

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena

7th Sunday of Easter

Ascension Sunday

May 16, 2010

Acts 1:1-11

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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 ends of the earth." ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

"You are Witnesses"

40. 40. 40.

**40 days of flood. 40 years of wandering in the wilderness for Israel.
40 days of wilderness for Jesus as his post-baptismal inauguration and as
the start of his mission.**

**40 days of lent. And now 40 days since the Day of Resurrection we
observe the Ascension. That was Thursday. We celebrate it today on
Sunday.**

At the end of the gospel of Luke we are told (24:50-53): “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

The scene here in the opening words of the Book of Acts is the same as the end of Luke. Not surprising as we attribute Acts to really be the second movement of Luke’s composition.

There is a two-fold happening here. Jesus commissions or sends out the disciples. Jesus is ascended. Luke adds this essential piece of information, that for 40 days Jesus has been not only appearing to them but also “speaking about the kingdom of God.”

The ascension piece is puzzling at best and we should not make too much out of the way it is related. It understands a cosmology that is unlike what we understand today. We know that earth is not flat and we don’t conceive a universe where heaven is up there and something worse is down there. Yet, even with children, somehow they get the idea that there is an up there, and even a down there. It’s a functional way to tell the story.

But Jesus does not launch as a rocket skyward or even gently float up as an escaping helium balloon. Such is not the point of the telling of the story of the ascension. The method of departure is really not the centerpiece of the story.

As Luke ends and Jesus is ascended, the disciples were, as it says, “continually in the temple blessing God.” But in the Acts account of the ascension there is a detail that stands out. There they are with Jesus and he is in conversation with them. They have grown accustomed to being

with the resurrected Jesus and by this point they are relaxed into the incredible reality that it is really Jesus with them.

At such a moment the detail of the Acts account emerges. The disciples ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” That is the question of the disciples. It is such a precise detail that one can gloss over it.

The disciples ask is this the moment, is this the time, is it now when the Lord will restore the kingdom of Israel. For 40 days now the resurrected Jesus has been appearing to them. For 40 days that living Christ has been sitting with them, traveling with them, eating with them, and teaching them. What has he been teaching about? Acts 1:3 is clear: “After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convicting proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”

He speaks about the kingdom of God. They ask about the kingdom of Israel. There is a difference there. It is that difference that gets to the heart of the matter. It is that difference that is still the nitty-gritty, bottom line, crux of the matter in our lives. The difference has to do with our preconceived notions of the kingdom.

It is not so much a kingdom of God vs. the kingdom of Israel; it is not a one wins over the other. It is more about what reigns, what gets the priority, what comes to the forefront...it is even a matter of what motivates us, what forms our story, and what do we witness to.

Jesus says to those disciples there that day at his ascension: “But 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 ends of the earth.”

“You will be my witnesses...” You are his witnesses. You are witnesses.

But what is our motivation...what forms our story...what is the content of that witness? Do we witness to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Israel? For us it is not about the kingdom of Israel as it is about the kingdom of our priorities.

So often our witness has less to do with the kingdom of God and more to do with the kingdom of survival. We are trying to get through and get by and make it. It is more about us that it is about God. It is about survival. Can we survive the week? Can we survive the next project at work? Can we survive the downturn in the economy? Can we survive the next challenge that our children place before us or the struggle to care for aging parents and relatives?

We witness to the need to make it and to get through. We witness to the need to survive. It has become the silent and unspoken mantra of the institutional church. It is that perspective that we are a small congregation that desperately needs young families to join us graying haired people so that we will survive.

Survival—making it, coping, getting by, having what we need—such is not to be our witness.

You are witnesses...we are witnesses to the incredible reality that come what may God is present. We are witness to the larger truth that in good times and bad times, in the feast and famine we can place our trust and faith in this God who will see us through.

This God can be trusted so much that even in the face of the cross—even as Jesus goes fully into death God raises him up and exalts him and

seats him fully in the reign of God. God can be trusted all the way—such a witness is larger than survival.

So often our witness has less to do with the kingdom of God and more to do with the kingdom of activity. You know activity and so do I. We know it well. We have so much activity going on that a mere list is not enough anymore. We have calendars—home calendar, work calendar, church calendar, family even calendar—and all those calendars we have them all synced to our mobile phones so that we can carry them wherever we go. I'm not immune to it—I have my Droid with Goggle Personal Calendar and my Outlook calendar—it syncs every 120 minutes.

A dozen times a day it is busy co-coordinating everything for me. If I had a dollar for every time I heard people talk about how busy they are, and if I had a dollar for every time I said I was busy—oh, I could take all those dollars and put them together and not quite pay off the national debt but make a pledge towards it.

Activity. We are so busy with activity in every aspect of our lives that we just about spin in dizziness. Be busy, stay busy—that is not our witness.

You are witnesses...we are witnesses to the incredible reality that beyond all that activity is the enduring presence of God. Beyond all that hustle and bustle and rush and running so hard that we cannot catch our breath—beyond all that is this God that holds us and sustains us.

Sometimes we keep all that busy going because we make it a measure of who we are—we can slow down...we can ease up—who we are is not measured by the length of our to-do list. Who we are is measured more in our awareness to God's reaching for us. Who we are is measured

more in our getting beyond all the activity to see God permeation of all things and every aspect of our living.

In our busy days and in our times where we take Sabbath...in our rush and in our catching our breath—in all of that God is yearning to have our attention so that we “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” That is a larger witness that our level of activity.

So often our witness has less to do with the kingdom of God and more to do with consumption. We have managed to turn everything into a consumer good. Things, things, and more things—that is what we are all about. We measure our identity and even our self-worth based on the amount and type of things we have. Better, bigger, stronger, newer...

Consumerism has so captured us that we even regard our relationships as consumer goods. We enter into relationships based on what they can do for us. And we dispose of relationships like they were a broken toaster—out in the trash it is of no use anymore. We dump people like yesterdays broken electronic...

...we have turned it into all about what we have. We have turned it into all about what we own. That way of seeing the world even invades our faith so that it becomes an issue of having God. God becomes a possession more than our context for living.

It is not about possessing God. God is not something you get or you have.

“You will be my witnesses,” Jesus says. We witness to this God that is larger than something you have, larger than all things, larger than activities, and larger than survival—we witness to this God that is larger—well, let me say it this way: “We witness to this God that is larger than life.”

We are witnesses to this God that is so beyond...so incredible...so awesome and amazing that this God has a passion of each of us. This God has a passion for each of us in this room and for those who this day we pass by who are mowing their lawns or kicking back unaware.

It is to those ones...that we will be witnesses to this God that is larger than our consumption-survival-activity. We witness to this God who brings life out of death...we witness to this God who holds us, and calls us, and send us out armed with love, wrapped in love, and witnesses of love.

You are witness. Go.