

#1
Sermon
Title Slide

“Called and Empowered to Be and Do the Impossible” – Acts 1:1-11

Good morning First Pres Baton Rouge it's a great joy to be here for this special missions conference weekend, carrying the theme, “Lord, enlarge my vision.”

Today we intentionally remind ourselves and focus on the unique call that God has placed on us as a church to help fulfill the Great Commission globally.

And to that end I want to celebrate your faithfulness. As a church you've generously given, participated, and prayed for many global mission endeavors in order to bring the light of Christ and the gospel to those who desperately need it and you've done that locally including your care for the homeless, pregnant women in crisis, and prison ministry just to name a few. I want to specifically thank you for your generosity in the past year and half in helping bring hope to those devastated by the crisis in Ukraine, earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, and the fire at EduNations in Sierra Leone through your contributions to the EPC International Disaster Relief Fund. Your giving has brought physical, spiritual, and emotional aid in Ukraine and border countries: Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and even Russia where the Presbytery of the East has an Engage2025 church planting partnership. One of the leaders who actually does not speak english made this video to thank you personally.

#2

[PLAY VIDEO]

Going from church planter to captaining relief efforts has become something of a norm among pastors in that region, donning helmets and bullet-proof vests to distribute food, water, Bibles, comfort, prayer, in short – the Gospel in word and deed. First Pres, you have made an incredible impact around the world, praise the Lord.

And while God has been working over there, he's been doing a work right here as well. As God has been speaking to you all through Pastor Gerritt's preaching, your small group times, your personal times with God, your pastoral staff, and everything you're doing in local outreach, God is here. God is here. God is here. Emmanuel, God with us. God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit. He is here. Amen?

As we acknowledge that He's indeed here, this passage reminds us that the presence of God denotes a calling. As the body of Christ, we've all been called, every one of us. If at any point today you find yourself thinking, inspired by the stories of your missionaries, “Wow, good for them, they're amazing! What an incredible couple! What an amazing sacrifice he's making! Glad she went, because I never could.” And you'd be right on all accounts, and especially that last one, you could never do it, but neither could any of them, without God and His presence in us, most certainly impossible.

Let's pray: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are here. We are here. We are here together. To God Alone be the glory. Amen.

#3 Let's read verse three again: He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Have you picked up the pattern God uses with man? From the very beginning of creation God does the impossible, makes something out of nothing and then he calls on man to do the same, to create and subdue. Jesus walks on water completely freaking out the disciples, calls Peter to come and join him and Peter walks on water – doing the impossible. He heals the sick, then they heal the sick. Impossible. Impossible apart from God.

The Title of this message is: Called and Empowered to Be and Do the Impossible

Jesus is constantly modeling for the disciples and us how this works. He does something then expects us to do the same. What do we see him doing here? We see him being present, truly present with the disciples. He presented himself alive, hanging out with them, eating with them and doubling down on his teaching on the kingdom of God over 40 days. Being with Jesus, he with us, that is what our lives are all about. He is calling us to do the impossible and the only way we can do that is to be immersed in His presence. “God empowers us to be immersed in his presence. Because God is Spirit we then can be immersed in his presence.

#4

And what difference does that make? It makes all the difference. Because that's what we were made for, to be immersed in His presence. We were made for this kind of close relationship with God, but because of sin that relationship was broken, restored through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God the Son, who paid the penalty of our sin, restoring us into a right relationship as he grants us faith to believe and trust in him and glorify him on earth. Creation, Fall, Redemption, restoration. It's the gospel.

Because Christ makes himself present to us, we must be immersed in His presence. And in turn follow his example of incarnational ministry. Jesus demonstrates that physical presence matters. His is an incarnational ministry and so should ours be. We saw that briefly demonstrated in the video with Pavel. What good would it be to ship money, water, food packets, and Bibles if there's no one on the ground to physically deliver them? To hold hands, hug and console traumatized people and crying orphans?

You support the Philemon Project in Lebanon. What an incredible incarnational ministry. They run early childhood development and day care centers and their primary clientele include refugee women, moms who could not work and therefore survive if they did not have the centers to care for their children. But it's far more than wiping noses, and changing diapers. I'd like you to meet one of the women whose life has been transformed by the GROW Center in Lebanon...

#5 GROW VIDEO [Show VIDEO]

[Tell my GROW Center story]

That's incarnational ministry, the hands and feet of the body of Christ, bringing the whole gospel in word and deed that transforms lives for eternity because His very presence is in us.

So, what does it mean to be immersed in His presence?

It is to be attentive to the kingdom of God. I'm going to come back to this at the end. Let's go on verses 4-8.

**Number 2: As a child of God and as the Church we're called to:
BE His Witnesses, Empowered by the Spirit**

ACTS 1:4-8

And while staying with them (NIV: on one occasion while he was eating with them) he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**"

#6

[Romans 8:11 - **The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.**]

#7 Romans passage

The same power that resurrected Christ from the dead lives in you. Lives in me. Lives in Us.]

[Set tone and vision – to push people to be more missional]

[You want your missionaries to be immersed and empowered by the Spirit of God to be a witness to God's people. Do you want that for yourself?]

But **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**"

[story of Sierra Leone] - I've read this passage countless times, but after traveling to the ends of the earth last year, I will never read this verse the same way again. I traveled to Sierra Leone and to get to this particular part of the ends of the earth, it requires a 4x4 vehicle and a bone rattling, spine displacing, brain-knocking, whiplash inducing ride for hours going 1-3 miles per hour. But when you finally arrive in the middle of nowhere, we found a people, who previous to 20 years ago, had zero encounters with Christians. Women and children lined the streets singing, "Yaweh, yahweh! Yahweh Once dominated by witchcraft, animism, fear, darkness,

illness, and no chance for children to be educated, now replaced with hope, clean water, laughter, award winning schools, health clinics, and a church with first generation believers. We had a chance to meet the first pastor in the history of the Kuronko people. How? God called a handful of his children, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to be his witnesses in this far flung hopeless place against impossible odds and obstacles. Did they know what it would become in 20 years? No. Did they know what it would become in 10 years. No. Five? No. But they were faithful to simply continue the task of what “being a witness” in that remote village meant to them in faith.

In the book, *“I once was Lost: What Postmodern Seekers Taught Us about their Path to Jesus,”* by Everts and Schaupp, that “the process of coming to faith really gained traction for them (non-believers) once they started to significantly trust a Christian.” So that’s great information. But what about the 3 billion people in the world who have no way of trusting a Christian, because there isn’t one to be found among them. For example, according to the TravelingTeam.org, There is 1 missionary for every 405,500 Muslims in the world. And that nearly 80% of Muslims won’t ever meet a Christian in their lifetime.

That’s not ok, and First Pres knows that and that’s why you committing a weekend to focus on missions is so special. Because most churches do not.

So BE immersed in his presence,
 BE his witness,
 And BE led with our hope in Jesus Christ, His Kingdom and Return

The disciples were caught staring in the sky for long time, so long that God had to send angels to tell them to stop straining their necks to see Jesus, because we was already at the right hand of the Father and they needed to get on with the business of waiting on for the Holy Spirit to show up. But you notice the dramatic contrast to when Jesus taught and left them through death, and then this time. The first time they scatter in fear, Peter denies him three times. This time, they gather, organize, pray, being led by a transformed Peter. And they’re eager this time to get after the kingdom of God this time, so much so that Jesus commanded them not to go anywhere until he sends what they’ll need, the Holy Spirit.

In a light-hearted way it reminds me of the first time my two older kids saw snow. They were 2 and 4 years old, and they were so eager to run outside into the 20 degree weather (remember we live in Florida) and start playing in the snow, my wife and I had to wrestle them down, “No, you can’t go out there in your pajamas, you’ll freeze! Please wait! Stop moving so we can get your clothes on and your snow clothes on!” But my oldest got away and ran out into the soft white wonderland and that look of glee on his face was transplanted with instant agony, tears and red-faced screaming in about 3 seconds as he plunged his bare hands into the snow, shocked with a cold he’d never experienced before in his life. Unprepared, unarmed, and ill-equipped for the task. Doesn’t matter how excited and passionate one is if combined with those three.

Thankfully, Jesus sends us what we need.

We've identified what we're supposed to BE and DO, but what's the why?

"Who are we in our relationship with God?" → God has adopted us as His children those who have placed their faith in him. Therefore,

- #8 **Because God has adopted us as His children, be immersed in his presence.**
- #9 Because God has adopted us as His children, be his witness.
- #10 Because God has adopted us as His children, may we be led with hope in Jesus Christ.

- #11 What does it mean to be immersed?
→ It is to be Attentive to the Kingdom of God

- #12 What does it mean to be his witness?
→ It is to be empowered by Spirit.

- #13 What does it mean to be led with hope in Jesus Christ?
→ It is to recognize his kingdom and return.

You may ask, why should I be immersed in His presence? What does it mean to be immersed in His presence? Oftentimes, we only think about immersion in terms of one being baptized (maybe not as Presbyterians), but I want you to think about this in terms of what you're immersed with in your day-to-day life, culture, conversations, attitudes, beliefs, habits, media, technology. For most, the majority of these areas tilt away from the Kingdom of God. But these are the ways we're formed and indoctrinated, instead of being indoctrinated with those things, let's be indoctrinated by being attentive to the kingdom of God. **Attentive**, because we give attention to everything else, which immerses us in that in which we're willingly indoctrinated. And so being attentive is to allow the kingdom of God to be at the forefront of your thoughts.

So how do we do that? One easy way, especially today, is to ask,

How can I be attentive in supporting First Pres's global missions efforts today?

If we're going to be attentive to the work of God, and be immersed in his presence, a lot of times we are only thinking about how that feeds us. But what if you're being attentive by daily praying for one of your mission workers? When you do that you begin to know their needs, or you begin asking God, "What do they need?" Daily drawing your attention to God's work in these hard places leads you to being informed. Engaged. That's very practical. And what's happening when you do that? You're building relationships, not just with the missionary, but with a people they serve who have little access to the gospel. You'll now be concerned for them and growing closer to the triune God who loves them. Growing a love for a people who are on the heart of God – that is being attentive to the Kingdom of God. Are you praying daily for one of your missionaries and for the fulfillment of the Great Commission in their ministry field? I invite you to do so. [show

prayer directory in hand and invite them to get one].

God loves you. And He's called you to this, but not by your own initiative, not by your own power. He's given you power. Power to pray, power to give, power to engage because you're immersed in His presence.

[REMINDER you need to be giving a charge.]

And First Pres, as you're immersed in His presence you'll know how to pray for your missionaries, how to support them and encourage them, and you'll also grow together in also being a witness where you have been called, a mutual encouragement to serve the Lord where you are physically present. And through their regular communication, prayers and example, and witness, they'll play an important role in the discipleship of this body in growing closer to the Lord and helping fulfill the Great Commission.

Like Pavel in Ukraine, the on-the-ground witness, receiving support and supplies to then deliver them to those in need, your missionaries are your on-the-ground witnesses in the Middle East, Uganda, Russia, South Asia, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and beyond providing a ministry of healing and of God's word to those who otherwise wouldn't have the chance.

First Pres, if you don't already know I want to declare it out loud because I speak from first hand knowledge. Regarding the WO workers your support: Nick, Amanda, Greg, Elizabeth, Robby, Joyce, Mike, Stephanie, Chris, Debbie are people who have immersed themselves in the presence of God and if you get around any of them you will feel that. Recently when I visited Nick and Amanda we prayed together she said so sweetly, "Lord, I just love you and adore you. Thank you that you keep speaking to me in your still small voice and I hear you." She'd later expressed to me regarding their accomplishments, "It's not anything that we're doing, it's all God."

Wow! Those are the words of someone immersed in God's presence. Who is ready to be His witness, empowered by the Spirit, to the ends of the earth.

#14

Zephaniah 3:17

For the Lord your God is living among you.

He is a mighty savior.

He will take delight in you with gladness.

With his love, he will calm all your fears. [a]

He will rejoice over you with joyful songs."

You may have resources to send, but it's God sending not just your missionaries, but YOU! Where your treasure is your heart is also. Is your heart there?

Your missionaries and you are empowered to be His witness. And we get to do it together. And I believe that's what Jesus is talking about in our passage, because that's why you get to chapter

two of Acts, when you see the power of God working in and through these individuals it is the outpouring of the Spirit. And that's what it means to be a witness.

One of my favorite stories of how God uses the body together to be his witness to do his work, is about a man named Humphrey Monmouth.

[tell Tyndale/Monmouth story] (53:35)

[tell of Iris and the NT translation in Pashto]

Like Tyndale and Monmouth then, World Outreach and First Pres today. A cloud of witnesses from those days of Acts to this very moment right now. Always know that God has gone before you and we together are part of His great gospel story of the church.

And let us do so with our hope In Him, his kingdom and return,

#15

You child of God, are called and empowered to Be and Do the Impossible, because you are His. He has gone before you. He has done it and invites you to do the same.

Parking Lot Notes:

- There are only two guest speakers for the Mission Weekend: me and Peter Kiwanuka: the founder and director of Bethany Centre Primary School in Jjungo, Uganda. The school offers day and boarding education for children aged 3 to 15. Peter attended LSU and returned to Uganda with a great desire to help his community.
- Mention Whitney Alexander is on the WOC.
- Scott Graham is on staff who used to be the EduNations US director. Make mention of him.

First Presbyterian Baton Rouge Giving:

- On the WO side they gave \$64,980 in 2021 to WO, supporting the Gibsons, Kuhns, Mooks, Smiths, Unnerstalls, and the Philemon Project
- in 2022 they gave \$73,708 to WO, and \$222,095 to Non-EPC Missions and Outreach
- Globally, other than the WO people listed above, they also give to workers in Colombia (through Global Transformation Ministries), African Bible College (in Liberia, Malawi, and Uganda), a Christian ministry center in Uganda that cares for orphans, youth and HIV patients, the Smiles Foundation in Romania, Word of Life Christian School in Russia, an SIM couple in South Asia, a Mission Aviation Fellowship family in Indonesia, a MTO couple in France, a Field Life family in Southeast Asia doing missionary care, a couple in Southeast Asia, and a single woman in North Africa,
- Details here: https://www.fpcbr.org/missions_global.cfm
- Locally, they partner with a ministry that welcomes internationals to Baton Rouge, one that supports pregnant women in crisis, one that supports the homeless, a low-income elderly apartment building, Habitat for Humanity, a Christian children's school, YoungLife, have adopted Buchanan elementary school and a local Christian school as well as mentor kids through Kids Hope USA. They support Cru, FCA, have a sewing ministry, and a prison ministry.
- Details here: https://www.fpcbr.org/mission_detail.cfm?mid=26