

## Sermon – May 21, 2023

Today is what we celebrate as Ascension Sunday. Ascension is celebrated 40 days after Jesus' Resurrection and then we celebrate Jesus being taken up into heaven after he had been and taught a little bit more following that resurrection. It's really, for me, more of a transition Sunday so it's kind of our prelude, our preparation for what we're going to celebrate next week.

So next week, 50 days after the resurrection, we celebrate the Festival of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit is breathed into Jesus' disciples on earth and they are commissioned to start their ministry. But for that to happen the groundwork had to be laid, and that began with the Incarnation; that began at the beginning of our gospel lesson when Jesus became one of us, that God took on humanity, becoming one with creation. It continued as Jesus called his disciples and started to teach and to heal, and to help them understand a new way to be God's people, and what it means to live in God's Kingdom not sometime in the future, but as we live and breathe and move now. Here our gospel lesson is a wonderful example of that last set of instructions, that last big prayer that Jesus prays on behalf of his disciples and his apostles.

He has gathered the disciples together in an upper room. He has shared with them the Passover meal. He has given them the instruction that they are to love God and to love one another, not just in their own way but in the way that Jesus has loved them; that self-giving love; that willingness to go to any lengths for the other, that all-inclusive and encompassing love; that's the love that Jesus is asking them to have. He continues to pray for them. He lets them overhear that prayer, recognizing that his time and his ministry on earth is coming to an end, because he already knows what's going to happen later that evening. Jesus knows that the arrest will happen. He knows he's going to be crucified, and he knows that he's going to fulfill his role in arising from the dead, conquering death on our behalf. So, he prays for them, and he looks up to God in conversation. He tells them of the transition as he defines for them what eternal life is. He says, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed." (John 17:3-6)

"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do." (verse 4) We often think of the end of this or an end of the chapter as the end of a book. Jesus is saying, 'What you've called me here to do I've done, and now it's time for me to finish my work elsewhere.' Jesus is preparing the disciples for this transition. He knows he will no longer be physically present with them, but he knows that they will remain in the world and that while they are in the world they are called to continue what they have already started to do, but in a new way.

It seems very appropriate that Ascension Sunday happens around the same time that graduation does, because graduation is a moment in our lives of education where we think we're ending something, right? We think of graduation as the *end* of high school, the end of that preparation. But even as we finish and we end our existence in that formal education, it's a *beginning* to something else, right? If that's ending something else is starting. It's our transition from one way of being in the world, as a student that we are expected to be in school, into a new way of being where we get to choose how we live in the world. We get to choose whether or not we will continue in our education, or if we choose, to go into work, or into the service. We choose what that next step, that next chapter what will happen for that transition.

Jesus is preparing the disciples for their choice. As we hear what happened at the ascension, we hear him again reminding them of his prayer and preparing them for what is to come. He prays in John, "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." (verse 11) We are protected for a purpose. We are protected for the purpose of being unified in faith for the work that we're going to be doing. Jesus' ministry is ended, but the ministry of the church is just beginning. This is that transition from life with Christ in the world in body, to life with Christ in the world in spirit.

The Ascension clarifies that even more, "While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait..." (Acts 1:4a) He was preparing them to wait. How many of us like to wait? Oh, we do have a couple, good. I am not one of those people that like to wait. If I know it's going to happen I want it to happen, and I get anxious in the waiting. I know the transition's going to be and I don't want to have to wait. I

want it to happen because I don't like living in that limbo, right? Here Jesus is saying to his disciples, 'You need to live in limbo. For at least ten days, you're going to be living in limbo. I've been with you. I've been preparing you, but you need to wait because the Holy Spirit will come upon you.' They don't know it, but it's going to happen in like ten days later. 'But wait here. Pause a moment and get ready.'

How many of us have ever been in a race? If you've gone to school I'm sure you have. You've raced other kids and you all get to that line, right? They say what? 'Ready...', go ahead, say it. 'Set. go!' So, his ministry has been ready, and now at his ascension he's saying, 'Get set. It's happening. Take that breath. I'm going to give you what you need for the race. I'm going to send the Holy Spirit to enable you to do, and here's what you need to do when I say go.' "...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." (Acts 1:8) Jesus is saying, 'Here's your race and it's not going to be a sprint. This is going for the long haul. You're going to start where you are. Ready, set, go!' On the word go we are just moving, right? We are kind of still in place and starting that momentum, so start where you are. For them they're in Jerusalem. 'Do my work here. Start telling people now.' Next week we'll hear how that happens. But Jesus says to go, right? He doesn't say 'Stay,' he says 'go.' "...when the Holy Spirit comes upon you," go.

So, they move out from where they physically are, they move out from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. But don't stop there, go into all the world. 'You are now responsible for the ministry I began. You are the ones that can tell the people about God's love. About the kingdom not being someplace away from where you are but with you and among you. You are the ones to do this work.' As he gives them this last commission and he says, 'You're going to get the Holy Spirit. You're going to do this.', he starts to go away. He is raised up and taken and they end up looking the same direction he looked when he prayed for them. They look up; and while they are looking up two men appear in dazzling white. That kind of sounds familiar, doesn't it? It happened at the transfiguration, it happened at the empty tomb. Two men in dazzling white appear and they ask them the question, "...why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" (Acts 1:11) 'Why are you still here?' Why are they stuck?

The verses that we didn't read is they do what Jesus asked, they regather. It names the eleven that are left, and they go back and they wait in that upper room. They wait for that promise that Jesus says, 'I'm going to send the Holy spirit, and that's your go, that's the gun shot, that's the flare, that's when you're going to know to take off, but you need to go get ready. Get ready, get set.' Feels weird not going to the next one, right? Get ready, get set. Go! Go, in your own way, the way that the Spirit has gifted you, go and tell. Share. Be the witness. For some of us it may be getting up and speaking to people, telling them verbally. For others that witnessing is how they live their lives. It's the acts that they do. Love isn't just a thing, it is a verb, it is an action. It is the way in which we are in the world. That is how we are God's witnesses first to each other, then to our community and then to the world.

That commission, that prayer that Jesus prayed and the commission that was given at the ascension, weren't just for the eleven, but for all of us, those that will believe because of their witness; and because they were faithful to the go part, we get the benefit of knowing God. If they never would have done the 'go,' we wouldn't know, that information would've died in that upper room. But they were willing when the Spirit enabled them to go, to share, to be and live the life that Jesus gave them. To help others understand that God's Kingdom is beyond this world; that God's love is something we don't have to wait for; that God's presence can dwell within and among us and can give us the strength; that we need to face the challenges we have in this world.

God still speaks to us. God still relates to us, and we can still receive the commission. Each day each moment we have the opportunity to decide what that next step in the transition is going to be. Jesus passed the baton to his disciples. The baton is being passed to us. We've been getting ready. We're on our set. How is God asking us to go, to share with the world who God is?

Let us pray. Holy Lord and God, we thank you. We thank you that before we are sent we are gifted. We are gifted by the Holy Spirit which allows us to do what you ask us. Help us, Lord God, to be open to hear what you are asking us to do. Help us to be your witnesses in what we say and in what we do; that the world may know that you are still here, that you dwell within and among us, and that your love goes beyond time and space. We pray this in and through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.