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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

If someone asked you the question, "Why are you a religious person?" what would be your response? If someone asked you the question, "Why are you a person of faith?" what would you say? If someone asked you the question, "Why are you a Christian?" what would be your answer?

As a pastor, I have the privilege of being in a position where I listen to lots of people talk about their faith. It is particularly true that as new people join a congregation, and they are meeting with the pastor, that it is common that people talk about their faith. For the last 24 years I have been pastor in areas that are growing in population so people have been joining the congregations I have served and people have talked about their faith.

It is not an uncommon thought for people to share that they are persons of faith for the hard times that come in this life. People are often aware that life is not always easy. Hard times come. And it is particularly when the hard times come that it is a good thing to be a person of faith. "I can't imagine how people cope in these circumstances if they have no faith," is a thought that is frequently shared by people enduring difficult times.

"Why are you a Christian?" It is likely that you have a thought that is more meaningful for you than this thought that others have shared. It is interesting that our First Reading for this morning has some insight into this very question. The perspective that is shared in this reading is important for us to hear, if for no other reason to balance off any other thoughts that we might have in regard to this question.

The first chapter of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles picks up the story of Jesus after Jesus has been raised from the dead. During the days and weeks following his resurrection Jesus appeared time and again to his disciples in his resurrected glory and spoke to them both of his resurrection and of religious truth. Our reading this morning describes a specific incident that happened while the disciples were still together in Jerusalem and during a time when Jesus was with them.

And the disciples are discussing with Jesus the question, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" The very question is evidence of an ongoing misunderstanding of Jesus' purpose on earth by the disciples. One of the ways that Jesus had always been understood was as the Messiah, meaning the Promised King who had been promised the people of Israel in the Old Testament of the Bible. And one of the understandings about this Promised King was that he was going to restore the fortunes of the people of God to what those fortunes were in the glory years of the Kingdom of Israel under King David. There was always the thought in place that Jesus was a political person, if not a military person, who was going to advance the cause of Israel on earth.

Jesus had done his best to resist this understanding and even to reinterpret this understanding, suggesting that his kingdom was not of this world, but rather a heavenly kingdom that was yet to come. But the misunderstanding persisted. And in this reading the disciples are asking Jesus if this is the day when Jesus is going to ascend to the earthly throne of Israel in power.

Once again, in this reading, Jesus deflects the question, suggesting it was not for the disciples to know God's schedule. But then he explains, as he has explained before, that the Holy Spirit of God was soon going to come upon the disciples. And, furthermore, Jesus explains that when the Holy Spirit of God comes upon the disciples, that Spirit is going to bring the power of God along with that Spirit.

Now, here is where it gets interesting for me. The question begging to be asked is, "What is the purpose of that Godly power that is going to come upon the disciples?" Many of us, I think, would think along with those who think that the primary purpose for Godly power in our lives is for strength in the hard times. It is true, we might think, that our own human strength will be sufficient for most times on this earth. But when the hard times come, then it is that we look for a power greater than our own to carry us through the day. Godly power, we might think, is primarily for strength in the hard times.

Jesus, however, has a different idea, at least on this occasion. What Jesus says to the disciples on this occasion is that the power of the Holy Spirit which will come upon the disciples will be the power needed for witnessing in regard to Jesus. "You will be my witnesses," says Jesus, "...to the ends of the earth."

Here is a great correction to the meaning of the Christian life. First and foremost a Christian is to be a

witness. First and foremost a Christian is called to make the crucified and risen Lord Jesus known as the Savior of the world. Even before strength for the hard times, God desires to give his people strength whose purpose is to be able to spread the Gospel, in order that others might become people of faith as well. To be a Christian, says Jesus, is to be one who speaks of Jesus, in order that the world might know of his love and his hope. It is, dear friends in Christ, first and foremost why we are people of faith. Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding...