

Lessons from the Ascension

READ Acts 1:1-11

Calendar watching can be a lot like clock watching. Halloween is not over before we start thinking about Thanksgiving, and the parades are still going when we start thinking about Christmas. All the Easter candy hasn't been eaten when we start thinking about Pentecost. The list goes on. That calendar watching can cause us to miss important things along the way, like missing all the good stuff on a trip by only focusing on the destination. Ascension Day is one of those that we can easily allow to slip by us after Easter on the way to Pentecost (which is next Sunday). The Ascension happened 40 days after Easter, about a week-and-a-half before Pentecost. There are important lessons and truths in the Ascension that we don't need to miss.

It may be that we skip over Ascension Day because we don't really understand it. There is a level here at which it sort of doesn't make sense to us, and I suspect that initially it didn't make much sense to the disciples, either. But it was important enough to have been recorded in some form in the three synoptic Gospels and here in Acts, and it is important that we get the meaning of it as well.

There are a bunch of things for us to learn here, but I want to focus on two: the mission at hand and the promise at the end.

Before His Crucifixion, Jesus had given His followers some really specific instructions as to what they were to do and how they were to carry on after He was gone. All this instruction about death and resurrection and life and treating each other first with love and all these parables about the nature of the kingdom of God were so far removed from their own life experience that they just could not get it. But after the Resurrection and after they had some time for everything to sink in and for the Holy Spirit to work in them to make sense of it all, they began to understand – and that understanding empowered them to change the world.

The basic but very challenging instruction that moved them so powerfully is found in verse 8 of this passage we just read.

READ Acts 1:8

This was a jarring instruction for those very Jewish disciples. They were fine with the direction to spread the Word in Judea. Those were people that looked like them, that spoke their language, that had a common heritage. Those were their friends and relatives. But to be told to take the same Gospel to the Samaritans?! We don't even talk to them. They don't dress like us or look like us or eat like us or talk like us! And to go even beyond that, to the ends of the earth? Surely we did not hear that right. At least the Samaritans were sort of related. Those other people were going to be of whole different races. They were not from around here. They could be dangerous. So what? The instruction was clear and not negotiable. Judea – people just like us; Samaria – people sort of like us; the ends of the earth – people not at all like us. All in the same sentence.

That same instruction is meant for you and me. We are inheritors of the same Commission to take the Gospel to all people, wherever we find them. We are inheritors of the same Commission to share the Gospel with all people, and sharing means that we hear what the Gospel has meant to them back from them. Who are your Judeans? Who are your Samaritans? Who represents the ends of the earth to you?

With the empowerment of the Holy Spirit – the very same Holy Spirit who empowers us – those disciples became radicals. They were not interested in fitting in; they were not interested in conforming to the world around them; they saw it as validation of their ministry if they were persecuted for their beliefs; and they knew that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was absolutely necessary for people to be saved from the power of sin and death. Are we changing our world or are we conforming to it? Are we informing and influencing public policy on important issues or is public debate dictating terms of religious life to the church? Are we telling people about the grace of God that saves them from sin and death or are we just trying to get people to feel good about themselves? Are we willing to take risks for the advancement of the Gospel – to say to one person “I know something that can make a difference to you, because it has made a difference to me.” Or is fear keeping us from the Kingdom? Fear of being different? Fear of rejection? Fear of persecution? God conquers fear when we give our fear over to Him. There are serious issues in this world, and there are serious issues right here in our

community – racism, hunger, drugs, immoral behavior, people experiencing loneliness and fear and alienation, abuse of all kinds, crime – you know that list as well as I do, and we are supposed to be making a difference in the name of God in every one of those areas. But it may be that the most serious issue we have to deal with is the complacency and apathy of Christians. We know the list of needs, but what are we doing about it? The Commission given us by Jesus Christ is not going to be fulfilled inside these walls. The task in here is to be equipped for that work, but the work is out there. We can make a difference in the world, one person at a time – and if we take the words of Christ seriously, we will make a difference, empowered by the Holy Spirit, one person at a time.

Then there is the promise for the end. We intentionally chose the scene for the stained glass window [POINT OUT] with this passage of Scripture in mind. In that picture, Jesus could be ascending as described in these verses – or He could be coming again in the same manner as He ascended, just as the disciples were told.

The Kingdom of God at his return looks like this:

READ Revelation 5:9-10

Every tribe and language and people and nation have become priests, leading the worship of God. Who is missing? Unrepentant sinners. The unbelievers are not there – those who have rejected the Gospel, turned their backs on the teachings of Scripture, and continued in the self-centeredness that is at the root of all sin. But we want be there, worshipping and singing and praising God with all His people.

The Ascension reminds us of God's calling and God's promise. While we wait for His promised return, we are called to be faithful instruments of God's grace to all people. The calling is for all believers, and so is the promise. Claim the calling, and live in the promise.

Amen