

Pastor Steve's Sermon for Sunday, April 19, 2020

Please find below the text on which I preached, and the sermon to follow.

Blessings to you!

Acts 1:1-14

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying* with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me;⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with* the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power 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.' ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.'

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of* James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

SERMON

The Waiting is the Hardest Part

He is risen!

Jesus was alive. Then he wasn't. Then He appeared to His apostles through what the text name as "convincing proofs". Within these forty days Jesus had this conversation Luke tells us about today with the apostles. Wait for the Father's promise of the Holy Spirit not many days from now. "X" number of days later Jesus is posed a question about the kingdom being restored to Israel, to which 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 has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* And then in that moment Jesus is lifted away to where we profess... *that he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.* As the apostles stood there gazing at the sight they had just witnessed, they are questioned as to why they are looking toward heaven. Then they are told that Jesus will return to them in the same manner that he just left them. They return to Jerusalem, just as instructed and get to the business of prayer. All eleven and then some.

Let's think about the state of our disciples. Their once stumbling, stumbling, doubting and denying have transitioned from learning disciples to knowing apostles. There is no shadow of doubt that God is in control. There is not an inkling of doubt in their minds that Jesus is divinely connected to the Father. Everything has been fulfilled. The entirety of what Jesus claimed would happen has come to be. Their hope has been displaced by "convincing proofs", and they are full of faith. These are good days to be an apostle. And they anticipate good days ahead by asking Jesus if this is when the kingdom will be restored to Israel. What does restoration look like to them? If it is worshipping freely in the Temple, no Roman occupation, and peace in all the land, they are about to realize that the kingdom of God is way beyond that, or anything they could ever imagine. To which Jesus replies in a number of words by saying, the Father is in control, has His own timeline, and will give you the power to name that kingdom far and wide! And then... the blank stare upward as Jesus is lifted up, up and away.

The rubber has met the road. Jesus has prepped them, the mission has been explained, but now they are to wait again for God's timing, for the Holy Spirit to launch them into the next phase. Yes, the rubber has met the road.

I imagine the walk back to Jerusalem was them not gazing at the sky, but looking at each other and asking the big questions. How are we going to launch this thing? How are we going to replicate all He taught us? How will we celebrate God's love with one another and with others? We will need to worship together. We will need to teach others who Jesus is. We will need to spend time together building trust and ideas.

And we will need to serve those who are new to the way of Jesus. So...what is our first move? Prayer. Prayer is the first thing. And that is what they did, “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” Oh yeah, and wait...

For a moment, put yourself in the apostles sandals. There is the big commission before them to take the kingdom to the ends of the earth. Their community of faith is small, but a huge world before them to minister to. But they are full of faith! Ready set...wait. I imagine they were spiritually chomping at the bit. When is the Holy Spirit coming? What will it look like? Will we all receive the Spirit the same? The pump is primed, the pulse of the apostles is beating, but now is the time to pray. In their sandals, what would you do? Until the Father directed the Spirit upon them they prayed. Holed up in a room together praying, thinking, dreaming and spiritual scheming was at hand in those earliest days of the church; constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Open to God’s timing.

Open to the kingdom being more than what they thought. Open to the Holy Spirit coming upon them they prayed. Their slate is blank, full of promise, just awaiting for God to ascribe the Holy Spirit to empower them and further God’s mission of new life, healing and forgiveness. And so they wait...

Can you identify with this scenario the Apostles find their selves in? Your cup is full, you are ready for the next step and you are met with, hold on...wait. You know the task at hand, and waiting seems to be what you are up against. Of course you have. All of us have waited to begin the next phase or step in the direction God has mapped out for us. Returning to seminary for my senior year after an entire year of being an intern at a 6-church parish in southwest Iowa was hard! I was ready.

I'd been preaching and teaching, burying and baptizing, visiting, and you name it. I was ready for my first call. But no. Wait. Pray on it with your school community. Reflect and talk about your strengths and weaknesses as a pastor in training. What kind of community is God calling you too Steve? That was a year. The apostles only had to wait 50 days till Pentecost!

The apostles retreated to Jerusalem to the room upstairs to consider the future and pray. The apostles were waiting to receive the Holy Spirit in due time so as to be Jesus witnesses to the ends of the earth.

But we...we have already received the promise of the Holy Spirit. We are living on the other side of the Spirit's arrival. For a different reason, we too have retreated to our place of living to consider the future and hopefully pray.

Each of us is at various stages of our lives. Some of us are more similar to one another than others, and others not as much. The lenses through which we live life are unique to each of us. What is important to you, may not be as important as the person sitting in the pew in front of you. Yet despite the differences that define our worldly existence, we profess that we are one in Christ. We profess that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the living breathing presence of Jesus in this world. Our calling is not gaze longingly for Jesus in heaven above, but to live intently into his love, by looking and listening for ways to make the kingdom know to the ends of the earth. For as much as those early disciples prayed for their ability to be witnesses as Jesus declared, they too were praying about who and how they were going to bring the way of Jesus to the world. They were impacted. And now they were to impact the world.

In this time of slowing down, how are you looking to be guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit? And as a member of the Body of Christ that is Nativity Lutheran, are you praying for how you can help define her future?

To internalize Jesus words to the apostles as he ascended to heaven...*when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; will you be my witnesses in Palm Beach Gardens, in Palm Beach County and south Florida, and to the ends of the earth.*

Of recent we have been given something to pray about as a congregation, and as individuals. An unexpected opportunity for Nativity to step into the future in a way it has never been asked to consider since the days Pastor David Wolber walked the flower-named streets knocking on doors with a simple message of come and see about Nativity Lutheran. The middle of last week members and regular worshippers of Nativity were sent a letter outlining a purchase and church building project on our 5-acre lot. If you have not received your letter in the mail, contact the church office. Simply put, we would have a new facilities and cash in hand. My purpose of bringing this up is not to go into details with you. My purpose is to ask of you to pray about what this could be. Pray about how this could impact the lives of those who don't know Jesus, but for whom you can witness to. Pray for how the Holy Spirit might use you in this period of discernment. Pray about how you can be a healthy voice as this opportunity is explored further. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give us guidance as to how we will worship as a congregation during construction. Pray for our leadership and you to have clear lines of communication. Pray for how the ministries of Nativity and how they will be impacted...Preschool, Alzheimer's Community Care. Pray for one another to receive this news graciously.

Pray that we each consider the fact that the church as an institution is not solely for those who are among us, but for those who are yet to be among us.

Yes, this is an odd time to entertain a project such as this with everyone distracted by the pandemic and all. Not to worry, God has work experience in much more difficult scenarios. In the end God's will, will be done. Perhaps that is why none of the other building projects have not come to be...because it wasn't the time. Nativity had to wait. For whatever reason Nativity had to wait. Until now? Who knows? Maybe? In the meantime pray my brothers and sisters. In prayer, call upon the Holy Spirit to make us holy witnesses to God's people in difficult times. In prayer, call upon and wait expectantly for the Holy Spirit to stretch and challenge your faith. In prayer, call upon and wait expectantly with me, with one another, for the Holy Spirit to breathe new life (**Resurrection!**) into Nativity Lutheran in God's time and by God's will something will become. Amen!