

“The Call to Inner Space”
Acts 1:6-14
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Preached May 4, 2008 at San José, Costa Rica

In the various mapping sites you find on the Internet, when you plug in an address or some other starting point, not only do you get a map of where you want to see, but you can also typically zoom in or zoom out, to change your perspective and context. Zooming out you see where your address is located within a country or a continent, or even on the planet, and zooming in shows where that address is in a city, or barrio, or street. With the Google Earth program, I can even see our specific house in San José. It is the one with our neighbor’s car parked in front. I also know exactly where it is, and what altitude it is at since Flora’s cousin came by the other day with his GPS instrument, and so now I can give exact coordinates longitudinally and latitudinally to anyone who might want to find us. We have explored and mapped the world, both zooming in and zooming out, to a degree maybe even Jesus could not have foreseen when he told the eleven remaining disciples where they were to be his witnesses.

At first glance then, it would seem then that our job is done. We have taken Christ’s message to “the ends of the earth,” and along the way, Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. In a sense, the vision Christ gave his disciples has been fulfilled, as they, and we, the church, have reached the vast majority of peoples and places. The Bible has been translated into thousands of the languages of planet Earth, and even

that of the Star Trek planet, Klingon. According to the United Bible Societies, “there are now over 2,370 languages in which at least one book of the Bible has been published. Although this figure represents less than half of the languages and dialects presently in use in the world, it nonetheless includes the primary vehicles of communication of well over 90% of the world’s population.” Ninety percent is pretty good, and praise God there are faithful people working hard on the other ten percent. Most of us are off the hook, and can now get back to the fishing or carpentry businesses we left behind to follow this Jesus and to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. There is nowhere left to go, except maybe Mars, but since we want to be good stewards of God’s gifts, we may want to wait for evidence of life before we trot off to outer space, looking for Klingons to whom we may bring the Gospel, already translated.

It is an understandable question the disciples ask Jesus at the end of their forty days together, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” They are concerned about their homeland, the lands of their ancestors and their children, their ‘eretz,’ the Hebrew word for the land that God had promised them so long ago. Having conquered death by rising from the grave, surely they thought he had the power to accomplish what generations of their brethren had failed to do, to return to their own rule the land God had given them. When they use the words “kingdom” and “Israel” they are probably thinking in geographical and political terms, even though both of those words would have had a much

broader set of meanings. Israel was a place, but it was also a people. The kingdom was a political entity, but it was also a divine political entity. Maybe these more complex meanings weren't completely lost on the disciples, but it seems clear they weren't exactly on the same wavelength as Jesus with respect to what these things were all about. And so it is that Jesus answers them with an unexpected charge: to receive power to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. While they are thinking of their own corner of the earth, Jesus is thinking the ends of the earth. While they are thinking of consolidating power, Jesus is talking about extending it. While they want out of interaction with unclean foreigners, Jesus sends them into a lion's den of Gentiles. The power of the resurrection is not going to be unleashed *on* the Romans, but rather it will be unleashed *within* the disciples as the Holy Spirit comes to call a few days hence. The kingdom of God is not to be restored to Israel alone, it is to be established in all the world. And so Jesus has bestowed upon the disciples, and thus the early church, their first vision: to boldly go where none of God's people had gone before.

Now, you didn't know that the Star Trek franchise was inspired by the early church, but there you have it. Like Captain Kirk and his fearless crew, the disciples would be seeking out new life and new civilizations in the outer space of their time. Their world as they knew it was small, but it was about to expand beyond their imaginations. For them, Rome might as well have been Mars, and Costa Rica,

Alpha Centauri, one of the nearest star systems outside our own solar system, but still some 4.37 light years away. But just before Jesus ascends into the clouds, he places before them the vision of an entire world that has experienced the healing presence of Christ, not just their own homeland, but the homelands of enemies and strangers. He places before them once again the ancient vision of all the nations streaming toward Jerusalem that had been the promise of prophecy to their ancestors. It will be they who go on without him, powered by the Holy Spirit, where no one had gone before. After them there will be the Apostle Paul who goes to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome, Saint Patrick who goes to Ireland, and Saint Thomas who goes to India. After them, there will be the Women's missionary societies who hold bake sales to send missionaries to deepest, darkest Africa, and inner Mongolia, and pre-Boxer China. There will be the United Bible Societies, and the Wycliffe Bible Translators who provide the Word in a host of languages. There will be the Clinica Biblica, and the Roble Alto Bible Home, Education Plus and the Rahab Foundation, and La Palabra de Vida School, and UNELA, all in Costa Rica. The missionary impulse of two thousand years finds its roots here in tonight's passage, and many of ECF's members are its modern day characters. We have taken this charge seriously as Christians and have covered the globe as Jesus commanded us. But what happens when you run out of places where no one has boldly gone before? What happens when you get to the ends of the earth?

To speculate on the conclusion to the missionary journeys is not to suggest that we have actually yet brought the Gospel to every living soul, and so there is still work to be done, going farther and deeper. You missionaries out there are not about to be suddenly unemployed. But it is to say, as the statistics of the United Bible Societies suggest, that at 90 percent Biblical coverage, we are approaching the end of that era. Our outer space is shrinking, at least the earthbound part. And so, what will God have us do next? Pour all of our resources into the space program so we can preach an Interplanetary Gospel? If the vision Christ gave the disciples is fulfilled, what vision comes next? Well, as the title of my sermon suggests, we may take our clue from the scientific world which has come up with a word to describe the counterpart to that aspect of our environment which is above ground, so to speak, which we call outer space. If outer space is everything from the edge of the atmosphere and beyond, inner space is that which is inside, that which is part of our biosphere. Inner space often refers to the oceans, what is under the surface, but the term can even include the workings of the human body. The Academy Award winning movie for Special Effects in 1987 was called Inner Space, about a man who was miniaturized and injected along with his microscopic ship into a human body. In a sense, inner space is that which we need to magnify to see because it is so close to us, while outer space is what we need to magnify because it is so far away.

As I said earlier, for the disciples, anything outside the Roman Empire was their outer space. And they went boldly. They fulfilled Christ's vision for them. As you know, ECF is in the midst of a process to discern God's vision for our church, and part of that process is understanding what "vision" is, and how it is different than mission, or identity. And in our passage from Acts tonight, we have an opportunity to explore that difference and what it means for ECF as a whole, and each of us in our daily journeys. And so let me say briefly that one of the things that characterizes a vision is that it is achievable, or at least believed to be achievable. A vision is not necessarily forever. You can get there. You can fulfill a vision, like you can fulfill a dream. And in Christian terms, when you fulfill a vision, you're not done; you get another one! The Israelites had a vision of arriving in the Promised Land. And when they did, they received a new vision of making it a beacon to all the nations: "Nations shall come to your light," proclaims God through the prophet Isaiah, "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." In God's good time, visions are fulfilled, and new visions extended. Perhaps we are at such a moment in the history of God's people, that we are waiting for the new vision for our inner space, now that we have conquered, or nearly conquered, our outer space.

What will be inner space for Christians? Perhaps it will be those places closer to home that we neglected in our journey to outer space, like making our churches welcoming to the alien and the stranger in our own communities, as well

as those in the lands to which we sent our missionaries. Maybe it will be the land itself we tend to next, as our focus on the “stewardship of the soul” permitted us to neglect the environment we walked across carrying the message. Maybe inner space will be the violence of our own homes, and the abuse and addiction that frequent not only the families of so-called heathens, but those of God-fearing Christians as well. Maybe that inner space will be silence; Mother Teresa said, “We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature -- trees, flowers, grass -- grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls.” Maybe inner space will be the Bible itself, for ourselves, when we really know it as well as we know the backs of our own hands. Maybe inner space will simply be the mundane, when we seek and embrace God’s Spirit and grace not just in adventure, but also in the everyday activities that make up the majority of the time we have been given.

ECF’s inner space has, I believe, already been partly defined. We have recognized that we are called to fulfill God’s vision for the English-speaking community in Costa Rica. This we have discerned already. It is our task now to recognize where in that community, which includes ourselves, God is calling us to minister. It is not that we will become some kind of self-obsessed, isolationist congregation, that gives no thought to those elsewhere who have not yet heard God’s word of grace and hope, but rather a congregation that recognizes that there

is still work to be done in Jerusalem, right where we are, in the inner space of Costa Rica and our own hearts. In scientific terms, in terms of what is truly accessible to us as human beings, there is more inner space than outer space. Only a few astronauts and wealthy tourists rise above the stratosphere each year, and when they get there, there may be a lot to see, but there is no one to talk to, at least not yet. But within the sound of our voices shouted from our own rooftops are more people than we can imagine who are seeking what we have found. May God bless us with a vision for our inner space, as Christ did the early church for outer space, and the same Holy Spirit to be witnesses there. Amen.