

“The Spirit is Coming!”

A sermon for Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia

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John 17: 1 – 11

¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And 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.

Acts 1: 6 – 14

¹In 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 during 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.”

⁶So 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 toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They 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.”

¹²Then 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.

Jesus. After eating with his disciples.
 After washing their feet.
 After revealing more about what is ahead.
 After giving the new commandment that we should love one another as Jesus has loved us.
 After all of this, Jesus does something remarkable- remarkable in its ordinariness.
 He prays.

He prays for their wisdom.
 He prays for the ministry that is before them.
 He prays that God would bless them with everything that has been given to him, Jesus.
 And as he does it for them, he does it for us.

Jesus prays for us.
 That we will know faith.
 Trust God, follow God, and know love.
 Jesus ends his prayer, with these words,
 “So that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

There is still much road to travel, and Jesus knows it, even though the disciples don't.
 They are still traveling that road when we meet the disciples again at the beginning of Acts.
 What Jesus was referring to in his prayer has now become a reality.
 The author of Luke is now continuing the story into the book of Acts,
 the first thing that happens is Jesus's ascension.

At the beginning the disciples admit that they are still hoping for the Jesus who will restore Israel.
 They are still looking for signals and signs.
 They don't know what the Holy Spirit is or will be,
 It's hard to cling to something when you don't know what it is.

What happens here? The Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad describes the events this way in her sermon on the Day1 Radio broadcast:¹

He rose up, up, up-away from the pull of gravity. He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of the disciples' sight. Even after Jesus had disappeared, they kept gazing up toward heaven, until suddenly two men in white robes appeared and asked them, "You, Galileans, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"
 Now, that seems a silly question. Wouldn't you stand looking up toward heaven if

¹ Barbara Lundblad http://day1.org/937-footprints_on_the_earth

you had seen Jesus rising up? Maybe you remember another time when two men appeared, two men in dazzling clothes who stood beside the women who had come to the tomb on Easter morning. Those men, too, had asked a question. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" It must have seemed an absurd question to the sorrowful women for they had NOT come to the tomb looking for the living.

Jesus doesn't seem to be where he's supposed to be. He was not in the tomb, but risen and gone to Galilee. Then, later, Jesus was no longer on earth, but risen beyond the clouds, beyond human sight. So it does seem that to be with Jesus means to be somewhere other than where we are now. Even if we don't believe heaven is up there, we still find ourselves looking up beyond the pull of gravity. We who dance and climb and run, we who lie on the grass or sit watching the late-night news, we are waiting to be surprised by Jesus.... How can we enter the pure life of the Spirit to be with Jesus where he is?

It is an important question, and one that offers a clue as to why the early Christians placed such importance on the Ascension.

Harvey Cox offers insight into why: "The early church's belief in the Ascension can be read as its refusal to allow its Lord to be localized or spatially restricted. The Ascension in its simplest terms means that Jesus is mobile. He is not a baal, but the Lord of all history."²

But back to Barbara Lundblad's question, which was the disciples' question.

What are we supposed to do now?

What are we supposed to do in this in-between time, in any in-between time?

How do we keep the faith?

Jesus told them. Jesus tells us.

While 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 me⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

And that is exactly what they do. They go back to Jerusalem, and they wait.

But it isn't a passive waiting. They don't do nothing. It is an active waiting.

Will Willimon says:³

² Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, compilers. "Resources for Preaching and Worship: Year A," (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press) 2004, page 154

³ Will Willimon, "Interpretation, A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching." (Louisville: John Knox Press), 1988. Page 20.

Their waiting is not empty handed, They wait in hope, as those who know that their Master has been “taken up where is he exalted at the right hand of God.” After the ascension, when Christians speak of God they must also speak of Christ, for Christ now reigns with God. The followers of Christ know that the one who served, taught, and loved them now rules for them. But this knowledge is no smug gnosis of the privileged first few. It is a knowledge which demands a witness. Thus, in the meantime, they are given a job to do and will have power with which to do it.

In the meantime.

In the meantime the followers still have a job, to witness to the Christ they knew and know. And in these days, for them, it is filled with prayer.

Which calls to mind the prayer we read earlier this morning, the prayer of Jesus.

Words that were full. Honest. Pleading. Determined.

That’s what prayer is, isn’t it?

One of my favorite novels is Jayber Crow, by Wendell Berry. In it, the main character, Jayber, reflects on his life with these words, that frequently come to mind when I think about Jesus’s prayers for us:⁴

I prayed like a man walking in a forest at night, feeling his way with his hands, at each step fearing to fall into pure bottomlessness forever. Prayer is like lying awake at night, afraid, with your head under the cover, hearing only the beating of your own heart. It is like a bird that has blundered down the flue and is caught indoors and flutters at the windowpanes. It is like standing a long time on a cold day, knocking at a shut door. But sometimes a prayer comes that you have not thought to pray, yet suddenly there it is and you pray it. Sometimes you just trustfully and easily pass into the other world of sleep. Sometimes the bird finds that what looks like an opening is an opening, and it flies away. Sometimes the shut door opens and you go through it into the same world you were in before, in which you belong as you did not before. If God loves the world, might that not be proved in my own love for it? I prayed to know in my heart His love for the world.

And it is here that I find my hope. My good news.

In the prayers that can bring us closer to God.

Because it feels like, to me, that we, too, are living in an in-between time.

Between the kingdom of God being already and not yet.

⁴ Berry, Wendell. *Jayber Crow: A Novel (Port William)*. Counterpoint, 2001. Kindle file. Location 4569-4583.

Just this week.

- Two men were killed for intervening when they saw a man verbally abusing a Muslim woman.
- A bomb was exploded at a rock concert in Manchester, England, claiming 22 lives.
- Masked gunmen fired on the passengers on a bus in Egypt because they were known to be Christian. 28 were killed.
- It's Memorial Weekend, when we remember those who have died in war, something we have no right to ask any man, woman, or child to do, and yet they have done just that. For causes we hope are worthy of their sacrifice, for a nation we hope to make worthy of that sacrifice, and we all know we have work to do.

And yet.... those aren't the only stories of the day.

- It's graduation weekend, here in Greenbrier county. Old Stone Preschool to High School to the Osteopathic Medical School. And I can attest to you after reading some 50 scholarship applications and attending the awards ceremony at one of our high schools, there is reason for hope.
- The men who were killed in Portland were helping someone in need, their neighbor, even though they had never met her before.
- Lena Hoke⁵ lost her house in the floods last year, and just this past week she got to see the inside of her new house for the first time. A new house built where the old one was, built by volunteers who traveled to West Virginia from as far away as Germany to help.

What are we to do with all of these things?

Maybe, we can take our cue from the disciples, and pray.

Pray, pray those active prayers with our hearts and our hands and our feet and our lives that call us out of ourselves and into our place where we understand and live out anew God's love for the world.

But there's one other thing we need to know. Need to remember.

Even in these in-between times, we are not alone. Nor are we left without what we need.

⁵ <http://www.wearewvproud.com/Clip/13365056/flood-survivor-sees-inside-new-home-for-the-first-time#.WSjIgXmHFTE.facebook>

It is a common misperception that parent birds will push their babies out of the nest when it is time for them to fly--- that the birds learn how to fly on their way down.

My friend, theologian Leah Vader, spends months every year watching eagle nests in the deserts of Arizona. When someone commented on this practice, she replied that in 40 years of observation of these nests that practice had never been observed.

Instead, she shared that the eaglets practice- they do lots of flapping in their nests before the parents determine they are ready to fly.

So, friends, whether you are still in the season of Easter.

Whether you are looking up at Jesus' feet as he ascends.

Whether you are praying, waiting for the spirit.

Whether you are still in the nest, or on the edge, looking out.

Wherever you are in your life, in your faith, there is a word of Good News for you today.

God is with us and we are with each other.

And if we allow the love of God to be our guide,

we will find all that we need to share it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.