“Did you see this coming?”
Sermon on Sunday, May 28, 2017
Based on Acts 1

“Did you see this coming?” Sometimes people get hammered by sudden developments in life, and they vent their shock in this question. Usually, when this is asked, it doesn’t reflect on anything positive. The person got blindsided. It may refer to a job lost, a person going mad, a tragic act of violence like the one last week in Manchester or anything negative that came out of nowhere, without much warning. As I read this passage from Acts I kept thinking that this must have been the question the disciples had on their minds on their way back from the Mount of Olivet to their temporary home in Jerusalem. “James, John, he’s gone! Did you see this coming?” “Beats me!” came the reply. Suddenly, Jesus was gone and they were in charge! In one instant, life had changed and changed dramatically!

Of course, nobody had seen the Ascension of Jesus coming. In fact, just before Jesus’ take-off they had discussed what his new role in Israel would be. They asked him: “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, they thought he was going to hang around and play a decisive role in the political and spiritual life of their community, be their Dalai Lama, be their new Moses, whatever, but Jesus disappearing was not what they imagined. And then, next thing you know, he is literally gone with the wind – and the resurrection a mere memory. They stand there by themselves on this small peak above Jerusalem, left to deal with yet a new twist in their lives. But that’s how life sometimes is, isn’t it? Things change in a heartbeat and somehow, we need to adjust...

I wonder whether you can think of a time and situation when you were put in a similar position. And of course, I am sure that 99% of you in church this morning had a “did you see this coming?” moment in your life and the other one percent, well, they must somehow not remember. I can think of a time when I wasn’t so happy with a sudden turn of events. It was in my first parish. On Saturday, I received a phone call from my council president. The council president happened to be married to the Music Director. They both were very important people in that community, people that others looked up to, leaders with ideas who brought hope to a congregation that had seen better days. Now the council president called me and informed me that his wife had accepted a full-time position in another church and that the following Sunday - tomorrow!!! - would be her last worship service and that they as a family would move on immediately. As a young pastor, just having served for two and a half years, this was a shock, and I really didn’t see it coming. Because of the important role they played in that church, and the very short notice, I also felt abandoned. It was a difficult time. How would we go forward from there?

I imagine the disciples struggled with similar questions and doubts upon their return to Jerusalem. “What now?” I imagine they had not really paid attention when Jesus 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.” At the time, it sounded like “Jesus talk”. He always said stuff and they didn’t always fully understand what he was talking
about. In hindsight, wasn’t that the Lord’s way of saying, “Na, you will be fine when I’m gone!” But we don’t feel so fine when important people are leaving us!

How then do we react to those times when things happen – and happen quite fast – that we didn’t see coming? Are we going to quit and give up and go home and bemoan the past for the next 5 to 50 years? Or will we connect with the power of the Holy Spirit that will lead us and trust in the power of God that Jesus alluded to? The fates of people, companies, churches, families, initiatives have ridden on how people handle those decisive forks in the road. There are probably a few people among us this morning who are going through a not so easy transition that they didn’t foresee just a few years ago. What are we going to do? How are we going to handle this?

And usually, there is no immediate answer coming down from heaven, and you are wise if you do what the disciples did in their famous upper room headquarters: they prayed. They opened their hearts and souls to God’s will. They asked for direction. They received peace. And maybe they did remember those words, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Two things I would like to say about this. Number one: what the Spirit of God brings is not the traditional kind of power, Washington type of power, but more of an inner strength and calling that empowers people in different ways. To give you an example… The doctor from Yardley who was all over the papers this week because she fought against this medical device which was used in surgery but could spread cancer and make it worse, she felt the power to fight for a right cause. And without putting her into a particular religious corner, I would say what she felt in her heart and what made her tick, came from God’s spirit. She died last week at a relatively young age. It’s a sad moment, because she leaves behind a husband and six children. But it also is a moment to celebrate her strength. She leaves her family a mighty legacy and I bet she has instilled in them the courage to fight. The power of the spirit, as a rule, leads us to live beyond our own needs and give back to God and the community in some ways. The power of the spirit, as a rule, leads us to do stuff we didn’t think we had in us.

And looking at our church in the last few years, I think, honestly, we have at times exceeded our own expectations. Did we believe that we could pay down our debt in three years? I can tell you, I didn’t see that one coming! Did I believe that 15 people would sign up for our first mission trip abroad? No, I was merely hoping! Did we believe we could raise $10,000 for a farm in Haiti from mostly outside of our community while we were still focused on erasing that debt? Oh me of little faith was praying for half of that. Once God’s spirit gets a say in a community, people start saying “Oh, we didn’t see that one coming!” – for the good things that happen! I think God has given us a gift in this church. This is a blessed church and we are responsible to use our blessings wisely but also boldly. I believe there is more for us to do in this world and that God will provide for us as we take on things that may feel big but are not so big in God’s book. I wonder what the good things will be five years from now that we reflect on and say, “Oh, we didn’t see that one coming!” I don’t know what it will be, but I sure expect a few such things to take place, by the grace of God, by the power of God. **Amen.**