

Delivered: Saint Paul UMC (Lincoln, NE) on May 16, 2021 (7th Sunday of Easter)

SERMON: THE BIG PICTURE

Text: Acts 1:1-11

By Jed Linder

OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray... Gracious God, we thank you for this time together to worship, to pray, and fellowship with one another. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, and prepare our hearts and our minds for your message to us this day. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

SCRIPTURE

Our Scripture today comes from Acts 1:1-11 [Begin SLIDES of the scripture]:

¹ Theophilus, the first scroll I wrote concerned everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning, ² right up to the day when he was taken up into heaven. Before he was taken up, working in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus instructed the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days, speaking to them about God's kingdom. ⁴ While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me: ⁵ John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?"

⁷ Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ Rather, 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 end of the earth."

⁹ After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. ¹¹ They said, "Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Thanks be to God.

I. INTRODUCTION: ASCENSION DAY

Well, today is Ascension Sunday, which always falls on the final Sunday of the Easter season. In actuality, Ascension Day was this last Thursday – because it's always 40 days after the Easter event – but we recognize it on Sunday... or, at least some churches do. In truth, Ascension Day is not all that recognized. There are not multiple evening services with children's pageants, or a candlelit, midnight mass, like Christmas. Nor are there sunrise services, tables covered with

lilies, and butterfly kites flying around like Easter. Instead, it just kind of comes and goes, and you often only hear about the following Sunday, if at all.

Why? Is it because it's on a Thursday? Is it hard for some to believe it really happened? If that's the case, regardless of what happened on that first Ascension Day, the story handed down to us carries with it a powerful, and timeless truth. It carries meaning and importance for not only our lives, and the life of the Church, but for all of history. Indeed, there is a reason the Church's traditional creeds mention that Jesus "ascended into heaven." And there is a reason that the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts told the story of the ascension twice: one at the end of Luke, and one at the beginning of Acts. Because for Luke, this event was a turning point in God's redemption of all creation.

II. THE TURNING POINT

So, let's remember, after Jesus's suffering and resurrection, it is written that Jesus spent 40 days appearing to his followers, and that number in itself is significant. It suggests the fullness of time, as well as a time for preparation. That is why you have Moses up on Sinai receiving the Law for 40 days (e.g., Exodus 24:12), that is why the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years (e.g., Numbers 14:34), that is why Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted before his ministry (Luke 4:1-13), and that is why we spend 40 days in the season of Lent. It's a time of preparation.

And for Jesus and his disciples, it was a time of preparation as well. It was a time for Jesus to teach them many things, particularly about the kingdom of God through the Scriptures. It was a time for the community to come together and unify around the risen Christ. And, it was a time for fellowship with one another, particularly at the table with the practice of table fellowship... If all this sounds familiar, it should... this is when they're learning what it means to live in light of Easter. They're learning what it means to be a resurrected community. Because pretty soon, Jesus will depart. So, this time they're enjoying together with Jesus in the resurrected flesh is not just in their heads, and it will not keep going as long as they do. No. These appearances are about to come to an end, and they need to be ready. They need to be ready for life without Jesus in the flesh. They need to be ready for the coming of the Holy Spirit. And they need to be ready for the next chapter of God's story of redemption – a chapter in which they will be prominent as the first church.

But even by the time of the ascension, itself, they still have a way to go; i.e., they don't quite get what's all happening, yet...

III. TIMES & SEASONS

We see this most clearly when one of them asks Jesus, right before he departs, "[Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?](#)"

Now, depending on who you ask, this is either a perfectly reasonable question, or maddeningly obtuse one. On the one hand, Jesus' messages – as well as the Scriptures and prophets before him – have all had political ramifications that hold to account the earthly powers in charge, and offer the promise that suffering, oppression, and elitist domination will not remain indefinitely – God's kingdom will come in its fullness, leaving all other kingdoms behind.

On the other hand, Jesus' instruction on the kingdom of God, at least the instruction that's been passed down to us in the Bible, points to a different type of kingdom and a different type of politics; one that does not fit into the mold of an earthly, political empire specifically centered around one people group. God's kingdom is not wrought by earthly superpowers, vast military might, or any human, political ideology, then or now.

But whatever Jesus felt about the question, he didn't give an answer to it. First, he tells them that's not for you to know. Only God knows the times and the seasons when such things will take place. Of course, that doesn't seem to stop some church movements and sects from claiming to know when the world is going to end... or even the guy on the street corner wearing a sandwich board and shouting through a bullhorn that the "end is near." Only God knows the times and the seasons when such things will take place.

Instead, Jesus points the disciples beyond the question of "when," and, instead, he points them to the "how" it all happens. It happens when the Spirit comes down and empowers Jesus' followers – then and now – to go out and witness to who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. And it goes far beyond just Israel... God's plans are for the whole world! All the ends of the earth! God's love and redemption is offered to everybody who wants it, not just Israel, and not just the church. They were not supposed to hoard the good news to themselves, but spread the good news to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. And we are not supposed to hoard the good news to ourselves, but spread the good news to Lincoln, to Omaha and Iowa, and to the entire ends of the earth. Jesus goes, but his message remains. And instead of the message being centered around one man on earth, the good news now passes on to his disciples, and they become apostles – from the Greek word *Apostolos*, which is a "person sent out." A person sent out to tell people what Jesus has done.

But for all that to begin, for this to start really happening, Jesus needs to ascend to his rightful place, glorified in heaven. And the Spirit needs to come – now poured out by Jesus from his throne. ***And we go from the Holy Spirit of God teaching through Jesus, to Jesus, now, teaching through the Holy Spirit of God.*** In other words, one man's message turns into the message of a multitude – millions, billions of people sharing that message. But, Jesus had to go, in order for this to happen, in order for the church to be born.

IV. STARRING INTO THE SKY

And so, Jesus ascends into heaven. And that does not mean Jesus blasted off into space like a rocket ship, but that Jesus has entered into a different, divine reality where his followers were currently unable to follow. After all, the word "ascension" has multiple meanings, including going upward, and also including how royalty ascends to the throne. So, it's how the prince will become king in England once the Queen passes on: he will ascend to it. It's more status, and less location.

And as Jesus disappears from his followers' sight, he leaves them starring up into the sky. And, apparently, they were doing that long enough that two divine messengers needed to show up and remind them that their focus should not be up there – not on heaven – but on earth. Jesus had prepared them for 40 days. He told them they would receive a new power – the Greek word

dunamis, it's where we get dynamite from – and they would receive this power, and that they would take that power and witness all over the world. This was going to be huge! But first... they needed to go back to Jerusalem and, simply, wait. It wasn't time for all of that yet. Right now, it's time to wait... to wait on God.

And this can be one of the most difficult things for us to do. After all, we live in a time of instant gratification, and an age of activism that's says if we don't do it now, no one will! It also would have been difficult for them back then... but, I'd like to think by this time, the disciples got to a point, finally, where they were trusting God's plan, and trusting God's timing. They had been crushed by the cross, but then they saw how God turned it around, transforming it from a symbol of hatred and oppression into a symbol of hope and redemption. They are now a people expecting big things from God, and they are willing to wait for it.

So, they go back to Jerusalem. They're unified. They pray together. And they wait. Because God's got the big picture planned out, and they now know they don't see this picture in its fullness, yet.

V. CONCLUSION: WAITING

This reminded me of one of my favorite illustrations of waiting for the big picture to take shape, and I want to share this illustration with you now. This is a clip from a television show from Switzerland. It's like their own "America's Got Talent," when artists, singers, comedians, etc... all come and ply their trade before a panel of 4 judges, and if all 4 judges give them a red-X, they're out... Well, this episode features an artist named Corinne Sutter, and we see if the judges can wait long enough for the big picture to be revealed. By the time we are picking this up, she's been going for about 30 seconds and is clearly creating a picture of one of the judges...

[VIDEO: Corinne Sutter on *Die grössten Schweizer Talente*]

She had it all planned out from the beginning, and she knew when the time was right for a little paint here, a little chalk there, and, finally, **boom**, an explosion of powder reveals what the plan had been all along... you just have to wait for it. But the judges couldn't wait for her to get there, and, likewise, we are also, all too often, too impatient for God to get going on God's own plans.

It is frustrating to wait. Especially when frustration and despair get overwhelming. You pray, you hope, you wait faithfully and expectantly, but God doesn't seem to be involved. You start to wonder if God has forgotten all about you, all about the church, even all about the world. And then, all of a sudden, **boom**, at the perfect time – at God's perfect timing – you discover that your waiting has not been in vain... in fact, God's done more than you could have ever hoped for or expected.

But, like Jesus' followers after he ascended into heaven, sometimes you will just have to wait... and, like the Jesus' followers 2,000 years ago, that's what we'll do as we wait for next week, and the festival of Pentecost.

CLOSING PRAYER

***Allow me to pray...** Gracious God, you are infinitely faithful, loving, and patient to a fault, and you have perfect plans beyond all our thoughts and understandings, beyond our abilities and imaginations... but sometimes, especially when things get rough, we can lose sight of all that, and we don't want to wait for your perfect timing. In those moments of life, give us the patience, the faithfulness, and the hope that sustain such waiting, and surround us with love and support, so that our waiting is never done alone, or in vain. In Jesus name we pray, amen.*