

Sermon: Ascension Day

The Rev. Mike Wernick

June 1, 2014

Year A
Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 93
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

Ascension Day was three days ago... on Thursday... but we celebrate it today because it's the name day of Ascension Lutheran Church... I read some of the Episcopal guidelines for transferring an event after which a church is named... and if I understand them correctly... I'm not supposed to do this... but I live in-between two worlds... Episcopal and Lutheran... and just gave myself permission...

The Paschal candle is extinguished... Jesus has ascended... is gone from our presence... in some ways... the light of Christ... that we lit from the new fire... at the Easter Vigil... is gone... the disciples lost their Lord and Teacher in crucifixion... gained him back in the resurrection... and now he's gone again... they may have been standing there with their mouths hanging open... in confusion... in grief... when two angels appeared... and asked why they were looking up at an empty sky... didn't they know that Jesus would return the same way he left... but they didn't want Jesus to leave... they probably felt abandoned... again...

There's that story you may have heard... about a little girl who goes into her parent's bedroom... when a thunder storm wakes her up... she's afraid... and her parents reassure her... tell her everything will be all right... that God is with her... and send her back to bed... and as she's leaving... she turns in the doorway and says... *I know that God's with me... but I want someone with skin on.*

We want an incarnate God... like a parent with skin on... to guide us... settle our disagreements... teach us the secrets of how things work... on whose right side and on whose left side we can sit...

But we also know why Jesus leaves... it's so that every single one of us can be God's beloved... and can grow into the fullness of what God has in store for us... just as those of us who are parents... want our own children to become fully functioning... whole... and mature adults...

Of the three synoptic Gospels... Matthew, Mark, and Luke... only this passage in Luke talks about the coming of the Holy Spirit: *And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised...* In the Gospel of John... Jesus says: *It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come...* It's like a kettle of water... at room temperature... the water is contained... but if you boil it... it can escape the bonds of the kettle and be everywhere we are...

Jesus has Ascended... but the Holy Spirit hasn't come... not quite yet... won't come until next Sunday... but the disciples didn't know... that... didn't know that yet... they were waiting... were in an in-between time...

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. This is an interesting image... the disciples who understood so little for so long... Jesus made them understand... maybe something like a Vulcan mind-meld... and it reminds me of what's actually a hymn from Philemon 2:5: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

With that mind... ordinary perceptions are surpassed by a beyond that is also within... it suggests a mysterious... expansive... uniting of mind and identity with God's past and future...

Both Luke... and Luke/Acts... declare that the disciples will be Christ's witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth... and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.

And so they asked "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" And Jesus answered "It's not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority... the disciples are in an in-between time... the Holy Spirit will come and give them great power... but they cannot know everything... they were in-between..."

I've had plenty of in-between times in my life... in-between times that lasted for weeks or months... and may have seemed to fly by... and in-between times that may have lasted moments... but seemed to take for ever...

In-between applying to different colleges... and waiting to see how they'd reply...

In-between being called to report to my commanding officer in the Air Force... and seeing him... and wondering during the walk over... maybe worrying what it could be about... fearing the worst but hoping for the best... and being told that I was going to be court-martialed for destruction of government property... I didn't do it... but ask me later if you want...

In-between coming out to my parents on the phone... and in the moments... that seemed like hours... before they said it didn't matter and that they loved me anyway...

In-between one job and another... or one project and another... one city or house and another...

Pastor Bradley Schmeling wrote: maybe the Ascension teaches us to trust these moments... these spaces between experiences... as the place where new history is possible... if we can let ourselves be suspended in that moment... maybe even let our mouths fall open for a moment in astounded disbelief... we may find ourselves beginning again... changed and maybe more mature... there are times when Christ has to leave us so that we figure out how to carry the light ourselves... we need his absence

to discover the power of Easter life within us... there is both loss and power... death and resurrection... in this mysterious realization that incarnation includes us.

Our two churches are in one of these wonderful in-between times... there may be diocesan or synodical mouths that have fallen open in disbelief that we are all sitting here today... some of our mouths may have fallen open as we take in what has happened around us... letting the wonder... yes... really the wonder of it sink in and change us... as we unpack boxes... decide some more of what goes where... find our unique rhythms... and know that we are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit...

Theologian John McClure wrote: we're not left in an in-between world without spiritual power and purpose... there are very important things to do during these times as we work towards God's new day... such as visiting the sick... being advocates for social justice... studying and worshiping together... and praying... the in-between time is a time to turn from ourselves toward others... living and ministering beyond ourselves in the power of the Holy Spirit...

The disciples returned to Jerusalem... to the Temple... to the place where it began... where Mary and Joseph went to dedicate the infant Jesus... where Anna and Simeon's mouths fell open when they recognized who this child was... and they prayed... let us engage this in-between time... this time of not having all the answers or knowing what the Father has set by his own authority... let us together... and while we're apart... also engage this in-between time... with prayer.

Let us pray: Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.