

Sunday 24 May 2020  
Ascension Sunday

Acts 1:6-11

So when they had come together, they asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up into heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Let us pray: Forgive us for standing around looking up into the sky. Forgive us for standing around waiting for Jesus to return. Forgive us for all the excuses we give for not doing what you have called us to do so. Help us see that we are not at the end, but at the very beginning. You are ready to do something new. You are ready to transform our lives. You want to fill us with all the power we need to change the world by bringing the knowledge of your great salvation to many. Open our hearts, empower us to respond to your word. Amen.

“Standing Around”

I am not really a fan a professional wrestling, but when I was a child they would have something called a tag team match. There would be two wrestlers battling it out in the ring, with each of them having a partner on the outside. When they got in trouble, if they could tag their partner, the partner would jump into the ring and save the day, and start wrestling in the place of his nearly defeated partner.

Jesus told us that something wonderful was going to happen, he was going to tag out. He would leave the ring and he would send the Holy Spirit to take his place. Jesus knew that for our sake and the sake of the spiritual health of the whole world, he needed to tag out, and let the Holy Spirit jump into the ring, and continue the battle for the hearts, minds and souls of people.

The disciples wanted to know if the battle was now over. Could they now leave the ring? Was Jesus declaring victory and reestablishing the kingdom of Israel? Their minds were still on petty politics, much like we are today. What they wanted to know is whether it was time for their side to win? They were told to leave all that to God, they were to focus their attention elsewhere. They had a witness to share that was to take them to the uttermost reaches of the world.

Salvation history was not over. There were still so many who needed to receive the Good News that Jesus had just died to provide not just those living in Jerusalem, but also those living in Judea and Samaria and out into the farthest reaches of the world. This is still true today.

The two fastest growing segments of the religious population are the none’s and the done’s. Those who have no religion, and those who have given up on religion. These are the people the church has chosen to overlook and those whom the church has chosen to alienate. In

many places the Christian church is dying of old age, because God does not have grandchildren nor great grandchildren, only children who must be born into every generation. And what do the angels find the church doing? Looking up into the sky, waiting for Jesus to return.

Jesus, however is not absent any more than God is ever absent. God is always present, and will always be present. What God is doing in Jesus Christ today, is what God has always been doing, seeking and saving the lost. Through prevenient grace God is helping lost souls work out their salvation with fear and trembling. We are either helping in that process of salvation or we are getting in the way of God and in the ways of their salvation.

When we are out working with Christ to save the people in our Jerusalem, we are working often with people who are just like us. They speak our language. They live similar life styles to ours. We share in a common culture. Most people come to Christ through someone they know and trust. These are usually a family member or a good friend. For me it was my cousin who was a few months older than I was. He was someone I loved and trusted like a brother. I could trust him because he would never do something to harm me. I felt I understood him and that he understood me. He did not judge me, but was concerned about me. The Living Bible has just come out and he shared it with me because it spoke to his soul and guess what, it also spoke to mine. He had been praying for me, and rejoiced when I experienced a personal relationship with Christ. And through the years he has continued to nurture my soul.

Who lives in your Jerusalem? Who do you know who speaks your language? Who are you naturally concerned about, who you have been praying for, for years and years that they would come to a saving knowledge of Christ? Who do you observe Christ's grace at work where you can be supportive? The harvest is great right now but the laborers are few. Are you standing around looking into heaven or are you at work with the living Christ in your Jerusalem making a difference?

Judea is the next place needing our attention. These are members of our community. We work with them, we do business with them, we live in the same country as they do. There is still some distance between us, they are strangers, they belong to different families, They may understand the world differently than us, but we still can understand them pretty well. They may belong to a different political party. They may go to a different school, or root for a different ball team. But the Christ who is working in our lives is also the Christ who is working the their lives through this same prevenient grace. Am I helping or hindering God's work of salvation in their lives? Is my witness a distraction or an attraction to the work God is doing in them?

When Christians are hateful in the name of Christ, taking his holy name in vain, they are working against what God is seeking to do in those who are struggling to make a decision for Christ. They hear words of hate or see acts of discrimination and violence, this is confusing because it does not seem to fit with a God of mercy and grace. The human soul is said to be like a wild animal, that is shy and easily frightened. These un-Christ-like behaviors send them away into hiding and we may never see again. Unchristian acts leave their mark for generations, causing people to reject the claims of Christ, because of the crusades, the inquisition, and slavery.

To witness to those in our Judea, we need listen and befriend. I am not talking about hit and run evangelism, where we spout Bible verses and force them to pray a prayer and move on to our next target. What I am talking about is making real friends, and taking a personal interest in their lives. Getting to know them, letting them get to know you and letting them become a part of your extended family. Being available to be used by Christ to help them experience

firsthand the love and generosity of the living Christ.

Moving into your Samaria is a little more difficult, these are those who live in the underbelly of society. They are the ones who people like you have harmed, exploited, abused and ignored. They will be very suspicious about you coming around and pretending to be nice and to care about them and their struggles. Your social privilege will give you lots of blind spots, where you will miss interpret what is going on in their lives, you will assume that you know what is best for them, and expect them to become more like you, confusing your affluence with godliness. Those who dwell in your Samaria will be polite to you and smile and let you do and say pretty much what you like, just so you will go away and do no more harm to them or their families. They will have a hard time trusting you or believing anything to tell them about Jesus and his love for them. They will expect that you want to use them and exploit their powerlessness for your own gain. They will see you as wanting them to make you feel better, by allowing you to go a good deed; allowing you to give them some of your old clothes; allowing you to give them a few dollars or fix up the outside of their home. And then you will disappear and they will never see you again, nor will they feel you ever really care about them as people.

Samaria takes longer, and takes more humility, to share a witness with them. You must listen more carefully to what they are saying. You must try to fit into their agenda. You must be open to repentance, and be willing to allow Christ to change you: The way you think; The way you behave; What you expect to receive from them or from God. You may have to change the way you speak to others. You may need to learn a whole new language or at least a new vocabulary. You may need to change your attitude, find a deeper humility, and lose a lot of pride. God will need to deepen your understanding about how your people have caused their people to live, and the sacrifices you have forced them to make. It may not have been intentional, but are the result of institutional racism and ethnocentrism that have always been a part of your life. What may have been normal for you has always be torment and humiliating for them.

To witness in Samaria may mean that you must become a Samaritan to the Samaritans. You may need to live among them and experience life through new eyes and a new heart. You must give them time to move from treating your as company, until you seem worth the risk to make you family. You can never force your way into Samaria, you will need to be invited in. This will be an act of grace on their part and it is one of the important steps for them in the process of them inviting Christ into their lives through your witness.

When we venture out with Christ into the uttermost places around the globe. They are a complete unknown to you and you are a complete unknown to them. To witness to them, you will need to learn to speak their heart language, so they can understand what you have to share with them from your heart. You will need to learn their customs so you don't offend them. You will need to listen carefully to what they are saying so you get to know them well. You will need to learn all about their spiritual faith so you can understand what God has already made known to them and what God might want to teach you, for they have learned lessons that only they can teach you. You can only really begin to share with them after they have already shared with you. Again it will take time for them to trust you and believe that you want to bring God's blessings to their lives. It is only as they experience the rich holy fruits of the spirit that they will know that you indeed bring to their lives the true blessings of God.

Too often we just stand there looking up to heaven. God has promised us to empower us with the Holy Spirit so that we can do even more than Jesus ever did. This was why Jesus was

so excited about his ascension. Jesus was excited about sending us out into the world with the empowerment of God. Jesus knew what God had done through him alone, now he could not wait to see what God could accomplish with all of us and our witness to the reality of God's redeeming grace.

So why should we stand around? What are we waiting for? The number of people with no religion is growing all around us. The number of people who have turned away from organized religion is growing. They are wounded and disappointed by those Christians who have betrayed their trust. They need us to bring healing. They have walked away because our faith makes no sense to their modern understandings of life and are dying for a translation of the faith that will speak to their contemporary hearts. What are we standing around for? Our nation is becoming more and more multinational and cosmopolitan and so we need a witness that resonates with this diversity. What are we standing around for?

Don't be overwhelmed. Jesus knows that the need is greater than the saints available. So we are invited to gather in an upper room and pray and wait upon the Holy Spirit to give us our next steps. Let us get ready and then be the witnesses Christ has called us to be.

Let us pray: Thank you, O Lord, for entrusting your witness to us. Help us to be who you need us to be. Open our hearts to the moving of your spirit, awaken in us your awareness of the needs of others. Use our witness to bring a sense of peace, a knowledge of love, and a heart filled with a joy in the Holy Spirit. We are ready to be used by you. We are ready to be your witnesses, here, there and everywhere. Amen.

Please share your needs.

Please share your tithes and offerings.

Please join our Bible Study and participate with your reflections.

Now may the One who has called us to be witnesses.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit

use your life in your Jerusalem, your Judea and Samaria, and to your outer reaches of the world now and always. Amen.