

In Absentia: Making Way for the Spirit
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
May 24, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Luke 24:44-53
Acts 1:3-11

It looked – and it felt – a little strange. There we were, six men sitting in a large and otherwise empty movie theater in the middle of the afternoon on a Tuesday.

But when the lights went out and the movie started, we weren't in Charlotte, North Carolina, any more. We were somewhere in the outer reaches of space, surrounded by phaser blasts and photon torpedoes and commands to increase power to the forward shields.

Yes, I admit it. I snuck off one recent afternoon to see the latest Star Trek movie. I needed a little escapism, and it worked.

Like many types of story-telling, the most recent installment of this 42-year old tale starts out with a flashback to the moment Captain Kirk was born – where else – in the middle of a light-speed fire-fight. I think the bad guys were the Romulans, but I get them mixed up.

You know the flashback. It's a great technique when a story needs a running start, when past is prologue.

The Bible includes a variety of flashbacks. The entire Old Testament might even be considered one long flashback – remembrance in history, psalms, proverbs and prophecy rooted in God's covenant with Israel. It is a case of past as prologue as the entire Old Testament points forward to the coming of Christ.

The author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles understood this technique.

In the closing chapters of Luke, he tells us how Christ – already crucified, died, buried and resurrected – spends his last snatch of time on earth with the apostles. Christ promises that God will send what Luke calls "power from on high." He then leads the Apostles out to Bethany, charges them to be his witnesses, blesses them and is taken up into heaven.

The Book of Acts, which is a sequel to Luke, opens with a flashback. Maybe he was worried his readers had a short attention span. Acts chapter one retells the story of how the risen Christ brought his earthly time to a close, promising the disciples there is more

to come from God, telling them to carry on and then ascending into heaven, leaving the stunned disciples staring up into the sky, wondering, perhaps, what just happened.

All of a sudden, Christ really is, once and for all ascended, gone and, for the moment, in absentia.

The Ascension is not very well known among us Christians, even those of us who grew up in churches that paid close attention to how the seasons of the church flow from one holiday festival to another. It came and went on the church calendar last Thursday and the world hardly knew it.

We celebrate Christ's coming into the world with all the pageantry, commercial and otherwise, of Christmas. We prepare for Christ's passion for the forty days of Lent.

But like Festivas, the made-up holiday on the Jerry Seinfeld show, the liturgical event of the Ascension of our Lord doesn't seem to get much respect.

That's a shame because it can serve as a wonderful prologue to the next event that we Christians celebrate, Pentecost. At Pentecost, we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit as God's eternal presence with us to inspire, enable and authorize our work as the church. But first, God's presence in our messiah, Jesus Christ, must take his leave in the ascension.

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In the first chapter, the author of Acts writes:

“After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” Acts 1, verse 3

It seems a reasonable guess that the disciples were getting used to having Jesus around, in those forty days after the resurrection.

‘Perhaps,’ the disciples thought, ‘this is how it’s going to be. Jesus has won victory over death AND he plans to stick around, sort of like a player-coach on a basketball team. Judas’ betrayal, Jesus’ passion, the agony of the crucifixion and those three days when our Lord was in the tomb ... that was an awful time. But things are working out pretty well now.’

‘Jesus has even made an entirely new promise, something about being baptized with the power of the Holy Spirit,’ they might have thought. ‘Maybe this Spirit will be one more member of the team.’

All of that would have been a reasonable interpretation of the events. But, then, quite literally out of the blue, or perhaps we should say into the blue, Jesus is gone. This time, it looked like, for good.

If the disciples didn't have something of an identity crisis before, one would have been warranted now. Or ... what appeared to be a sudden change in plans could be a chance to hear a new call from God, to grow in their identity as disciples.

In our own lives, we have those moments, don't we? Something changes, something big, and suddenly we feel like occupy a different place in the world. We unite our lives with another in marriage or maybe a marriage ends. We become parents or we become caretakers of our own parents. Or we lose someone who plays a unique role in our lives. And one day we realize our place in the world is not the same as it was.

This was one of the emotions I felt after my father died in March. At what seemed like a fairly random moment, it hit me. The two people in the entire world whom I am most like are my parents. And in many ways - physical resemblance, some characteristics and qualities, professional orientation, shared habits and hobbies - I am uniquely like my father. In these ways, he was the closest person on earth to me. And now he was gone and my place in the world is different, larger, to fill the space he left, a little heavier on my shoulders and a little more lonely.

I bet many of you know what I am talking about.

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In the case of the disciples, who had, of course, experienced a loss far greater than even our greatest personal loss, the question of new identity comes to a climax in today's passage in Acts.

Jesus makes what he calls the "promise of God."

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," he says, using the Greek word *dynamis*, from which we get our word "dynamic," suggesting something of the living force that is to come.

But both of those statements are about something that has yet to happen.

The disciples, of course, think this is it, the time when God's kingdom will be ushered in and all hurting, suffering and injustice will come to an end.

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" You can almost hear the breathlessness in their question.

There they go again, we might think. Or better yet, if we're honest with ourselves, there we go again, too, trying to make God's time fit our expectations. Time is one of the hardest aspects of our walk with God, an element of our relationship with our creator that can be befuddling if not downright discouraging. The issue of time lies at the heart of many of the most difficult questions of the Christian life.

How long will I be estranged from the person who had been so important to me?

How long before I or the person that I love feels better - whether it is physical, spiritual, mental or emotional?

Why, God, is it taking me so long to find a new job or, at least, a job I like more than the one I have?

Why haven't I yet found the person with whom I am to spend the rest of my life?

When will I be able to move on from the paralyzing grief I feel over the soul-mate I have lost?

When, O God, will I feel the peace that passes all understanding that I have heard so much about?

When the disciples ask Jesus whether it is time for God to make the world right, Jesus gives them a direct answer. It is probably not the answer that we want, the one that fits our schedules, desires or agendas.

Jesus says: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by his own authority."

What a let-down. This from the God who loves us? Doesn't God know how hard it is down here? Where's the love, we might ask?

In his helpful new book, The Will of God, Myers Park United Methodist Senior Minister James Howell offers these words:

God is well aware that it's dangerous out there. God made "out there!" But God decided: "I will not shelter them from all harm. What I will do is, I will love them; I will send my Son to be their brother. I will enter into their lives in such a powerful way that they can come to know my heart, so they can know my mind. And then they will know what I am calling them to do and what my will for them is: and whenever they suffer, they can look to my Son."¹

For the disciples, Jesus was the promise of God, God with us, the messiah. Then, he was gone, "taken up" as scripture says, ushering in the epoch of faith in which we all live still today, this in-between time, the time after God's coming in Christ Jesus and before Christ's return.

This in-between time can be a trying thing even for the most devout Christian. Can you imagine what it felt like for the disciples? At that moment it seemed like all bets were off.

God was gone, in absentia, unaccounted for. Christ was ascended, but the Holy Spirit had yet to come into the world. But, as it is so often in our relationship with God, what might have looked like the end was actually a beginning – a beginning the disciples could never have imagined, even though Christ had promised it.

¹ P.11

At that moment, God withdrew the presence of God's only son to make way for his presence in the Holy Spirit and through that Spirit God would authorize, enable and sustain witnesses and disciples for all the years to come. The New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says it this way.

"So long as Jesus was physically present, he was available only to those he encountered; by the Spirit, he became powerfully present to many through his prophetic successors." ²

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As I thought about that succession, that sequence of events in which Jesus had to leave to make way for the Holy Spirit, I thought about the journey of Caldwell church over the last three years. And I thought about people like Grace Strickhouser, who joined the church triumphant at the age of 98 on Thursday, which happened to be Ascension Day on our liturgical calendar.

We look around today and we see signs everywhere of the "new thing" that God is doing here - new faces, new ministries, new activities and opportunities to serve God. At last week's meeting of the Presbytery, which is the seven-county regional body of our denomination, they released statistics that made it official. For the second year in a row, Caldwell was by far the fastest-growing church by percentage in our region. Thanks be to God!

But, one has to wonder, is it all somehow part of God's sequence, God's often-elusive but always sovereign sense of timing. Perhaps, albeit in a smaller and less cosmic sense that we may not fully understand, this church needed first to make way for the new thing that is happening. Grace and her generation did that by building this place and then, when the time came, by making way so generously and graciously for a new congregation. And in Grace's case, she made her welcome clear so personally and so memorably with those soft, smiling blue eyes.

Next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate anew the presence of God in the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus had to make way for the Spirit, just as Grace and Bill and their generation opened their doors to the rest of us, let us open our hearts afresh ... to make way for the Holy Spirit to be our inspiration, counsel and guide as we seek to be the body of Christ ... and as we make way for others to join us in his work.

Amen

² The Acts of the Apostles, a commentary. p. 31