

Sermon 6-2-19
Paul Purdue preaching

Gazing Towards Heaven, Waiting for the Spirit to Fall - June 2, 2019

Our intergenerational Sunday school is considering the church year as our marker of time. With that in mind, 44 days ago we entered the season of Easter. Thursday, 40 days after Easter, we celebrated our Lord's Ascension. Next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost.

It stretches my imagination to picture the Ascension. In Luke, Luke offers no flaming chariot, no whirlwind, no parting sky, no angel band singing "glory to God in the highest" or "victory in Jesus". There is no voice from heaven, the spirit does not descend/ascend like a dove, no rush of a mighty wind, nor tongues of fire. Unlike Christmas, Easter or even Pentecost, the Ascension comes with no back stories and few details.

Luke shares, "Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, lifted his hands and blessed them. While blessing them, Jesus left them and was taken up to heaven." They worship and return to Jerusalem. Luke reports the disciples are overwhelmed with joy. And they were continuously in the temple praising God. Can you get that one scene in your mind?

I like Luke's retelling in the Acts of the Apostles a bit better. Hear Acts 1:9: "After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, Jesus was lifted up. A cloud took Jesus out of the disciples' sight. While Jesus was going away and as the followers were staring toward heaven, suddenly two messengers in white robes stood next to them. The messengers said, "Why are you standing here, looking toward heaven?"

Why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? I know there are supposedly no dumb questions, but that seems like a dumb question. I wonder a bit about the angels, for on Easter the angels ask Magdalene, "Why are you weeping?" But maybe the question "Why are you standing here, looking toward heaven?" is more a question for us who stand 2,000 years away from the Ascension?

Why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? Is Christianity about continuously dwelling in the temple praising God?

There are strands of Christianity, both monastic (high, quiet, and set apart) and contemporary (accessible, loud, and communal), that direct our focus towards heaven. Some folks measure Christian faithfulness in terms of achieving deep inner or peace or "overwhelming joy."

Mother Teresa counters faith lived for the world to come: "Prayer does not demand that we interrupt our work, but that we continue working as if it were a prayer. It is not necessary to always be meditating, nor to consciously experience the sensation that we are talking to God, no matter how nice this would be. What matters is being with God, living in God, in Christ and inside God's will. To love with a pure heart, to love everybody, especially to love the poor, is a 24-hour prayer."

I grew up narrowly understanding Christian mission as going to church and trying to get people into heaven. At times a fiery sermon stoked our fears of eternal damnation. The rhythmic weekly refrain of Jesus' prayer "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven" did not remind us to build Christ's blessed community right now, right here. Some hype up the great worship they offer but Jesus warns, "Not everybody who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of our Creator." (Matthew 7:21)

Jesus whispers, "Come, you blessed by our holiest heavenly parent, inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. For I was hungry and you

gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me... 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' "The Lord answers, 'I assure you that what you have done for one of the least of these my kindred, you have done for me.'"

Why are you standing here, looking toward heaven?" Surely, we come like spiritual sunbathers hoping to soak up spiritual rays. We long for the comforting glow of faith, hope and love. The question, "why are you standing here" resets the focus and ask us "What is next?" We find ourselves asking, "What is next, church?"

Perhaps life is always asking us what is next! Three summers ago, my mother moved out of our home after 5 years, her dementia stealing so much of her, she could no longer live in our home. Two summers ago, I began here. This time last year my youngest graduated high school. In January, he changed majors. For the next few years, we may be asking "what is next?" Next summer my oldest graduates... what is next? Yesterday, Connie and I celebrated 31 years of marriage. I remember walking down the beach on our honeymoon, enjoying the glow of deepest infatuation. As the tide danced at our feet, a strange question intruded our rom-com, "who is this I am married to? What will this be like?" Life always asks "what is next?"

Some forward-looking folks believe we are in an era of unprecedented societal change. For example, never before could I hold between my fingers a calendar, camera, broadcast studio, matchmaker, all the world's newspaper, world's biggest record store, blockbuster, bookstore, department store, arcade, translator, travel guide, fitness tracker, worldwide phonebook, photos album of all my friends' children, facetime, calculator, altimeter, GPS, weather radar, market tracker, and yes, a phone.... What is next? Are our devices little printing presses reshaping Martin Luther's 99 treatises and tracts? Gutenberg's press fueled the reformation as much as Wittenburg's door! Or are our phones just an alarm bell chiming a deep spiritual illness?

As we wonder what is next, the world may not be looking to the church for answers? The universal church is facing huge changes, a deepening exodus and growing divisions. We mistake a reshuffling of members for conversion. It is a strange era; a pastor friend shared how her teenage daughter is rejecting Christianity because it is anti-science. Do you know such stories? Is the church more in love with the warm glow of the recent past than challenged by the uncertainty of God's future? Do we love our traditions more than we value God's pentecostal winds that light new fires and send us out into the streets with good news? It is never past time for reformation.

Why are you standing here looking toward heaven? Martin Luther King, Jr. preaches to our moment: "I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities.... And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, non Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.... On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the south's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: 'What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?'" (T)he judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church

has turned into outright disgust. (1963 letter from a Birmingham jail) Perhaps, disgust has turned to indifference.

What is next for the church? I do not have the answer, but I know it is more than standing around, gazing towards heaven, hoping God will intervene. Just before Jesus slips into the clouds to ascend into glory, the disciples ask, "Lord when will you come back and fix everything?" Jesus says, "Rather, rather than me doing it, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses, my martyrs, my little Jesus-es in concentric circles moving out from where you stand, over to your Samartant opponents, to the Ethiopian eunuch, to the uncircumcised, and to the end of the earth."

Oh, let us stop standing around waiting on a strangely warmed feeling. Rather, let us build up Christ's blessed community, a community of faith, hope, love, justice, and equality for we have this power in the Holy Spirit. Amen.