

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church (via zoom)  
Ascension Sunday 5/24/2020  
Texts: Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53  
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Today is Ascension Sunday, a time to remember how Jesus was taken from the sight of his disciples. When he appeared to them after the resurrection, their grief had turned into joy: to be able to see him and speak with him; though it was not as often or in the same way that they once did. The glimpses they had of Jesus now were more fleeting, surprising, and sometimes, they did not know that it was Jesus they were with until well after the fact. Now Jesus tells them that he is going away. And they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. He tells them the Holy Spirit would come upon them- "not too long from now." But they will need to wait for this to happen.

More waiting. They had to wait until the third day after Jesus died for the Resurrection. From the resurrection to the ascension was 40 days. And it was to be another 9 days from the Ascension to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Once more the disciples were in a period of uncertainty, waiting, and wondering. A liminal time. Liminal times are times of transition and even transformation- They are like a threshold between what was and what is to be. The example of a liminal time that most quickly comes to my mind is that of adolescence; when one is no longer a child, but not yet an adult. I remember how I could not wait to experience the freedoms of adulthood. (I did not yet fully comprehend the responsibilities that come with that freedom.) Liminal times bring with them a stew of emotions: longing and anticipation. Stress and grief. And even boredom and frustration.

The COVID19 pandemic has put us all into a liminal time. We grieve for what was, and we are beginning to understand that things will never be the same. We are beginning to understand that some things should never again be the same. The pandemic has revealed deep flaws in our society. How workers- now recognized to be essential- but who have long been denied a living wage and benefits-are put in harm's way and treated disrespectfully. We have seen more clearly, how black and brown people are disproportionately affected by this disease because of inconsistent access to healthcare, and other health issues. We have seen the frustration and anger in those who want to just get on with things, and who take their frustration out on others. It is always hard to wait for what will be.

In the moment that Jesus was about to leave, I imagine that the disciples had so many questions for him. They want to know where he is going and when they will see him again. They want to know is this the time when you will restore the nation of Israel? (Are you going to come back and kick out the Romans?) And I imagine that they wanted to know, how are we to get along without you? And, what are we supposed to do now? You'll notice from our readings this

morning, that Jesus did four things. He opened the scriptures to them; he blessed them and gave them both a challenge and a promise.

The challenge was this: to bring to all people his message -his good news- of God's desire for the healing and reconciliation of the world. Jesus' disciples were to take up his mission- To bring God's vision of the beloved community more and more into being. To do this, they needed to repent- to turn back again and again, to the path that Jesus had set before them. And he promised they would receive the power to do this from the Holy Spirit.

We too have been given the gift of Scripture. We know from the first letter of Timothy that all Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching so that disciples may be equipped for every circumstance and every good work. The words and example of Jesus continue to be relevant in guiding us through the difficult times in our lives.

We too, are given this charge and this promise: to remember Jesus' message of repentance and the hope of new life. Words like repent and lament have fallen out of favor in our lexicon of faith. We prefer to focus on joy and praise and blessings. But we have entered into a season for lament and repentance. We need are to repent- as individuals and as a people, the ways in which we have strayed from God's vision of the beloved community. We need to repent: of the greed that has led to the abuse of creation and our fellow creatures.

We need to repent: that we allowed economic indicators be our guiding principle and bottom line instead of humanitarian concerns. Far too often, we forget that God is willing to forgive us. It is easy to forget that as often as we mess up, we can start again fresh by returning to God and receiving God's love. And we too-are given the blessing and the promise that we will be able to spread that good news-not on our own strength, but by the power of the Holy Spirit that will fill us and guide us and work through us.

We will get through this difficult time- by the power of God that will be given to each one of us. We can use this waiting time -this liminal time- to imagine the way the world could be; to imagine what the beloved community could look like here on earth as it is in heaven. Imagine a healed world- not going back to the dysfunctional way things were, but going forward in God's spirit to create a society based on love, mutual respect and the care of creation.

The threshold days between Ascension and Pentecost are a time to pray for the coming of God's Spirit upon us. So let us pray, today and every day, that we might receive the promise of the power of the Spirit, to face the days ahead, and to take up Christ's challenge- to bring God's vision of a just and harmonious world into being. Amen.