

Patience and Power
Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11
May 28, 2017 – Seventh Sunday of Easter

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, forty days after Easter. the day that Luke tells us the risen Christ ascended to heaven. Our United Methodist Tradition does not celebrate the Ascension in a major way. But the Ascension of Jesus to heaven is hugely important. First, it's important for theological reasons. The Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was not created on the first Christmas. No, those three persons, what I'll call the three natures of God always existed and always will exist. The first verses of John's Gospel confirm – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . and the Word became flesh and dwelled among us." Indeed the Word, that is Jesus Christ always existed and always will exist.

Neither was the Holy Spirit created at Pentecost; and I'll say a lot more about that next week; but, today I'll simply note that the first verses of Genesis confirm – "In the Beginning when God created heaven and earth. . . the Spirit of God moved across the face of the waters." Indeed the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit always existed.

But back to Christ... Christ, the Son, always existed, at one with God. On the first Christmas, twenty-one hundred years ago, Christ, the Word, became flesh and blood, that we might have an ever closer relationship with the divine. So, theologically, the Ascension is important; because, as Jesus states repeatedly, most especially in the Gospel of John, it is necessary for him to return to the father, it is necessary for him to return to his oneness with God. His work on earth is done. We might say that the Ascension brings theological closure to the story of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, God in human form.

But, as much as I love theology; as much as I find great meaning in the scholarly contemplation of the nature of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about more than theology. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about more than thinking, head knowledge, theological reflection. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about who we are; and the life we are called to live. And so, I find in the report of the Ascension two things that directly affect our lives as Christians: patience and power.

Before I begin, let me remind you that there is very little doubt - The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were written by the same person. They form a two volume set. Thus we have, in the opening of Acts the statement: "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven." Now, we're not real sure who Theophilus was, but that first book to which Acts refers is the Gospel of Luke. And thus, we have this overlap of the story of the Ascension. Like a good author, Luke is

refreshing our memory, saying, “This is where we left off. Let me continue from here.”

But, perhaps the most important thing about today’s lesson is not the fact that Jesus returned to the Father. Perhaps the most important thing is what he said to his followers before his return.

First, Jesus tells them to wait. In Luke we read: “you are to stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”; and, in Acts, Jesus “ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.” Wait. Patience. The disciples are witnessing a miraculous event, the Ascension of Jesus to heaven. Don’t you think that wanted to go forth and tell the world what they had just seen. But Jesus says, “Wait. Not yet. Have patience. I am giving you the power to change the world; but, be patient. It will come.”

It’s been said that patience is a virtue. Many of us have heard the prayer: “Lord, give me patience, and I give it to me now!” But Jesus tells the disciples, “In time, the time is coming. Be patient and wait for the right time.”

But having said that, Jesus also says, the time is coming “not many days from now.” Patience is not an excuse for “sitting back and doing nothing.” I generally like to think of myself as a patience person. I’ll leave it up to others to confirm or deny that; but, I’m also a person who generally lives by the adage, “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” I like to get things done today, because we never know what tomorrow will bring. It was the Jewish Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus that developed a three-fold philosophy. His third “fold” is, “If not now, when?” No, patience is not an excuse for procrastination; but it’s also a recognition that everything has its time.

We also need to recognize that the disciples did not simply return to the upper room and “sit on their hands.” No, the Gospel says, “They returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” They spent their time in worship, waiting patiently for the promise of God.

And what was the promise? – “power from on high,” or as one translation puts it – “you [will be] furnished with heavenly power.”(Luke 24:49 CEB) In the Book of Acts, Jesus instructs his followers: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” The promise... The promise of the Holy Spirit; the promise of heavenly power.

But there’s still more. Yes, I believe that the Holy Spirit works in wonderfully strange, miraculous ways. Sometimes wonderful things happen that are totally beyond our control – strange “coincidences,” unexplainable events. But let us look to the beginning of today’s lessons. The Gospel states that Jesus “opened the minds [of the disciples] to understand the scriptures,” and Acts says, “Before he was taken up, working in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus instructed the apostles.” Instruction, scripture. . . Friends, these are powerful words. The

Gospel of Jesus Christ contains amazing power, because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest news the world has ever know, the news of God's amazing love for you, for me, for all people, indeed for the entire creation.

So today we celebrate the Ascension. Today we celebrate the return of Christ to the oneness of God. Today we also hear the call for patience combined with the call to study, to worship, to hear the promise of scripture. Most importantly, today we hear the promise, the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit.

May the power of the Holy Spirit be present to each of us, to this church, to our denomination, indeed to all the world; that we might share the Good News of God's amazing love with all whom we meet.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,
Give us patience, the patience to wait, to discern your call.
Help us hear your call, to worship, to study,
 to grow in the knowledge of your word.
And give us the heavenly power, the power to act,
 the power to share your Good News,
 the power of the Holy Spirit
 that we might be a source of love and peace and joy
 in our community and in our world.
This we pray in your holy name. Amen.

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