

## The Ascension as Exit Plan

Yr 1; Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Ascension Day was last Thursday, but our readings today are the Ascension readings. Three years ago I preached on the Ascension and these same readings. Does anyone remember a single thing I said? Good. I can try it again, without worrying about contradicting myself.

Luke, in his Gospel and his letter we call the Acts of the Apostles, gives us our only description of the day Jesus “was taken up” at the end of his time on earth. This occurred forty days after the Resurrection, in Bethany, a village across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Jesus told the disciples that, empowered by the Holy Spirit, their responsibility would be to proclaim the good news of the coming Kingdom of God to all nations. While Jesus was raising his hands in blessing of the eleven disciples, he withdrew from them and was carried up into a cloud. The disciples’ response was to worship him, and then return to Jerusalem.

There are many parallels in the Ascension account with other biblical stories, a traditional way of establishing a person’s credentials. The number “40” in Hebrew thought indicated a complete cycle. Jesus was tempted for 40 days, Moses spent 40 days on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments; the rains fell on Noah for 40 days.

The most significant parallel is with Elijah. The phrase “taken up” from our Gospel reading is the same phrase used in the OT book of II Kings to describe the prophet Elijah at the end of his days on earth. Elijah did not die but on Mt Horeb was “taken up” in a whirlwind accompanied by horses and chariots of fire. Thus, Luke establishes a parallel between Jesus and the most revered prophet of Judaism, Elijah, who was expected to return before the coming of the Messiah.

The Ascension is not a discourse on first century cosmology, or space travel, and we should not be distracted by the suggestion that heaven is “up”. That’s one of the many ways the pastor of my childhood and youth got it wrong when he rushed into our Sunday School class to exclaim that the Russians, having put a man in space, should not worry us; Jesus was the first to go up in space, at the Ascension. Pastor Brown in his excitement, I guess, forgot about Elijah.

In contemporary lingo, the Ascension could be said to be Jesus’ exit plan. He had completed his work on earth. A retirement in a villa along the Sea of Galilee - well that would not have worked out so well; no one would have left him alone. But there is another reason Jesus could not stay. Christ’s departure was necessary because God’s mission for the world, to bring the kingdom of God with peace, reconciliation, and justice, to all peoples, required it. Jesus, if he remained on earth, would have remained the central protagonist in God’s plan of salvation. But rather than one person walking the back roads of Palestine—evangelization on the slow track—, Jesus’ Ascension shifted the burden to us. It is our job, as a part of Christ’s church and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God by word and deed throughout the whole world. We will hear the story of the beginning of that great task next Sunday on the day of Pentecost, the day on which we celebrate the birth of Christ’s church.

There is also an important leadership lesson in Jesus’ exit plan. Have you ever been trained or trained someone to do a new job? As long as the trainer remains available, the trainer remains the expert, the go to person when a question arises. It is not until the trainer is no longer available that the person trained, much to her or his surprise, is empowered to fully exercise his or her abilities and judgment, and becomes the expert. This was true with the disciples and other followers of Jesus as well. By exercising leadership and stepping aside, Jesus empowered his followers to spread the good news of the Kingdom of God throughout the world. Jesus’ departure, the Ascension, was, and through the Holy Spirit continues to be, a great gift and

exercise of true leadership.

As a sort of interlude in this short reflection, I want to remind us that, for ourselves, but much more for those close to us we will leave behind when we die, we can exercise leadership by doing some important exit planning. We can have an Advanced Directive that outlines how we want to be treated during our final days, and what we want done about a memorial service. It is our choice, while still here, as to whether we want to be treated with every possible form of medical treatment to be kept alive as long as possible, or to be allowed to go in peace, without pain, in God's time. It's our choice whether at the end we want our bedside crowded with family or friends, or our room peaceful with quiet music. We can plan our own memorial service, specifying what readings we want read, and what we want the homilist to talk about. Tired of newspaper obituaries that all say the same thing about dying in the loving presence of your family? We can write our own obituary. Instead of our survivors wondering what we would want, we can tell them. Some of the worst family fights are among offspring about what the old goat would have wanted or deserves. So, head them off at the pass. Go out in your unique style, with a thoughtful Advanced Directive. Write your own exit plan.

I have one more comment about Jesus' ascension.

The Ascension story is also a story about waiting, an in-between time, about life after someone dear has departed. This for the disciples was a time of uncertainty, and perhaps diminishing hope. Jesus had made several appearances, and surely his followers were yearning for a return to the ways things had been. And they asked him, if this was the time when all of their hopes would be realized. Jesus' answer must have been off-putting: The time was not for them to know. He promised the Holy Spirit would come, but not yet. And then he disappeared.

So the disciples waited, and wondered, undoubtedly with increasing despair. And we can identify with them. Our lives have in-between times. They occur after loss of a loved one; with illness or unemployment; after a broken relationship; after graduating from high school; and while waiting for a child or grandchild to be born, awaiting the results of a medical test, watching as a loved one slips away into Alzheimer's. We know things will never again be as they were, but what will be is not yet known. We crave resolution, and want to go on to the next page. But life is not so neat and tidy, and we do not control the timing of events. One part of life is waiting, living in the in-between time. But we do have an advantage the disciples did not yet have. We have experienced the comfort and leading of the Holy Spirit, and we can know we will again have the hope and peace that can only come from God.

The Ascension is not about primitive cosmology, with Jesus flying up to heaven. It is about the beginning of a major transition, a shifting of the burden from Jesus to his disciples, and to the Church. In other words, to us. During this coming week, anticipation of Pentecost is inevitable. But also reflect for a few moments about the in-between time and how the disciples must have felt as Jesus left their sight. Feel the uncertainty and doubt. But do not despair.

Next Sunday we will all wear red, and celebrate.

Amen.

Dale Ramerman

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Christ Church Anacortes