn't work that way - but a deeper capacity to notice your own shadows and failures and to confess and be honest with yourself in your own complicity with what's wrong in the world, you'll have that kind of power. I know, I know, not nearly as much fun as the other kind of power, but much much less damaging to the world and others as well and so much more healing.

This world is filled, way too filled, with examples of the other kind of power, the power that dominates and hurts and damages other people. It was on display in a devastating scene from Uvalde, Texas where our insistence on access to all kinds of weapons of violence makes very sick people able to cause very great harm. And it's on display sickeningly, day in and day out in Ukraine as Putin's Russia continues to devastate a smaller weaker country. And we must remember here on Memorial Day weekend that the service members of our own country

similarly met with violent ends because of men with power grasping for more power to put themselves on high which inevitably creates chaos and death all over...

That kind of power from this world's high places rather than from the heavenly heights multiplies evil often in the form of trauma that lives in people's lives and continues to have its ripple effects as people who've experienced the violence of those in power, whether that's the president of a country or an athlete sexually assaulting a woman who he paid to give him a massage, or church pastors abusing their position and privilege for their own gain at the expense of others, the nature of such evil is that it causes the ripple effect trauma that leaves people for lifetimes trying to come out from under its effect; the post-traumatic stress of it, grappling with shame and depression or eating disorders or suicidal thoughts or crippling anxiety... all because the power that someone had over someone else was misused and abused and devoid of the truer power from on high. There's such a drastic and terrible contrast between power given from on high from Jesus' spirit and power wielded here below that comes from some other place, call it Hell or the Devil or human arrogance or whatever.

It's what Jesus' temptations were all about – the devil, the Accuser, wanted to give Jesus the power of here below to make bread from stones, to dominate and rule over others, to ensure his own safety, and Jesus refused them all and insisted on awaiting the power from on high and even when that power led to his own excruciating sacrifice he remained true to it, did not bail for the other power that he could have claimed for himself.

And that's what we are asked to do... to distinguish between the power from here below that is corrupted and corruptible and the power from on high

that is blessed and blesses. And when we have power in a given situation, whatever degree and gradient of power which we all have at some level or another, we at least should be aware how easily it can be twisted towards protection and advancement of self and domination of others which is contrary to the power from on high that comes from Jesus and holds great potential in us for manifesting good... and a similar ripple effect in the world.

And in the meantime we lament and mourn for the innocents that are caught in the terrible webs of human power and violence and greed, like the children in Uvalde, like the soldiers and civilians in Ukraine or Yemen or Afghanistan and the service members who died in service to this country as we honor them this weekend, all victims of power gone awry and corrupting when the power on high comes always more gently to bless.

I'd like to end with a song about those victims of power from below. It's a sweet song of hope that the power from on high will have the final say in the by and by, in heaven. It's a song by John Gorka which was written for soldiers who had died, but somehow feels very appropriate for the children killed Uvalde this week as well... it's called "Let Them in, Peter" ...

LET THEM IN

Let them in, Peter, they are very tired
Give them couches where the angels sleep
And light those fires

Let them wake whole again to brand new dawns
Fired by the sun not wartime's bloody guns

May their peace be deep remember where the broken bodies lie
God knows how young they were to have to die.
God knows how young they were to have to die.

So give them things they like let them make some noise
Give dance hall bands not golden harps to these our boys

And let them love, Peter for they've had no time
They should have trees and bird songs and hills to climb

The taste of summer in a ripened pear and girls sweet as meadow wind
With flowing hair

And tell them how they are missed but say not to fear
It's gonna be alright with us down here.

Let them in Peter