

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Succession of the Spirit"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 1:1-14, 21-26
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 16, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Did you notice that we changed the decorations in the sanctuary? On Friday, we took down the Easter season banners and put up the Pentecost banners. Technically, it isn't Pentecost yet. That happens next Sunday. So next Sunday is the day you should all wear red clothing to worship, in honor of the flames of fire that landed on the disciples' heads. And next Sunday is when we will get out the May birthday box, because Pentecost is the day we celebrate the birthday of the church.

The reason we put up the Pentecost banners a week early is because today is known as Ascension Sunday. By the church calendar, today is when we read from Acts chapter one about the day Jesus ascended into heaven and told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. As I was thinking about Ascension Day and Pentecost, I decided that we ought to do a sermon series from the Book of Acts. The full title of the Book of Acts is "The Acts of the Apostles." But it could also be named "The Acts of the Spirit" because, in every chapter, the main character is God's Holy Spirit, who is constantly preparing Jesus' disciples to go forth and spread the Christian gospel.

So, from now until mid-July, we're going to read stories about the "Acts of the Spirit"—the empowerment of the Spirit, the witness of the Spirit, the gift of the Spirit, the message of the Spirit, the fathers of the Spirit, the reception of the Spirit, the inclusivity of the Spirit, and the church of the Spirit. Today we begin with the succession of the Spirit.

STORIES OF SUCCESSION OF THE SPIRIT

You may have noticed that the Call to Worship in today's service was based on the story of how the Holy Spirit was passed from the prophet Elijah to his disciple Elisha. The story from Acts 1 is similar. Jesus isn't drawn up into heaven by a chariot, and his clothing doesn't fall back down to earth. But you

can see the obvious parallel. The mantle is passed from the leader and teacher to the followers and students. In the New Testament, just like in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is at work, moving from one generation to the next. As the leaders come to the end of their time on earth, it's a question of inheritance. It's a question of succession. There's no doubt God's Spirit wants to live on. But how will that happen? Will there be willing and capable recipients? And who will they be? Today, we could add: All these generations later, is the succession of the Spirit still happening? And how can we be participants in these acts of the Spirit?

1—WHEN WE'VE BEEN WITH JESUS

In this story from Acts, chapter one, we can see—first of all—that the succession of the Spirit happens when we've been with Jesus. Acts 1:2-3 indicates that those who were there to see Jesus ascend were “the apostles whom he had chosen.” They were the ones to whom Jesus had given instructions. They were disciples who had seen Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. They were ones who had heard Jesus “speaking about the kingdom of God.” Later, in verse 21, Peter is explaining the criteria for a new apostle to replace Judas. They were looking for someone who had “accompanied [them] during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among [them], beginning from the baptism of John until the day when [Jesus] was taken up from [them].” In other words, the succession of the Holy Spirit wasn't going to happen to just anyone. It was going to happen to someone who had spent time with Jesus—hearing him teach, watching him heal, agonizing over his crucifixion, and seeing him appear in resurrection.

This requirement of having spent time with Jesus seems obvious on the one hand and scary on the other. If a person actually had to be with Jesus in order to participate in the succession of the Spirit, then what about all of us who have come later? What if we weren't even alive then?

We get an answer to that in Acts 1:1. Bible scholars know that the writer of the Book of Acts is the same person who wrote the Gospel according to Luke. They can tell from the writing style and

vocabulary. And they can tell from what this first verse says: “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven.” The author, who was setting out now to write volume two, was giving a gentle reminder to someone named Theophilus that none of these acts of the Spirit and the Apostles would make any sense without first reading volume one. It was through reading, learning, and embracing the gospel that Theophilus could spend time with Jesus and thus become prepared to share in the succession of the Spirit.

The same is true for us today. We too have received the gift of not just the one Gospel of Luke, but also the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John. It’s in those beloved and precious stories of teaching, healing, dying, forgiving, and rising again that we find Jesus and hang out with him. Jesus and his good news message about the kingdom of God is not lost to us and gone. When we read, learn, absorb, and allow ourselves to be challenged by Jesus’ words and actions, then we truly will have been with Jesus. That’s when we’ll be ready for the succession of the Spirit.

2—WHEN WE’VE BEEN IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Acts 1 also indicates that the succession of the Spirit will happen when we’ve been in prayer together. We see this in verses 12 through 14. The disciples returned to Jerusalem and came together in an upper room, and prayed together there. It seems evident that both the “prayer” and the “together” were important. Sure, the disciples could have prayed alone or in small groups somewhere else. But there seemed to be something important about getting a larger group together. And, yes, the disciples could have gotten together for other reasons—maybe to grieve, to eat a meal, to have a party, or to plan. But coming together for prayer is what would result in the succession of the Spirit that became evident at Pentecost.

There’s something powerful that happens when people pray together. Verse 15 indicates that there were 120 of them in that upper room. That’s enough people in a room to feel exciting, like something important is about to happen. And for them to be praying together means that they had to

have some degree of unity. They were on the same page, wanting and hoping for the same things. When we pray together, we're imagining the same outcomes, seeing the same visions, and asking for God's same will to be done. That's not always an easy feat. Imagine those 11 original disciples, plus members of Jesus' family, plus the women who faithfully followed Jesus, and many more. That's the potential for a lot of opinions, perspectives, differences, and conflicts. And, yet, they were able to pray together because they had spent time with Jesus and they shared his vision of the kingdom of God. The succession of the Spirit could happen to them, and to us, when we've been in prayer together.

Now that the COVID threat and restrictions are lifting, we here at First United Methodist Church will have an easier time gathering for prayer together. If you are able to be here in person, I hope you will come often and regularly. If you worship with us online, we consider you part of our flock too—but it would help us to know you by name. It would encourage us and you if we could be become friends in faith. It would give us a stronger sense that we are ready to participate in the succession of the Spirit through our prayer together.

3—WHEN WE INVITE NEW LEADERS

After laying out the importance of being with Jesus and praying together, Acts 1 tells us a third criteria for the succession of the Spirit. The passing of the mantle happens when we invite new participants and leaders. That's the definition of "succession," after all. Succession is about the transfer of leadership from one generation, person, or group to another. The ascension of Jesus story is about the transfer of the Spirit from Jesus to the disciples. And then, because Judas had died, the disciples determined that they needed a new person to fill that 12th position. Verses 21-26 tell us that the disciples looked for persons who had spent time with Jesus. They narrowed it down to two, and then cast lots for the final determination. They then invited Matthias to join the other 11 apostles in that leadership group.

This need for new leaders makes me think of what's going on in our United Methodist denomination right now. Because the 2020 General Conference was delayed by COVID, first by one and a half years, and now by two and a half years, we're getting into a bind with leadership. There are approximately 65 active bishops in the United Methodist denomination, and about 1/3 of them are at the age to retire. But, because of the delay in our denominational meetings, there hasn't been the possibility of electing new leaders. Bishops who aren't retiring yet are having to take on extra duties and extra-large geographical areas. They're being spread really thin. So it will be a huge relief to the church at large when new bishops can be elected, and we can get some new leaders into the system.

In the local church, we also need new leaders, volunteers, and participants. Long-time faithful members of the church are growing older and becoming more frail. So we need to invite new persons into our church to help fill the gaps. Each one of us needs to be on the lookout for people we can invite to come and worship with us, study with us, and join in mission projects with us. We need to be willing to share our faith, knowledge, and experience, and pass along valuable skills. And, sometimes, we need to give permission and encouragement for the new people to do things the way they see best. When we invite new leaders, that's when we'll see the succession of the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

When I was a teenager, I learned a hymn called "Let Thy Mantle Fall on Me." The first three stanzas talk about the succession of the Spirit between Elijah and Elisha. Stanzas four and five switch to the story in Acts 1.

In the Upper Room they waited/ 'Twas the faithful Christian band—
 And their pray'r was heard and answered/ Over in the glory land.
 Let Thy Spirit fall on me; Let Thy Spirit fall on me.
 The promised blessing—may it be outpoured./ Let Thy Spirit fall on me!*

Yes, may it be so. On me, on you—and from us to others—may there be a succession of the Spirit!