

## **“The Power for Leaders”**

On April 12, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt died while vacationing at his home in Warm Springs, Georgia. He had been President of the United States for twelve years and had led it through one of the most difficult times in its history. When he died the country was still involved in the largest war in history and although Germany was on the cusp of defeat, the United States still had to conquer the Empire of Japan. This was a change in leadership at a critical time and the people were anxious because they had to place their trust in an unknown clothing salesman from Missouri named Harry Truman.

Truman inherited the Presidency at a time when Vice-Presidents had little knowledge of the workings of the White House. When he became President he had no knowledge that the United States was working to build an atomic bomb. He had to learn from scratch. Many wondered if he was up to the job.

Although heavily criticized while in office, Harry Truman ended up becoming one of the best Presidents in U.S. history. He made the difficult decision to drop the first atomic bomb. He had to deal with the Cold War with the Soviet Union. He and his staff developed the Marshall Plan which saved an economically crushed Western Europe from Soviet takeover. He also headed the Berlin airlift to save West Berlin from the Soviets.

Truman also had to make the difficult decision to send troops into South Korea to defend that nation from an invasion by North Korea. It was not a popular decision and many veterans of World War II resented being called back into service. But Truman did what he thought was needed. He eventually had to fire a popular general, Douglas McArthur, for failing to follow orders. When Truman left office, he had a very low job approval rating and was considered a failure.

Over time Truman has become to be regarded as one of the best Presidents in U.S. history. The tough decisions he had to make are now regarded as a key to the United States victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War. His willingness to be unpopular at the time he governed proved to be the best for the country.

In our passage today from Acts 1:1-11, the followers of Jesus Christ also face a change in leadership. Jesus is getting ready to ascend to heaven and leave the believers behind. In verse 2, there are three signals that alert the reader to the importance of the events that will soon follow. First, the ascension helps to introduce the succession of the apostles to Jesus' ministry. They will continue to do and teach what Jesus had begun. There is a religious crisis here. With Jesus' departure, the question is whether the new age of God's promised salvation will continue to unfold in his absence.

The second signal is that Luke, the writer of Acts, understood that all Jesus did as God's messiah was "through the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of prophecy who calls forth, empowers, and authorizes the Messiah's prophetic ministry and will ensure continuity in his absence. Jesus' instructions to his apostles are given "through the Holy Spirit" because only through and by the Spirit's power and direction will they fulfill their vocation as prophets like Jesus.

The third mark is that Luke mentions the apostles whom Jesus had chosen. The word apostle means someone who is sent out with something important to give another. In this case the important task was a word of salvation to proclaim and mighty works to perform in Jesus' name. Similar to the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus chose the apostles with God's providential help and they were given special responsibilities.

Both the catchphrases "through the Holy Spirit" and "the apostles whom Jesus had chosen" introduce the key elements of the continuity of succession from Jesus to the apostles. Both the Holy Spirit and the apostles are the appointed successors of God's messiah. In the Old Testament the Spirit was the instrument by whom prophets are raised. In the New Testament Jesus' apostolic successors are God's spirit filled prophets. Today, what are the marks of the Spirit-filled

prophets? They are those who help the community experience God's love, know God's word and discern God's will.

In Acts 1:3-8 Jesus gives us his Last Will and Testament. The central moment of this narrative is the prophecy of the coming of God's Spirit. The Spirit will empower the mission of the church. Jesus will ascend to heaven forty days after Easter. Ascension Day was actually this past Thursday and 10 days later the Spirit will come at Pentecost. The mission of the church will be inaugurated by God on Pentecost day.

Jesus tells the apostles to wait in Jerusalem on the promise of the father which is that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. They are to wait together in one place for God's promise because this is a corporate act, not an individual act. They will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as a community. The Holy Spirit will continue to mediate God's word before, through, and after Christ is on earth. Initiation into the realm of the Spirit enables the believers to bring an effective witness of the risen Jesus to the world. God's reign will be re-established among God's people not by some apocalyptic act from above but by a mission on earth.

In v. 8 Jesus says "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." Luke's word for power in the Greek is *dynamis*,

which stands for a robust force at work. One can tell that it is similar to the word dynamite, which is a powerful force used for blasting. The Holy Spirit gives great power to believers to give them the competency to enable them to perform the tasks given them, whether through their inspired words, their miraculous works, or through their leadership with the community's common life.

How do we apply this passage to our Christian lives today? The Holy Spirit does not work in an intellectual vacuum nor is Christian witness effective if it merely testifies to the experience of God's salvation without being able to interpret meaning for all of life. Much of this passage in Acts 1 involves believers coming together in order to learn, wait upon God, and to pray in preparation to witness in Jesus' name by the Spirit's power. Jesus used the forty days between his resurrection and his ascension for an extended preparation and examination for the difficult work ahead once he ascended. Unlike Harry Truman, the apostles were given information and training. They were given convincing proofs by Jesus and the apostles were eyewitnesses to Jesus's ascension, lending credibility to their proclamation that he is alive and resurrected.

Today the risen Lord bids us and fills us with the Holy Spirit to witness to him publicly and boldly in all that we do and say. The same Holy Spirit guided and empowered Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he guided the Confessing Church in Germany

to oppose Nazi Germany. The Spirit led Martin Luther as he brought about the Reformation. That same spirit led Martin Luther King, Jr., as he led the civil rights movement. Our Christian community today is enabled by God's Spirit to witness to God's messiah, to preach persuasively and teach boldly, to interpret scripture after the mind of God, and to perform miracles to awaken people to the benevolence of God's rule.

In closing, let us remember that the power given to us by the Holy Spirit means that we take the message of God to the ends of the earth and to all people, especially those living on the margins of society. In Acts 1 Jesus rejected the idea that the message of salvation would be limited to the Jewish people. John Wesley also reminds us not to be stuck thinking that God only shows up inside the church or inside the four walls of whatever box we try to put God in. Wesley wrote that he looked "upon all the world as my parish." By this he meant that God's presence and activity encompass the whole world, indeed the "ends of the earth," so ministry and mission are possible everywhere. Wesley insisted that we share the good news of God's love and do good in all places. "Ends of the earth" refers to God's purposes to bring salvation to all of humanity.