

Sermon: Ascension Day

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

Today we commemorate Jesus' Ascension... transferred from Thursday... in his Gospel... Matthew is silent about the Ascension... and the original ending of Mark didn't include anything about it... but the ending that was added about two hundred years later did... and Luke... who is also the author of Acts... actually tells two different versions of the Ascension... and we just heard both of them...

In the Gospel we heard today... the Ascension happens on Easter... just a few vv. before... Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus... after hearing what Mary Magdalene and the other women had told them about the empty tomb... and Jesus interpreted to them what was foretold about him in scripture... and he was known to them in the breaking of the bread...

But in today's reading from Acts... the resurrected Jesus remained with the disciples for forty days... and spoke about the Kingdom of Heaven... and exhorted them to stay in the city... until they had been clothed with power from on high... power they would receive from the Holy Spirit... and after he had said this... he ascended...

Retired United Methodist Pastor F. Belton Joyner, Jr. wrote... in the earliest depictions [images] of the Ascension... the apostles see the hand of God reach down from a cloud... to grasp the hand of Jesus... a cloud is often a biblical symbol for the presence of God... and when these early artists wanted to make sure that viewers understood that God was involved in what was happening... they painted a cloud... and so in Acts... *a cloud took Jesus out of sight*... and in Luke... Jesus was *carried up into heaven*... indicating that something was done to him...

Luke and Acts were both written after the Romans destroyed the second Temple... the covenant promises to the Jewish people... seem to have been crushed... and I've talked a little before... about the brilliance of the Shema... *Hear O Israel... the Lord our God... the Lord is One*... brilliant... because it revealed the understanding... not that each city had it's own god... but that there was only one God over all cities... and indeed... over all creation... in fact... the prophet Ezekiel... who was also taken into the Babylonian Exile in 597 BCE... further discerned this truth when he wrote about YHWH... leaving the first Temple in Jerusalem... and riding on the backs of two cherubim... to go... and be with... and comfort God's people in Exile... and when Luke wrote about Jesus' ascension... again... after the destruction of the second Temple... there was a further affirmation... for several reasons... including the incarnation and the coming of the Holy Spirit... that YHWH was not limited to the Temple's Holy of Holies...

I've always wondered what it meant... when Jesus opened their minds to understand the scripture... I used to wonder if it was something like a mystical... miraculous... Vulcan Mind Meld... but I think quite simply... it had more to do with connecting dots for them... spelling out plainly... what their worldview prevented them from seeing...

Worldviews are formed by some things outside of our control... like our upbringing and background... and not only impact how we make sense of the world around us... but also affect how we express ourselves in the world... the combination of personal values... beliefs... assumptions... attitudes... and ideas that make up our worldview have an effect on our goals and desires... our relationships and behaviors...

Because the Jewish worldview was of a Messiah who would free Israel from Roman oppression... the things Jesus said... and what happened to him... just didn't make sense... remember in Luke 9:41 when Jesus said... *You faithless generation... how much longer must I put up with you?*... they couldn't begin to see... that lording power over others... praying on street corners so as to be seen by others... building bigger

barns... begging to have a huge debt forgiven but failing to forgive a small debt... coveting the Iron Throne... these worldviews are not God's worldview...

So when Jesus ascends... we may imagine that it's a reward for a job well done... we want Jesus' Ascension to be triumphant and glorious... because we want to be triumphant and glorious... Ephesians even tells us that he is... *seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places*... and tradition held that to sit at the king's right hand was the place of honor... it's where Solomon's mother Bathsheba sat in 1 Kings 2:19... and Psalm 110:1 recounts... *The Holy One said to my monarch... sit at my right hand*... but the Ascension is less about where Jesus went... and more about how he functions... less about the status that the world gives... and more about the redemption that Jesus gives...

But still... instead of discerning God's will in community... we struggle with wanting to be special... to be honored... to have power and authority... to have the biggest bank accounts... even when we have no idea why we'd need all that money... deciding who to hire and who to fire... we want the best seats in the theatre... and the first place in line... and when we want these things... when we justify to ourselves why we deserve them... as advertisers continue to convince us so effectively... there are others who don't get them... and who even have to do without... even things like affordable housing... and GMO-free food... and access to healthcare... because the budgets that are passed... which *are* moral documents... don't include enough to help those in need... but these are choices we make collectively... as evidenced in who we elect... and the laws that they pass...

When Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room... he still bore the wounds of crucifixion... and he invited the disciples to examine them... and he may be seated at God's right hand... but his first throne... the throne on which he was glorified... was the holy cross... and contrary to popular belief... it's not the completely healed and tanned and fresh-from-the-spa Jesus who sits on the heavenly throne... it's the broken...

suffering... and crucified Jesus... who now reigns... there is no undoing or minimizing of Jesus' suffering... and the power with which Jesus rules... is not accompanied by angelic fanfare... it is not triumphant in the way the world understands triumph... the power that Jesus has to do God's work... is the power over and above *all rule and authority and power and dominion*... it's the power not of empire... but over empire... and sin... and anything else that has authority over us... that's not of God...

When the two men in white robes... ask the Men of Galilee... why they're slack jawed and looking up to heaven... and tell them that Jesus will return in the same way they saw him go into heaven... our worldviews determine just how we think Jesus will return... we imagine those trumpet-blowing angels... but Jesus began his ministry in submission... submitting himself to John's public baptism... and he ascended in a public way... as he blessed the disciples... and the two men in white robes say that he will return in the same kind of way... though it may not be our place to know the times or periods that God has set by God's own authority... but when God's revelation unfolds... God is not about secrets...

Jesus encouraged Thomas to reach for the divine life that flows through him... and when Jesus tells the disciples that they will be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem... in all Judea and Samaria... and to the ends of the earth... it's kind of a *Shema* moment... he's saying that God doesn't belong just to the Jewish people... or the Muslims... or the Hindus... that God is not tied to place... that God is not about land ownership or nationhood... and when Jesus says that they will be baptized by the Holy Spirit... not many days from now... he recognizes that God dwells in each person... and among us... as community... so when Jesus is no longer present... the way that his disciples lived into their calling... was by spreading the Gospel... and when we live into our calling... we spread the Gospel too...

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