

SERMON
MENNONITE CHURCH OF THE SERVANT
MAY 24, 2020
ASCENSION SUNDAY
TEXT: ACTS 1:1-11

The account of Jesus' ascension picks up where Luke's gospel leaves off. But before the story continues, Luke summarizes what he has done in his gospel. He says that he has written about all that Jesus did and taught, through Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and his ascension.

Luke presents this summary to someone named Theophilus, who we can assume was Luke's patron. Luke also acknowledges Theophilus in the gospel of Luke, one of the many clues that tell us that Luke also wrote the book of Acts. Most likely, Theophilus provided the financial support that enabled Luke to spend his time writing, first his gospel, and now, the book of Acts.

At the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus ascends to heaven. The opening scene in the book of Acts is not a different ascension, but a retelling of the ascension story-- another way of connecting the two volumes together.

According to what Luke tells Theophilus, Jesus appeared to his disciples over a 40-day time period, continuing to teach them about the kingdom. The disciples were in a different space than they were in Luke's gospel when Jesus first appeared. In the gospel account, when Jesus appeared, they thought they'd seen a ghost; they were "disbelieving and still wondering," only believing it was really Jesus when he said he was hungry and ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence (Luke 24:36-43). But in Acts, the disciples had grown comfortable with having Jesus around.

During these 40 days, Jesus continued to teach his disciples about the kingdom, just as he had done before his crucifixion. So, it is not surprising that having heard so much talk about the kingdom, the disciples would ask him "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

One would think that the disciples would get what Jesus had been trying to tell them about the kingdom, but apparently this isn't the case. To ask about restoring the kingdom implies that there had already been a kingdom, and in the political sense, that was true. "Israel," refers to Jews whose ancestors had been citizens of the kingdom of Israel or the kingdom of Judah. Both nations were conquered by the superpowers of their days, and the Jews still living in Palestine were living in occupied territory and had been for centuries.

It was a widespread belief among the Jews that, someday, God would send the Messiah to restore political independence to the Jews. The Contemporary English Version translates the disciples' question as. "Lord, are you now going to give Israel its own king again?" Even though they had

experienced, in Jesus, a different kind of Messiah speaking about a different kind of kingdom, they couldn't quite shake off the traditional images of what God's kingdom would be like.

Jesus deflects their question by saying the timing of the kingdom's arrival is in God's hands. "But," Jesus says, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses." We can assume that some of Jesus' kingdom teaching and kingdom living had made an impact on the disciples; otherwise, why did Jesus have the confidence to appoint them as his witnesses? Jesus tells them that the Holy Spirit will guide them to say and do the right thing, to be worthy witnesses to Jesus as they continue his kingdom work.

In both Luke and Acts, Jesus instructs his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait-- according to the gospel, wait for "the power on high," and in Acts, wait for the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells the disciples to begin their witness in Jerusalem, "...then in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." This instruction serves Luke's purpose in Acts, to show that the apostles first witnessed to their own people, the Jews, and then, they witnessed to gentiles, as well. The book of Acts is the story of how Jesus' apostles put his instructions into action, beginning in Jerusalem, and concluding with Paul's preaching in Rome, "the ends of the earth."

Then, all a sudden, "...he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight." Some translations say, "a cloud *took him* out of their sight;" others say, "a cloud *hid him* so they could no longer see him." It was either a cloudy day, or a cloud enveloped Jesus and took him away, but the point is that the disciples looked for Jesus in the sky but couldn't see him. The disciples kept on looking for him, their heads cocked back and their eyes gazing upward. How long would they have stood there in disbelief that Jesus had so abruptly left them, if they hadn't been interrupted by two men in white robes who ask, "...why do you stand looking upward toward heaven?"

In the Bible, unidentified men wearing white robes are understood as divine beings: angels. Angels bring messages from God.. William Loader, in his commentary on this verse, v. 11, suggests that Luke intends them to be the same two "men in dazzling clothes" who, in Luke's gospel, tell the women at Jesus' tomb, "He is not here. He is risen" (Luke 24:5).¹ In v. 11, the angels have a message for the disciples: Jesus "...has been taken up from you into heaven and will come, in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Loader explains the significance of these messages: "You can be as sure of [Jesus'] return as you are of his resurrection...you may be confident of the coming of the kingdom and the coming of Jesus, because God has vindicated him, God has identified [God's]self with him. Jesus is Lord."²

Luke believed that the end of the age was coming soon, the time when Jesus would return to claim his own, but Luke also faced the reality that forty-something years after Jesus' ascension, Jesus still hadn't come back. In the interim, Luke's solution was to explain the success of the

¹ Loader, William, *Being the Church Then and Now: Issues from the Acts of the Apostles*, "2. Why do you stand looking up into heaven?" (Acts 1:11), <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au>

² *ibid*

growth of the Christian movement as the power of the Holy Spirit. But as of the end of today's text, the disciples have yet to experience this power. They are waiting.

What do disciples of Jesus do when he has left them on their own, and the Holy Spirit is only a promise? Before Jesus' final instructions to his disciples, before he ascended into the sky and left them on their own, he told them to wait. So those who had followed Jesus waited, about 120 of them, according to v. 15. They knew that the Holy Spirit would come one day, so the eleven apostles recruited a replacement for Judas to restore the leadership group to twelve who were witnesses to the Resurrection. They were prepared. They were ready. But, for the most part, they were immobilized. All they could do was pray—and wait.

There's nothing like a global pandemic to remind us that Jesus has yet to return. The book of Revelation promises that in the age to come, God will live among the people. "[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more ... See, I am making all things new." (Rev. 4-5). In this present age of sickness and suffering, we are waiting for Jesus to inaugurate his kingdom, but the old one is hanging on.

In the interim, we are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. With social distancing and only virtual images to remind us of who we are, are we, like the disciples, still waiting for the Holy Spirit to guide us as Christ's witnesses? Has the Spirit social distanced from us? Does the Holy Spirit know how to Zoom?

We may be on our own for a while. Worshipping with each other, praying with each other, may be the only thing we are equipped to do in this time of waiting. Pray, take care of "essential business," and wait.

We wait for the Holy Spirit. We wait for the time when the Spirit will empower us once again to be witnesses for Jesus' kingdom work, in what we say and in the way we live. One day, when Jesus returns and God reigns on earth, there will be no more hunger, no more suffering, no more injustice, and, please, Jesus when your kingdom comes, no more pandemics!