Mission and Ministry Sunday

**“MARCH OFF THE MAP!”**

SERMON

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my*

*witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

Acts 1:8

INTRODUCTION More than 300 years before the time of Christ, Alexander the Great was marching across Asia Minor. Under his leadership was the greatest army ever assembled to that time. They had conquered every foe. No one could stand up against them. When they reached the Himalaya Mountains, the leaders on the front-line came back to Alexander filled with concern and dismay. “We have marched off the map,” they said. “We should go back to where we know.” They had literally marched off the known map of that time. Alexander listened to them and then said this, “Mediocre armies always stay within the known areas. The great armies always march off the map.”

Alexander the Great wasn’t the only conqueror to give the orders, “March off the map!” In one little verse today, we hear Jesus, the One who conquered death, give those same orders to his army. Fellow soldiers, today our Savior gives us the command, “March off the map!” As we consider our Commander’s marching orders from Acts 1, we will see that we are encouraged, we are compelled, we are ordered: 1) to march together as a Spirit-led Church; 2) to march together as a risk-taking Church; and 3) to march together as a reproducing Church.

I. MARCH TOGETHER AS A SPIRIT-LED CHURCH Before sounding the orders to march, our Savior makes a promise. He says, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” As you hear those words, stop to think what a difference it makes for us to be a Spirit-led army, a Spirit-led Church? For one, it gives direction. The Holy Spirit provides the Church with an understanding of what we should be concerned about. That’s not something that comes naturally. Remember the disciples who first heard these words from Jesus? They walked with Jesus for three years. They witnessed his resurrection. Over a period of 40 days he had made it crystal clear to them that he had conquered death. But what are they concerned about? Their heads are still stuck in the sand as they ask Jesus, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6)?

Brothers and sisters, without the Holy Spirit, that’s you and me. Without the Holy Spirit, that’s our church body. On our own it is impossible to comprehend spiritual things or to know their importance. Like those first disciples it is so easy to let our personal ideas about what the church should be doing interfere with what the Lord wants done. Programs can become more important than people; beautiful buildings can become more important than bodies won for Christ; organizations can trump the Lord’s orders. That’s why Jesus sends his Spirit. Working through the Word the Spirit sees to it that we are not left spiritually wandering or wondering. The Spirit leads us to see Jesus as our Savior and to recognize that our job on earth is to be witnesses of that Savior. It is important to march together as a Spirit-led Church because the Holy Spirit leads us to remember what we’re commissioned to do.

But not only does being a Spirit-led Church provide direction for our marching; being a Spirit-led Church gives us confidence to march. Christ, our Commander says, “You will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” Look at the impact that the Holy Spirit’s power had on those disciples. Just a few weeks earlier, one of those men fled naked in the Garden of Gethsemane and another one crumbled under the questioning of a servant girl. All of them abandoned the Lord Jesus. But later, given the Spirit’s power, those same disciples were changed from frightened cowards to fearless confessors. Empowered by the Spirit they could even perform miracles such as driving out demons and curing diseases. But the greatest demonstration of the Spirit’s power was not seen in outward miracles, rather it would be seen in the effect their message would have on human hearts and lives. Remember that first Pentecost Sunday? Led by the Spirit, the disciples preached to the crowds assembled in Jerusalem. Under the Spirit’s power, their message took hearts filled with hatred of Jesus and turned them into hearts pulsating with love for the Savior. That’s power! That’s amazing power!

And that same amazing power of the Spirit has been given to us. We have the gospel that is the power of God to salvation. But at times we forget, don’t we? At times we forget or underestimate the power that the Holy Spirit gives us in that gospel. Sometimes, almost like those first disciples hiding behind locked doors, we sit around and wring our hands about the boldness of Jesus’ enemies in the world. We look at the fact that in today’s world there are more unbelievers than at any other time in history and we’re ready to throw in the towel. We forget that God has placed into our hands and our hearts the raw power of his gospel, a gospel that is no less capable of creating and sustaining faith today than it was in the first century. As a Spirit-led Church we have the power to pour water on a baby’s head and apply God’s Word and know that another child is brought into God’s kingdom. As a Spirit-led Church we have the power to offer bread and wine connected to God’s Word and know that a sinner is assured to be in a right relationship with God. As a Spirit-led Church we are equipped with the tools necessary to bring down the devil’s walls, to cut through hearts of stone and let the Spirit lead people to faith in our Savior. Fellow soldiers, we can march together confidently as a Spirit-led Church because we are guided by the Spirit of God and equipped with the power of God.

II. MARCH TOGETHER AS A RISK-TAKING CHURCH And as a Spirit-led Church, we can also march together as a risk-taking church. Jesus brings that thought to mind when he gives us his marching orders and says, “You will be my witnesses.”

Why is being a witness a risky business? Look at the disciples. As they witnessed about Christ and for Christ, their lives were immediately at risk. They were tortured for even mentioning the gospel message. They were tried, imprisoned, banished, and finally executed for simply talking. It is no surprise that the Greek word for “witness” is equivalent to our word “martyr.”

But it is not only the external threats that make witnessing risky. At least, here in our country there aren’t too many people who will imprison, torture, or kill us for speaking about our Savior. More than likely, the bigger risks that we face as witnesses come from internal threats. As individual witnesses for Christ, we face the fear of failure. Will I say the right thing? Will I embarrass myself? Will I embarrass my Savior? Will I walk away with more questions about my own faith? Faced with those risks we often adopt the fearful attitude of that servant who buried the talent his master entrusted to him instead of putting it to work.

But just as much as a fear of failure is an internal threat, isn’t it true that a fear of success can also make us regard witnessing as risky? Aren’t we, at times, like those soldiers who came to Alexander the Great and said, “We should go back to where we know”? We realize that witnessing can lead us to places we’ve never been before. Witnessing can take us out of our comfort zone. Increasingly, the people moving into our neighborhoods are different from us. What will reaching out to them mean for our congregations? How do we penetrate the big cities of our world today? Can we afford to do it? Are we willing to change the way we do ministry, as long as it is within the parameters of Scripture, in order to reach them?

Risks are there, but haven’t we seen how God blesses us when we take risks in his name? Consider how congregations in our synod are working with Hmong, Vietnamese, and Sudanese living in their communities – and who in some cases just walked right into their churches! Was reaching out to a new people taking a risk? You bet it was. It’s forced our church body to look at ministry from a different perspective. It prompted us to develop a new ministerial training program called Pastoral Studies Institute, which helps train leaders from other cultures. And there was one of the bigger risks we deal with on a regular basis—it took money. But look at what God did and is doing through those risks. He has led several men from these other cultures to become full-time pastors in our church body. Some have been used by God to spread the gospel to others in their own communities. Others are scattered out around the United States. Still others have gone to their countries of origin to reach out with the power of the gospel. God moved us to take a risk and now thousands of people from other cultures are marching together with us as a Spirit-led Church.

Think God wants us to be a risk-taking church? Listen again to his orders: “You **will be** my witnesses.”He does not seek negotiation. He does not ask for input. He is not overly concerned about whether or not being a witness is exactly what we had in mind. He leaves no option. We will be what he makes us to be: witnesses. Fellow soldiers, let us march together as a risk-taking Church because that is what our Savior calls us to be.

III. MARCH TOGETHER AS A REPRODUCING CHURCH And now for the fun part. What does a Spirit-led Church and risk-taking Church become? It becomes a reproducing church. On the tail end of his marching orders, Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses **in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**”Almost immediately, we see this come to fruition. Led by the Spirit, and taking a risk by witnessing to a crowd that once cried, “Crucify!”, the disciples saw first-hand how God made his Church a reproducing Church. Within ten days of Jesus giving the marching orders, Christianity became a worldwide event. People from Arabia, Africa, Italy, and Greece were all there to hear Peter’s Spirit-led, risk-taking witness of Christ. And they believed. Three thousand were added to their number that day. Later on we find Peter’s testimony recorded before the Jews at the temple in Jerusalem and before the Sanhedrin. Philip begins the witness to the Samaritans and also witnesses to an African. Paul witnesses through Asia, Greece, Italy, and the islands in between.

Today, the testimony of those eyewitnesses of Christ continues to go out. Today Christ’s Church is still a reproducing Church. When a mother sings, “I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb” to her baby boy, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When a pastor tells his congregation, “Through Jesus, you are forgiven,” God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When a grandfather witnesses to his grandchildren from his deathbed, “I’m going home to my Savior,” God’s Church is a reproducing Church. Those situations are our “Jerusalem.”

But God’s Church isn’t just reproducing in our homes, congregations, and in our neighborhoods. The testimony of those eyewitnesses of Christ continues to go out very literally to the ends of God’s earth. Whenever the gospel message is translated into new languages, which is what happens through our WELS Multi-Language Publications, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. Whenever we march into new countries like Ethiopia, Vietnam, and the Philippines with the disciple’s message, God’s Church is a reproducing Church. When we send young people around the world to teach English as a Second Language classes and they wear their faith on their sleeves, God’s church is a reproducing church. When we use the Internet to make Christian resources in Spanish available to people all over the world, God’s church is a reproducing church. We are able to see that God’s Church is marching off the map!

Fellow soldiers, by God’s grace we are part of that march. May we continue to march together as Spirit-led Church, as a risk-taking Church and as a reproducing Church. May we march together off the map! Amen.