

Psalm 93
Acts 1:1-11

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Midway Presbyterian Church
May 28, 2017

Parting Words of Our Lord

Introduction to the Psalm

Our psalm today is understood as an enthronement psalm. It was thought to be used in ceremonies in the temple that declared God's kingship over all. The Divine's majesty and holiness are proclaimed. Listen to these words from Psalm 93 . . .

Introduction to the Lesson from Acts

The lesson from Acts for today consists of two main parts. The first five verses serve not only as an introduction to the entire book of Acts and the work of the Holy Spirit, but also to the wonder of the Ascension. The next six verses present the event itself, with instructions for what the followers of Christ are to be about. Listen to Luke's words from Acts 1:1-11 . . .

Sermon

Last Sunday we looked at the so-called Descensus Clause—that portion of the Apostles' Creed which declares that after Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, *he descended into hell*. We saw this belief in 1 Peter 3 where it speaks of Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey.

Next, the creed states that Jesus "rose again from the dead." And then that "he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." Many Christians don't think a lot about The Ascension of Jesus Christ. Some have seen paintings of the scene, or a stained-glass "ascension window"

adding beauty to a sanctuary. These depictions usually show Jesus drifting upward into the clouds in flowing white robes while awe-filled disciples gaze upward. But The Ascension of Jesus Christ was so important to our ancient forebears in the faith that they made it a part of the earliest Christian creeds, including both The Apostles' Creed and The Nicene Creed.

Now on the church calendar, last Thursday, May 25 was designated as Ascension Day or Holy Thursday, which is forty days after Easter as set by Luke's calendar, and ten days before Pentecost, with Pentecost completing the Great Fifty Days of Easter—from Easter Sunday to Pentecost. While Luke in our lesson from Acts provides the basic narrative, Luke's Gospel offers this in the last four verses of its last chapter:

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:50-53)

William Barclay says that The Ascension is not a conception that should cause us to be hesitant or doubtful; that it was in fact a necessity. The forty days of the resurrection appearances had come to an end. And it was imperative that there should be one final moment when Jesus went to the glory which was his, so it was time to say goodbye. And The Ascension brought a sense of closure. As Jesus had come into the world in a moment of time, so in another moment of time he would leave the world.

So, The Ascension is the event that marked the end of the resurrection appearances of Jesus and the end of his earthly ministry. But this meant the ministry of the disciples was at hand. They were instructed to go back to Jerusalem and to wait there for the promise of the Father—which would be the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then, when they received the Spirit, they were to go forth to be Christ's witnesses.

In the first verse of the second part of our lesson from Acts we find the disciples asking Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6b) Not even the events of Easter and the succeeding forty days had rid them of a longed-for hope: that God’s Messiah would reinstitute the political fortunes of the old Davidic monarchy. Now that Jesus has been raised from the dead, their hopes came alive again. What Jesus did not do for them in the normal manner of earthly Messiah, the apostles now expected him to do in a dramatic way as the risen Lord.

But with the following words, Jesus deflects their question about restoring the kingdom and refocuses their attention upon the marvelous display of God’s power and love that is soon to be revealed in the presence of the Holy Spirit:

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” (Acts 1: 7-8a)

Jesus did not come to satisfy man’s curiosity about God’s time-schedule but to *reveal* God and *lead* us into a right relationship with God. And such understanding is relevant for our own age. About six years ago Harold Camping, the 89 year-old preacher from Oakland, California, predicted the Second Coming of the Lord on May 21. At about 6 p.m. that day he reckoned, 2 per cent of the world's population would be immediately "raptured" to Heaven; the rest of us would get sent straight to that Other Place.

The “Left Behind Books” are but one example of a tendency to speculate about end times and the like. But such speculation is utterly useless and wasteful; for it is not for us to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. And there’s no point in idly gazing up toward heaven. There is a world to engage and a work to be done—a mission to be fulfilled.

But 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.” (Acts 1:8)

You may have heard this imaginary story about Ascension Day:

When Jesus went back to heaven from earth, the angel Gabriel met him and said, “Jesus, how many people on earth really know what you have done for them?”

And Jesus said, “Well, there are 120 people gathered together, right now, thinking about me.”

And Gabriel said, “That is not many. There are thousands and thousands of people in the world who have never heard about you. How will they learn your teachings? How will they know your love? How will they know you died to take away their sin and bring them to God?”

“Well,” Jesus said, “Peter will tell some. Philip will let others know. James will live the good news. John will write to his friends. Mary and Martha will show my love to others.”

“But,” said Gabriel, “suppose Peter goes on back to fishing and is afraid to let others know he is your friend. Suppose Philip is too shy to talk about you. Suppose James loses his temper and does not ‘turn the other cheek.’ Suppose John never cares enough to write to his friends. Suppose Mary and Martha get too busy with housekeeping to show your love to neighbors...What plan do you have then?”

“I do not have any other plan,” answered Jesus. “I am counting on them.”

While we do not know when Christ will come again, or the times or periods set by the Father, we do know we have a purpose—a mission: “to be Christ’s witnesses.” A real witness involves both words and deeds. When British explorer H. M. Stanley found missionary David Livingstone in Central Africa, and had spent some time with him, he said, “If I had been with him any longer, I would have been compelled to be a Christian and he never spoke to me about it at all.” Livingstone’s actions had obviously preached quite a sermon.

The power of the Spirit was going to make the disciples Christ's witnesses. And their witness was to operate in an ever-extending series of concentric circles, first in Jerusalem, then throughout Judea, then Samaria, and finally that witness was to extend to the ends of the earth. Yes, we have enough problems right here in our own midst and in our own area that can surely keep us busy, but this lesson from Acts teaches us that our calling is to reach beyond, even to Mexico and South America, to China and Africa.

And being a witness is not just about preaching to the lost; it involves visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for abused and neglected children, praying, teaching, studying the Bible, and worshiping together.

Jesus did not leave the disciples without a purpose and a mission. And he did not leave them on their own, to fend for themselves. He promised the Holy Spirit would come to give them power to fulfill their mission. And in ten days—at Pentecost—that promise was fulfilled.

Then Luke says that

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:9)

In this final farewell, Luke the physician presents us a picture of the humanity of Jesus taken into the heart of God, and in that picture we see all of humanity taken up into the heart of God, perhaps more deeply than ever before. This is profound good news for us in the in-between times. As the world changes, we confront new forms of insecurity. We experience oppression and sometimes violence, as we have this last week in Manchester, England, and outside of Cairo, Egypt. We confront suffering and death. We long for healing and wholeness. We work for justice. And through it all we carry with us this vision of our real value to God, through Christ, who made himself at home with our humanity. Now he is taken up into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father, praying for us.

The Ascension means that Jesus has returned to his spiritual home, with the Father. And there he prepares a home for us who trust in him. And there he “sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” All glory and honor are his. He is given a name...

...that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9b-11)

Those people present at The Ascension went back to where they were staying. With the family of Jesus and a number of women they formed a community. They prayed as they sought to be about the work of Jesus. And when Pentecost came, filled with power, they went into the streets of Jerusalem, and soon they continued their work in Judea, Samaria, and finally to the ends of the then-known world. And today, as heirs to the promise of the Spirit, *we* are called to go into the world and share the hope that is at the heart of the message of Christ, loving and giving value to all those who know hunger or thirst, condemnation or rejection, loss of home or loss of a loved one.

My friends, let us listen closely—hear carefully and obey—these “Parting Words of our Lord.” Jesus is counting on us to be his witnesses. To proclaim the good news. To reflect the good news, right here at Midway, and in Anderson County, and to the ends of the earth. And we have the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to fulfill our calling. Today. And tomorrow. And until that time that our Lord shall come again.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.