

Easter Series 2016:
A Focus on Our Baptismal Vows and the Book of Acts

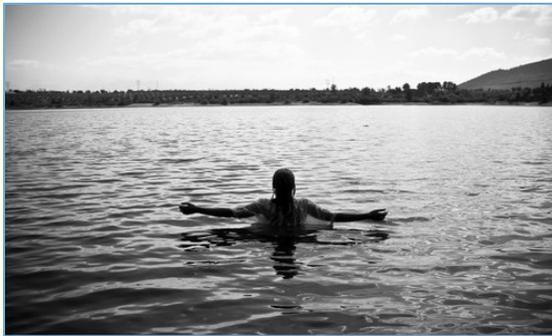
Rev. Dawn Chesser
Discipleship Ministries
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Note that full sermon notes for these texts will be available online at
<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-preaching>

Tools:
Bible (or online access to <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>)

[Our Membership Vows in The United Methodist Church](#) by Mark W. Stamm

Second Sunday of Easter, Year C



Anchor Image for Series: A person rising up out of the waters of baptism or some image that suggests moving from baptism to living as a disciple.

Key Words: Renounce, Reject, Repent

Baptismal Vow:

“To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of sin.”

Notes on the Vow: In the early church (according to *The Apostolic Tradition*), when people entered the period of catechesis in preparation for baptism, the process of formation began with the demand for repentance. Gladiators, idol makers, and adulterers, among others, were called to turn away from their lifestyles immediately. If they were not willing to repent (which sometimes meant leaving their jobs), they were sent away and told to come back only when they were ready. In other words, the early church *expected people to live differently as a result of their baptismal vows.*

Likewise, when early Methodists wished to join bands or class meetings, they were called to “flee from the wrath to come and be saved from their sins” by doing no harm and avoiding evil of every kind. John Wesley named some of these “evils” outright. On his list were practices such as slaveholding, usury, and uncharitable conversations. So the early Methodists also *expected people to live differently as a result of their decision to join a band/class meeting.*

Question to consider: When people join our churches, do we *expect them to live differently as a result of their decision to unite as members of Christ’s holy church?*

Background to the text:

A couple of important things have happened just prior to this reading. Ananias has withheld some of the proceeds from the sale of a piece of property rather than giving it all to the church. Peter confronts him, and Ananias drops dead. Then, when his wife Sapphira is asked about it, she lies and also drops dead. Word quickly spreads about the power present among the apostles, especially their power to heal, and the number of believers begins to grow. So the priest, in a jealous rage, takes action and arrests the apostles. In the night, an angel of the Lord opens the gates and releases all the prisoners. When the priest asks what has happened, he is told that the prisoners are out and teaching in the temple. So the priest has them brought before him, where he confronts Peter and the apostles about their disobedience to his orders to stop teaching in the name of Jesus.

Text: [Acts 5:27-32, NRSV](#)

²⁷When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Key point of connection between text and vow: Naming the evil powers of this world that stand in the way of proclaiming the gospel and calling people to live differently from the way they have lived before. Peter is announcing publically his intent to live differently when he defends his right to proclaim the gospel message, even after he is ordered by authorities -- other RELIGIOUS authorities -- to stop what he is doing. His faith will not allow him to keep silent. He is willing to risk his life to follow Jesus.

The first **act** of living out our baptismal covenant, then, is to name the evil powers at work in the world in which we participate, either willingly or unwillingly, and discern where our vows are calling us to live and act differently because of our vows.

Sermon Starter Questions to Discuss with Your Worship Team:

- What "spiritual forces of wickedness" and "evil powers of this world" would you put on your list if you were making one? Consider the world, your own community, your particular congregation, your work, and your personal life.
- Are there things you are doing that destroy God's people, deface God's creation, and stand in opposition to the coming of God's reign?
- How can you "obey God rather than any human authority"? What might you need to change? How do you need to "live differently" in your own context? Is it always possible to do this? What can you do if it is not possible?
- Name one thing you can do to witness to the power of the Holy Spirit over and against the spiritual forces of wickedness and evil powers of the world.

Notes from Planning Session:

Sermon Ideas:

Music Ideas:

Visuals:

Bringing the Word to Young Worshipers:

Third Sunday of Easter, Year C

Key Word: Resist

Baptismal Vow:

“To accept the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression.”

Notes on the vow: This week is about active resistance to the evil, injustice, and oppression of the world in which we live. Mark Stamm writes:

How does the church do this work of resistance? Does our way differ from what those outside the church may do? When Americans think of resisting evil, our thoughts may be drawn to battling Nazi fascism by sending waves of young soldiers onto the bloody beaches of Normandy. We may think of New York City police officers and fire fighters who rushed into the chaos of the World Trade Center, giving themselves up to save as many persons as possible. These actions did say “No!” to evil; doubtless, some of those who served saw their grim work as an expression of their Christian discipleship. Regardless of the motivations, lives were saved as the result of these sacrifices, and that is a good thing.

Resisting evil may require the use of force. For that reason, the church needs to continue reflecting on the just use of force, and our church has done so. As our United Methodist Social Principles assert, “we deplore war and urge the peaceful settlement of all disputes among nations.” We also remind ourselves that many Christians have decided that use of force “may regretfully be preferable to unchecked aggression, tyranny, and genocide.”

*We have failed to hear the Gospel, however, if we think that force is the only way to resist evil. The baptismal and liturgical context for these membership vows suggests another way. According to the ancient church order mentioned earlier [*The Apostolic Tradition*], one moved directly from the baptismal font into the assembly of the faithful, where one participated in the intercessory prayers of the people, the kiss of peace, and the Eucharist. This order reveals that baptism and these other worship acts are deeply related. Intercessory prayer is a way of resisting evil. When people practice the discipline of reconciliation embodied in the passing of the peace, enmity is rooted out before it can mature into bitterness and violence. When people gather around the Lord’s Table, offering themselves and their gifts to God while giving thanks for God’s mighty acts in Jesus Christ, they learn how to exercise dominion over Creation in the right way. When the bread and cup are freely given and received, the bondage of selfishness is broken and a new vision of community takes shape. The Eucharist resists evil by forming us according to a different vision. (Mark Stamm, [Our Membership Vows in the United Methodist Church](#). Nashville: Discipleship Ministries, 2014, pages 12-13, *emphasis mine*.)*

Question to consider: How can we draw from liturgically rooted practices such as intercessory prayer, passing the peace, and celebrating Holy Communion as means of resisting evil and oppression in the context in which we live and serve?

Background to the Text:

In chapter ten a man in Caesarea, a Gentile centurion named Cornelius, experienced a vision in which an angel of the Lord urged him to summon Peter to come and visit him. When Peter got the invitation, he agreed to come. On his way to the city from Joppa, Peter stopped to pray and eat. During his stop, he fell into a trance in which he had a vision similar to the vision we read about in the text for today. As Peter was puzzling over what the vision meant, Cornelius' servant appeared to take him to see the centurion. So the next day Peter went to Caesarea. When Peter asked Cornelius why he had been summoned, Cornelius shared the vision he had experienced with Peter. Peter responded by witnessing about Jesus Christ and inviting Cornelius, a Gentile, to become a follower. As Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard him speak. Although the circumcised Jewish Christians among them were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, Peter invited them to be baptized.

Word quickly spread down to Judea about what had happened in Caesarea among the Gentiles, and Peter began to catch flak from the circumcised Jewish Christians about whether or not Gentiles could be baptized into the body of Christ. Peter's action demonstrates that God shows no partiality, but accepts anyone in any place who honors God and does what is right. Through the witness of Paul and Peter, we hear the good news that God welcomes all people into the family of Jesus Christ.

Acts 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Key Point of Connection Between Text and Vow:

Sometimes we must move beyond renouncing, rejecting, and repenting of our sin toward resistance to evil. This may mean standing up for folks whom some in the church have predetermined to be unwelcome in the body of Christ or for certain roles within the body. We have only to scroll down through our own Methodist

history to find examples of this sort of resistance to evil happening in our denomination. I think, for example, of how John and Charles Wesley both spoke against the practice of enslaving people of African descent, and how Methodists then struggled for more than two centuries, and still are not finished, over how to resist and eradicate forever the racist attitudes that are so deeply entrenched in American Christianity. Still, God has come to people in dreams and visions and empowered them to speak out against this evil in every generation.

Likewise, although the biblical witness suggests that women held significant positions in early Christianity, since the church began to develop, women have been refused certain leadership roles. Indeed, in the majority of Christian communions today, women are not allowed to preach or lead or teach men in the church. While the Methodists began ordaining women in 1956, and women outnumber men in many of our seminaries today, it is clear that women continue to struggle for equality in the church. Many of our brothers and sisters in the faith continue to insist that the Scriptures clearly limit the role that women can play in leading the church.

Sermon Starter Questions to Discuss with Your Worship Team:

- What are some concrete examples you can think of where your church needs to stand in resistance to evil, injustice, and oppression?
- What form might that resistance take? How has the church expressed resistance in the past?
- What can we learn from Mark Stamm's suggestion that we take some of our cues from the liturgical practices of the church? How might intercessory prayer, passing the peace, and sharing in Holy Communion provide avenues of resistance to the evils, injustices, and oppressions we face in our own community?

Notes from Planning Session:

Sermon Ideas:

Music Ideas:

Visuals:

Bringing the Word to Young Worshipers:

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

Key Word: Grace

Baptismal Vow:

“To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as our Lord.”

Notes on the Vow:

Mark Stamm notes two important things to think about as we consider this part of our baptismal vow. Having been confronted with the matter of our own sinfulness, we are invited to turn away from sin and toward lives of grace. But this, Stamm says, is not a simple, once-and-for-all matter. As Methodists, we don't believe that we need only confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior and that's the end of it. Rather, confession is an ongoing call and response as we live out the baptismal covenant all of the days of our lives. We must continually “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). In the words of Stamm:

Jesus reminds us that following him means denying ourselves and taking up the cross. Thus, confessing Christ may mean dying a number of smaller deaths—setting aside our desires for the sake of others—yet always knowing that we find ourselves in the midst of our service. In our United Methodist membership vows, we commit ourselves to life within this baptismal dynamic of death and resurrection. (Stamm, *Our Membership Vows in The United Methodist Church*, 15).

Furthermore, we can't live out our baptismal vows of our own volition. To live as disciples of Jesus Christ, we must continually put our trust in God's grace. And for Methodists, that means using the *means of grace* to provide substance for our journey.

Question to Consider: What do you know about the means of grace?

Background to the Text:

Prior to his encounter with the risen Lord, Saul, or Paul as most of us know him, was a Jewish fanatic. He knew the law. For him, it was black and white. Knowing the law enabled him to judge clearly who was following it and who was not, and he made it his mission in life to confront and weed out those who were not. Saul had determined that the Christians were not following Jewish law, so Saul was on a mission to find the Christians and weed them out. But then something unexpected happened to Saul. He had an encounter with Jesus, and it changed his entire life. It changed his perspective, his beliefs and his mission and purpose. Once Paul met Jesus, he gave his life over to serving Jesus as Lord and Savior for the rest of his days.

Acts 9:1-6

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard

a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

Key Point of Connection Between Text and Vow:

Encountering Jesus changes our lives. Knowing that we are, by the pure grace of God, loved and accepted and forgiven of all of the mistakes and sins we have committed changes our perspective. It changes our beliefs about ourselves and about other people. It changes our mission and purpose in the world. Once we encounter Jesus, we want to give our lives over to serving him for the rest of our days. But it takes discipline to do this. We have to work at living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Sermon Starter Questions to Discuss with Your Worship Team:

- What does it mean to you to “confess Jesus Christ as your Savior”? When did that happen? What happened in your life that brought you to a point of conversion?
- How is your life different now from the way it was before you met Jesus personally?
- How are you putting your trust in the grace shown in Jesus Christ? Give specific examples (Hint: think about the means of grace!)
- What are you doing to serve Jesus? Again, be specific.

Notes from Planning Session:

Sermon Ideas:

Music Ideas:

Visuals:

Bringing the Word to Young Worshipers:

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C

Key Word: Serve

Baptismal Vow:

“To remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s representatives in the world.”

Notes on the Vow:

Our service to Jesus Christ is not an individual act. Some things we do may, of course, be individual acts, but we serve Christ within the context of a community of faith. We serve as part of a family that includes not just people who believe exactly the way we do and interpret the Bible the same way we do, but also with Christians who see things very differently from the way we do. Mark Stamm notes that when we enter into the covenant of marriage, we promise to be faithful to our partner in easy times and in hard times, in times of plenty and in times of want, when we are healthy and when we are struggling. We promise to keep loving the other person no matter what happens for the rest of our lives. Stamm suggests that perhaps it would be a good idea if we understood our covenant with the church in a similar way. That is to say, we promise to keep loving each other and we promise to keep our commitments to each other no matter how rocky the road becomes.

Of course we all know that the church has been unable to do this throughout history. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t keep trying. After all, as Stamm points out, the church is sinful, but it is also filled with grace.

Question to Consider: When have you known the grace of God in your community of faith?

Background to the Text:

Both Luke and Acts tell stories of Peter offering prophetic and healing ministry in the early days of the Christian faith. This story about Peter raising Tabitha from the dead is one of them. Tabitha lived in Joppa, a harbor city near modern-day Tel Aviv. It is important to understand, however, that this is not just a story about Peter’s witness to the early faith. It is equally a story about Tabitha. Be sure to notice the name that the writer of Acts uses to describe Tabitha in verse 36. She is a *disciple*. In the New Testament the masculine form of the word translated as disciple, *mathētēs*, here appears in the feminine form: *mathētria*. This is the only time in the entire New Testament that this word is used (although the word appears in an apocryphal gospel, *The Gospel of Peter*, in conjunction with Mary Magdalene). While some scholars have suggested that the word simply means that Tabitha was a follower of Jesus, there are others who believe its use here indicates that Tabitha was more than just a follower: She was a disciple. The fact that Peter went immediately to her side when called would suggest that she was known already to Peter. Was she one of the “other women” who traveled with Jesus and the twelve male disciples? Was she one of a number of female disciples who lived in Joppa? Could she have been one of the widows? Was she the leader of the group of widows in the Joppa church?

The writer of Acts says that Tabitha was devoted to good works and acts of charity. Her colleagues showed Peter the tunics and other clothing she had made, which scholars suggest may have been clothes meant for distribution to the needy, which was one of the tasks assigned to widows in the early church. Whatever

the truth is about this woman, we may never know; but we do know that the church in Joppa valued her ministry, and that she was well-known to the twelve male disciples, and that remembering her was so important that her name and her story were preserved in our Scriptures.

Acts 9:36-43

36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Key Point of Connection Between Text and Vow:

What we find in this short text from Acts is the story of not one, but two faithful members of Christ's holy church who served as Christ's representatives in the world: Peter and Tabitha. The story models so many values we want disciples of Jesus Christ to uphold in our communities: faithfulness and care of one another; care of the poor; the ministry of all believers; the healing power of the Holy Spirit; the saving witness that happens when people of faith spread the good news to others; the belief that love inspires; and the power of God that resides in the community of God's people.

Sermon Starter Questions to Discuss with Your Worship Team:

- What does this story teach you about Resurrection? What else, besides Tabitha's body, did the Holy Spirit working through Peter resurrect?
- How can you make Resurrection real for people in your church? How can you claim and use the power of the Holy Spirit to resurrect things that have been left lifeless in your congregation? In your community?
- How can the community of Joppa and the witness they provide through this story both challenge and influence how you think about the ministries and outreach you are offering through your own church?

Notes from Planning Session:

Sermon Ideas:

Music Ideas:

Visuals:

Bringing the Word to Young Worshipers:

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C

Key Word: Testify

Baptismal Vow:

“To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments”

Notes on the Vow:

Being in covenant with one another calls us to shared commitments that build us up as the body of Christ in the world. One of those commitments is to wrestle together with the holy texts of our faith tradition: the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. And let's be clear about it: there are many stories contained in our Bible. The stories are not always easy or pretty. They call us to reflect upon deep issues around what it means to be human, how we can live as God's people, and what we might do about our unavoidable inclination to sin. It is a book about the struggle of living together as people of faith. My dad used to tell me that the Bible wasn't about finding the right answers. It is about asking the right questions. But the stories in the Bible are critically important; and the learnings that come as a result of wrestling with our holy texts need to be shared with others, so that they too may come to know the love of God shown in Jesus Christ that we have come to know through the Word of God.

Mark Stamm points us to the Apostles Creed as a guiding strategy for understanding the biblical narrative. Not only does the Creed stand at the heart of the Baptismal Covenant in our liturgy, but it also serves to remind us what the church holds most important about the biblical witness:

The Scriptures witness to a God known in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God is Creator of all things. At the heart of the biblical narrative is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are given life in and through this Christ, and his ministry continues in the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such is the heart of the narrative (Stamm, [Our Membership Vows](#), 19).

Question to consider: Read Mark Stamm's comments on using the Creed as a strategy for wrestling with the Scriptures on pages 18-19 of [Our Membership Vows](#). Then use the Apostles Creed to guide a discussion of the text from Acts below.

Background to the Text:

Paul and Silas. You gotta love them! There they are in Philippi, heading out to a place of prayer, when they run into a slave-girl who is able to divine the future. Now let us be very clear: however we may feel about her abilities or the spirit that enabled her power, the power that she possesses does not benefit her. All the proceeds she earns from her ability go straight into the pockets of the men who own her.

People who are able to tell the future were in demand during biblical times, but they are also in demand today! Just recently I had a conversation with a friend about whether she should visit a fortune-teller or palm reader during an upcoming visit to New Orleans. She wants to know what her future holds! In a popular tavern near where I live, there is a fortune-teller who has been given space under the stairs to divine the future. I think he gets more business than do a lot of our local United Methodist churches! Why

do people continue to desire to know the future? Is it to avoid calamity? Is it to hear a word of hope? Do they really believe in the prophecies of these modern-day soothsayers?

Although the people of her area apparently believed her to be the one with all the power, this woman was quite taken by the powers she felt emanating from Paul and Silas. So she began to follow them and compare their work to her own. In her mind they were “slaves” also -- not to some wealthy owner, but to the “most High God who proclaims to you a way of salvation.” Perhaps she sensed in the followers of Jesus a possible way out of her own enslavement.

After several days of the woman following after them, Paul became annoyed at the spirit that was in the woman. In heat of the moment and by the power of Christ, he ordered the spirit out of her. When her owners discovered what Paul had done—meddled in their lucrative business—they went after him and his traveling partner, Silas, and dragged them both before the authorities. They were accused of advocating for Jewish customs and disturbing the city. They were stripped and flogged and thrown into jail.

We all know what happened next. While in prison, Paul and Silas continued to profess to their faith through prayers and songs. Their testimony attracted the attention of the other prisoners. Then came an earthquake and the prison walls came down. The prison guard, seeing what was happening, began to divine his own future if he failed to keep his charges secure. He was about to kill himself when fate intervened through Paul and Silas. The guard was moved by their testimony, experienced conversion, and made a profession of faith in Christ. He and his entire household were baptized as believers in the God shown in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Acts 16:16-34

16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” ¹⁸She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the

house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Key Point of Connection Between Text and Vow:

The message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ contained in our holy texts has the power to change people's lives. It has the power to turn things around! It calls upon believers to use their power to take risks on behalf of others to bring salvation to the whole world. It calls us all to testify to the good news of Jesus Christ!

Sermon Starter Questions to Discuss with Your Worship Team:

- Why did Paul's actions make the slave girl's owners so angry? Who in our world today can you identify as being "enslaved" by people who profit from exploiting the labor of others?
- Who in your community experiences this kind of exploitation? Consider the people we don't always "see," those who remain invisible, but without whose underpaid or unpaid work in the background, homes and businesses would be less profitable.
- How can your congregation open their eyes to see the oppressed and exploited people of the world? What can you do to change the lives of these people?
- How can you use the power of Jesus Christ given to you through the Holy Spirit to bring about healing? What risks would you have to make to change your community? What costs might you have to pay?

Notes from Planning Session:

Sermon Ideas:

Music Ideas:

Visuals:

Bringing the Word to Young Worshipers:

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year C

Key Word: Loyalty

Baptismal Vow:

“To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in our power to strengthen its ministries.”

Notes on the Vow:

This vow is actually not the same as the vow printed in our current *United Methodist Hymnal*. In 2008 the General Conference voted to update the language of the vow. Get a hymnal and turn to page 38 and notice that the vow there reads, “As members of Christ’s universal church, will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries?” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, page 38).

Why the change? “Where previously our members had promised loyalty to the United Methodist Church, now we promise loyalty to Christ *through* our denomination” (Stamm, [Our Membership Vows](#), 20. *Emphasis mine*). Why is this distinction important? Because it recognizes that there are many denominations and communions within Christianity, and that each has unique and important insights to reveal about what it means to be the body of Christ together. No one denomination or communion has all the truth. Each person and each group sees through a mirror dimly. Each sees only a part of the fullness of God’s truth. It takes all of us together, agreeing on some things and disagreeing on others, to begin to glimpse the kingdom that God has envisioned for us. And so our loyalty is first to Christ, and then to the distinctive witness of our own denomination. What is important to hear in this distinction is that we should intentionally seek to be in conversation and collaboration with our brothers and sisters who practice their faith differently from the way we do. And not just our brothers and sisters in Christ, but all of God’s people, from other religious belief systems too! We live in a diverse global neighborhood; and as the world grows smaller, we must find ways to be together as people of faith, even if our faith traditions are very different.

Question to consider: How does this change in the vow challenge you personally? How does it challenge you as a community of faith?

Background to the Text:

Many of the people to whom Paul’s visions and travels take him come from other faith traditions. His mission is to the “Gentiles.” In this story, Paul has a vision that he is to take the good news of Jesus Christ to the Macedonians. So Paul and Silas head to Philippi, a city in Macedonia, which is a Roman colony. On the Sabbath day, they go to the place of prayer outside of town, likely a synagogue, where they find a congregation made up entirely of women. This is interesting because it is the only story in the New Testament that presents a gathering of women only. Perhaps this is because Philippi was a Roman colony, and there were not ten Jewish men in the city to make up a synagogue. But these women gathered anyway, and they opened their hearts to Paul and Silas to “sit” with them, which means preach to them and teach them.

At this gathering in the synagogue is a woman named Lydia. (Information on Lydia drawn from Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1998, page 123). Lydia is a professional woman, a fabric weaver, who lives in Thyatira, which was famous throughout the region for its purple dyes. The purple dyes used to color the fabric came from the veins of shellfish, so members of the Jewish faith, who, by law, had to avoid shellfish entirely, would have considered the work that this woman was involved in ritually unclean. Lydia was ritually unclean and not Jewish. Yet she was there, in the synagogue, praying with the women!

Lydia is referred to as a God-fearer, which was a term used to describe a Gentile who accepted the truth of the Jewish religion, but who was not of the Jewish faith. So although not technically Jewish, she knew a lot about Judaism. Furthermore, she is believed to have been the head of her own household, either never-married or widowed. Perhaps her household was made up of people who worked for her to produce textiles. Whatever her life was, it is important to grasp that this is the household where Paul and Silas went to stay. Further, she and her household members and these women were their first European converts. That is to say, the first Christian congregation in Europe was made up of women, and Lydia was their benefactor and quite possibly their leader.

[Acts 16:9-15](#)

⁹During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."¹⁰When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

¹¹We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Key Point of Connection Between Text and Vow:

In light of all this, what might it mean to you to that we make a vow to be loyal to Christ through the United Methodist Church and do all in our power to strengthen its ministries? The United Methodist Church has a long history of standing against the status quo and advocating for the powerless in society. Although our record is far from perfect, we do have a tradition of trying to engage in witness for justice. It might be beneficial to review the Social Principals and the items in the *Book of Resolutions* that speak to such things as advocacy for the oppressed and the poor, standing up against policies and businesses that violate human rights, and especially our relatively long tradition of ordaining women as full clergy members.

Sermon Starter Questions to Discuss with Your Worship Team:

- Yes, we have come a long way on human rights, but we still have a long way to go. Where in your community have you as a congregation stood with "the least and the lost"?
- Where do you still have some work to do?

- What do you think about the notion that the first Christian congregation on European soil was made up primarily of women and likely had a female leader? How does this challenge the Christian church as a whole? How does it challenge you in your own context?
- What does it mean to be loyal to Christ?

Notes from Planning Session:

Sermon Ideas:

Music Ideas:

Visuals:

Bringing the Word to Young Worshipers:

Pentecost (May 15)



Anchor Image: Flames

Key Word: Witnesses

Baptismal Vow:

“To faithfully participate in its ministries by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.”

Notes on the Vow:

As with last week, our vow this week is different from the vow that is in our current hymnal. Turn to page 38 in *The United Methodist Hymnal* and read the vow under section 15. Notice the word that is missing: *witness*.

Mark Stamm emphasizes that our vow to live baptismally doesn't call us to something vague and general. It calls us to live in a particular way within the context of the “web of specific relationships, problems, and challenges” of a local congregation (Stamm, [Our Membership Vows](#), 25).

Christian life involves specific and concrete commitments. As Christians, we are called to love God and our neighbor. We believe that God calls us to “do justice and love kindness” (Micah 6:8). We may be moved by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of racial equality. We may speak passionately about the need for an inclusive, hospitable church. As Christians who live and work in particular places, we witness to these commitments in particular, embodied ways.

Stamm goes on to present a scenario in which a local congregation goes about the work of dealing with a specific challenge in their church: a new member who is confined to a wheelchair. Take a moment to read aloud the example that is given and the steps the church takes, as well as the challenges it raises ([Our Membership Vows](#), pages 25-26).

Questions to Consider:

- What is a particular challenge your congregation has faced?
- How did you work through that challenge together? What roadblocks did you face? What larger questions did it raise for you?
- Did it lead you to engage in a witness that had an impact on the community around you? Why or why not?

Background to the Text:

This familiar story is one of the most beloved texts that we share as disciples of Jesus Christ. Lots of times when I hear people preaching on this text, they focus on this as the moment that gave birth to the church. Some congregations even celebrate with birthday cake and balloons.

Much to my son's disappointment, I have never been a fan of big birthday celebrations. I guess I learned this from my own mother, who always insisted that birthdays were for the family. As such, I had only a couple of birthday parties that involved non-family members growing up, and I raised my sons in the same way.

This is not to criticize birthdays, but rather to point out that birthday parties have a tendency to focus attention mostly on ourselves. Thus, if we celebrate Pentecost mostly as a big birthday party, our focus is on ourselves and the people who are already part of the church. That's not a bad thing. But our orientation on Pentecost might better be outward rather than inward. The purpose of the coming of the Holy Spirit was to enable the people of God to be witnesses to the power of Christ for those *who do not yet know him as their Lord*.

The amazing story of the Day of Pentecost is that by the power of the Holy Spirit, all of those people, even those who didn't speak the language of the one who was preaching, were somehow opened up to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Pentecost is not so much about the birth of the church as it is about the culmination of the Easter proclamation that Christ is risen and continues to empower people to give witness through the body of Christ in the world!

That means YOU! You are witnesses to the life, death, and most important, RESURRECTION of Jesus Christ! You are living proof of his resurrection because he continues to live in you!

Acts 2:1-21

²When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

- 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
- 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
- 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
- 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Key Point of Connection Between Text and Vow:

I hope that since so many of us may already be familiar with the vow to support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service, that this year we will focus on our WITNESS.

Sermon Starter Questions to Discuss with Your Worship Team:

- How are you witnessing about Jesus Christ to your community? What are you doing?
- What does it mean to be a witness? Is it simply sharing your faith and inviting others to proclaim Jesus Christ as their Lord, or is there more to it?
- Who are the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs in your community? Who lives around you that might not "speak your language"?
- How can you grow your witness of the ministry of all believers so that all the people who live around you—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—will be able to hear in their own language about the saving power of Jesus Christ?

Notes from Planning Session:

Sermon Ideas:

Music Ideas:

Visuals:

Bringing the Word to Young Worshipers: