

Stay in the City until You Are Clothed with Power from on High
Acts 1:1-11

“While staying with (the disciples), the resurrected Lord ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” He patiently explained that it was not given to them to know ahead of times how God would act. “But,” he said, “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.” The more succinct version is found at the end of Luke’s earlier Gospel in his name: “Stay here in the city,” he told them, “until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Then Jesus ascended, disappearing from their sight, to be at God’s right hand.

This unique time in the life of St. John’s Church is very similar to that faced by the disciples after Jesus ascended to be with God. No, we haven’t experienced Jesus’ ascension. Although St. John’s has experienced significant comings and goings – the departure of your Rector, Fr. Leander Harding in 2006, my arrival as your new Rector in January and our recent goodbye to Fr. Bart Gage. Those departures and my arrival as well as some other significant changes in front of us, put us in a position of continued discernment, prayer and preparation. And so, this morning, I hear Jesus’ command to his disciples to “*stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high,*” as words also spoken directly to us in St. John’s Church.

About 25 years ago the people of St. John’s made an important decision, to stay in the city of Stamford. Other churches had moved away from downtown. St. John’s made a concerted decision to stay in the city. St. John’s has always played a pivotal role in the city of Stamford. We began the mission of St. Andrew’s, Emmanuel, Trinity and most recently L’Eglise de L’Epiphanie Episcopal Churches. We established a ministry in the South End that has shifted over time and is now a vital presence through *St. Luke’s lifeworks*. We established Stamford hospital. The leaders of the parish wanted to continue St. John’s vital ministry, but how to afford to stay in the city and continue to be a living, thriving presence of Christ and a force for his Kingdom, when the ongoing maintenance for an aging physical plant was enormous? The leaders and people of St. John’s worked out an exciting plan to use a portion of our property to build a multipurpose high rise building. Canterbury Green, one of the first high rise buildings to go up in Stamford, was the culmination of that vision. The ground rent or lease to the owners of Canterbury Green has and continues to sustain a very significant portion of St. John’s life and mission.

Today we face a new period of prayer, discernment and preparation to continue with a vital ministry of presence and mission in Stamford. That period began with the departure of Fr. Harding and the process of search and discernment in the interim period between rectors. You had parish meetings, focus groups and an extensive survey to help figure out where St. John’s was headed. *St. John’s is a historic and diverse parish in downtown*

Stamford. It is a place to find and be found by God. We are committed to sharing the love and teachings of Jesus Christ through:

- *Inspirational worship and music,*
- *Strengthening spiritual journeys and*
- *Reaching out through our talents and resources to our community and the world.*

Our mission derived from that process. So did our four essential goals, to:

- *Encourage spiritual growth for all members*
- *Recognize, develop and support leaders.*
- *Share our gifts, knowing they are from God*
- *Reach out to help other beyond our doors*

Our *St. John's Rising* capital campaign and the new building project we are envisioning to finally address the pressing need for repair and upkeep of our aging buildings is another important area for our prayer and discernment. You are invited to hear more about it in a question and answer forum (today) following the 10:15 a.m. service. The Associate Rector Search Group and I begin phone interviews this afternoon. Our new Associate Rector will have particular responsibility in supporting and developing outreach ministry and new member ministry among the many young professionals who continue to move into the Stamford area. I have begun a parish visioning process that I hope will culminate in a distinct and exciting statement of our parish mission, and concrete plans to put that mission and our existing parish goals into action. Our *Home Gathering* groups that met with my wife Carol and I have already generated many exciting ideas, such as:

- *Advertising on city busses*
- *A weekly course of "Bible study for dummies" with babysitting available*
- *Developing a tutoring or after school center for area young people*
- *Provide ESL training for adults*
- *To get more personally involved in St. Luke's Lifeworks*
- *Hold a barbecue on the green for the City of Stamford.*

and many more. The Vestry and I will go on retreat early this fall to craft our dreams and ideas into a clear statement of our mission and some concrete steps to begin to fulfill it. Our newly renovated building will give us a space to live out our mission.

Jesus' disciples experienced the joy of Jesus' resurrection and he stayed with them for a time. But that honeymoon period could not last forever. Jesus had work for them to do. He had called them to be fishers of people and he had prepared them to haul in the nets for his Kingdom. Jesus' ascension meant it was time for his disciples to get to work. But first they needed to pray. They needed to discern and prepare for that work. They needed to recruit and elect new leaders. They needed, as Jesus told them, to *stay in the city until they were clothed with power from on high*. And that's what they did. Luke describes the process as 40 days from Jesus' resurrection to the Ascension and 10 days until Pentecost. But those dates are probably more symbolic than actual. The disciples clearly settled into a life of prayer, community and worship. They met in the Temple. They gathered for prayer in the Upper Room. They elected a new leader in Matthias, but

there were many more people in the Jesus community than just the 12. They continued in prayer and discernment and then something dramatic happened. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke describes the scene as **spiritual fireworks**. The power they experienced in Jesus' love, in community, in worship, and in prayer literally filled them. The time for discernment had moved into a dramatic time for mission and ministry.

I believe that Jesus is calling us to continue to stay in the City of Stamford and to continue in a period of discernment and prayer until we are clothed with power from on high. We are in a time of discernment about our building and essential repairs, about our finances as we await the conclusion of the renegotiation of the Canterbury Green ground rent, about our leadership as we work to call a new Associate Rector, and about our mission and ministry as we continue to discern that exciting mission and next steps in mission. We need to continue to meet and talk and pray. But this is also a time of excitement and anticipation for the ways that God will fill us and use us.

Imagine this church reaching out to the bustling daytime community around us and offering times of worship and music, meals and discussion for business men and women and others available during the day. Imagine opening a St. John's After School Center. Imagine classes and tutoring opportunities for people to improve their English, to strengthen their skills. Imagine vital 12 step groups. Imagine mid-week Godly Play classes for children from Bayview Towers. Imagine mission, Bible study and prayer groups for all ages. Imagine our mission seen on every bus in Stamford. Imagine seeing our beautiful Transfiguration Window backlit so that part of the beauty of our magnificent sanctuary could become visible to all. Imagine 2-3-400 people gathering to sing God's praises in these pews each week. We need to wait and pray until we are clothed with power from on high and sent to accomplish such works for God's glory.

The beautiful quilt that hangs over the north entrance on the way to classrooms, nursery and gathering spaces proclaims: "*To seek and serve Christ in all persons.*" It portrays an eagle – symbol of St. John's Church, a descending dove – symbol of the Holy Spirit, and multiple people around the globe. I've been told that the making of that quilt involved every single person in the parish. Many contributed their hard work and artistic talents, but everyone contributed something, if only a single stitch.

As members of St. John's in the past gathered to quilt that beautiful symbol of our mission, we need to gather to quilt together the pieces of our future mission. We need to talk and plan and discern it into reality. We need also to pray and wait. God's surprising wind will fill us and use us in God's time to do amazing things for his glory. We need to stay in the city and wait and pray until we are clothed with power from on high.