

It's Not All About You

Ascension

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Texts: Acts 1.1-11;
Psalm 47;
Ephesians 1.15-23;
Luke 24.44-53

Here we are: Ascension Sunday. You've been making your plans for weeks - right? Wasn't that the last question all your colleagues and neighbors were shouting to each other at the end of the week - "so where are you spending Ascension Sunday?" No? OK - maybe Ascension Sunday isn't the biggest high holy day of the church year. In fact few Protestant Churches will even make mention of this day.

You wouldn't know that from the liturgy or the hymnody of the day though? We're going to end this service with the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah. It doesn't get much bigger than that! The Ascension of Jesus is the story we hear on this Seventh Sunday of Eastertide on the week before Pentecost. It's an interesting story of how Jesus ultimately leaves following the time with the disciples after his resurrection. Luke tells it differently from Acts which is odd since the books of Luke and Acts are really two chapters of the same book written by the same author. The phrase about Jesus being carried up into heaven, according to the foot note, wasn't even present in some of the ancient manuscripts of Luke. Clearly, even to the writer of the gospel how Jesus left the earth was not the point. The stories of the ascension as our celebration of this day point to something far more significant.

As Jesus looks to say good-bye to these ones he has so deeply loved, as they struggle to let him go, we are given a window not only into that very human moment of their farewell but into a much deeper theological insight as well. The title for today's sermon comes from one piece of the very human moment of their farewell. In the version from Acts the disciples ask the question about whether this is the moment when the kingdom will

finally be restored to Israel. As I say, it is a very human moment. You can understand the impulse behind the question. But Jesus essentially says to them “it’s not all about you” and your personal positions of power whether as individuals when they asked earlier “who will sit at your right hand in the kingdom?” or here as they wonder about the status of their nation. It’s a word the church needs to hear – we need to hear. It’s not all about us and the various ways we become so singularly focused on ourselves –where we stand, how we rate, what we can gain.

As Jesus leaves these friends he so deeply loves, he reminds them again to lift their eyes higher than that; to look beyond what is right in front of them to see the vastness of God’s realm. The impact Jesus sees them making goes far beyond Israel, Jerusalem and Judea and even Samaria. They will be his witnesses to the very ends of the earth. That’s the paradox here. On the one hand “it isn’t all about you” but on the other he is saying to them (and us) “but you do have an integral part to play here.” The only way for the realm of God to move to the ends of the earth is for Jesus to leave and the disciples to step up. In a certain sense Jesus is affirming that it isn’t all about him either. That’s the tender moment here. They can’t imagine life without him. He knows that the exact opposite is true. He needs to leave in order for them to find their own place and to receive the power of God to become the witnesses who take the gospel forward.

I was thinking this week about a time when I first understood in a deeper way what this whole dimension of the ascension was about. When I lived in NJ in my first pastorate I met a very powerful woman named Lea Adler. She had a counseling practice that was a kind of hybrid between spiritual direction and meditation. Lea was a healer. She had an ability to get to the heart of the issue beneath the concerns you might at first present to her. She had a way of helping people find healing in the midst of pain, find the direction God was leading them and could help people get where they needed to go. I started as one of her clients and became one of her students. Lea had a lot of students. She was eager to train people to join her in this work of healing. She had a huge practice. She needed colleagues to help carry the work forward and outward. But very few of us were willing to step out and start our own practices. I know the internal dialogue I had: “Why would people come to me if they could go to

Lea.” Tragically, Lea contracted cancer and died very suddenly. Part of what we all began to recognize after Lea’s death is something she had been saying all along. We didn’t need to cling to her shadow. She did not need groupies. She needed partners.

That’s what Jesus is doing in his ascension: calling forth partners to bear witness to work of God in the world. That’s what’s happening on the human realm: calling us forward to look beyond ourselves and our own interests to catch the vision for our place as a partner with Jesus to bring the healing, the forgiveness and the justice of God’s realm into the places where we live and move and have our being.

There’s another dimension at work in this story as well and I suspect that it is this theological dimension that drove the gospel writer to include the more fantastical version of the story in the book of Acts. By speaking of Jesus as ascending into heaven, the early church was speaking about the completion of a sacred circle; this mysterious movement of God joining with creation from incarnation to ascension. Forever now heaven and earth are joined. The glory of God is ours even if we only catch glimpses of that glory from time to time. That is why the liturgy and music of this day is so grand. We are celebrating all of the glory of heaven, all of the goodness of God, “all of the immeasurable greatness of God’s power for us who believe.”

If you aren’t feeling yet how awe-inspiring this day really is, Handel will get you there! As you hear that piece, listen for this line and take in that impact of what it means: “The kingdom of this world IS become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever.”