

5-17-26 sermon

Acts 1.1-11

How do you picture this scene which Luke describes? In the age of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, I admit it's tempting to picture this in some kind of superhero way. Does Jesus ascend slowly, majestically like Dr Strange? Or does he raise a fist and shoot up like Superman? Does he wave to the disciples as he goes? Or is his gaze firmly fixed on the clouds? I have questions. However we picture it, we run the risk of the physical description diverting us from the *meaning* of what is happening.

Jesus is leaving them behind.

He is about to be absent from them. But he's not abandoning them, as we discussed last week. He is going in order to send them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the new way in which he will be with them – forever. And yet, Jesus, the Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity remains a resurrected human being, and now a human fully exists in God's realm, the realm of heaven, and somehow, in the mystery of God, heaven and earth become one again, in the person of the resurrected Jesus.

Jesus has spent three years proclaiming the Gospel of the kin-dom. Without going into a lengthy explanation as to why I choose to use "kin-dom" instead of "Kingdom," while the language of the scriptures is of kings and kingdoms, in our own context, I believe "kin-dom" comes closer to the vision of what that word is getting at. In that it recognizes that we're all connected to one another. That we belong to one another. And so many of our problems is that we believe we're not, and act accordingly, causing great harm to others – and to ourselves. Jesus comes to remind us that we are one household, one great family, and that in him, the kin-dom of God has drawn near. That the kin-dom of God is among them.

Jesus has taught his disciples to pray – as we do – "Thy kin-dom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." But because of passages like this one at the beginning of the book of Acts, we tend to picture "heaven" as being "up there," while we humans are stuck down here on the earth. Rather than the picture that the bible as a whole gives us, which is that – rather than being two different places – heaven and earth are in fact two different dimensions of God's good creation: heaven, the realm of God, and earth, the realm of humanity, which in the beginning co-existed seamlessly, God walking with humanity in the garden in the cool of the evening.

Until the great disruption that sin brought.

When heaven and earth were rent asunder, the separation and alienation which resulted ultimately leading to "the Word becoming flesh," and dwelling among us.

This is why, instead of Jesus saying things like *this* to his disciples: "Build the kingdom. Expand the kingdom. Bring the kingdom," (all of which I've heard different preachers say is the task of the church), what Jesus actually said was,

"Seek the kin-dom. *Enter* the kin-dom. *Receive* the kin-dom."

“Wherever you see the kin-dom of heaven on earth, run to it!” And what does the kin-dom of heaven look like? Jesus has both shown us, and told us. The kin-dom of heaven is where hungry people are fed. Where the sick are made well. Where the outcast is invited to sit at the table. When you see that, the two dimensions of God’s good creation have come together, God’s will is being done on earth as it is in heaven. “And don’t just *pray* for that – join in wherever you see it happening!” And where you don’t see it happening, *be* the kin-dom of heaven, so that others can enter it with you.

But – Jesus tells the disciples – you can’t do that on your own. You need the power of God, and while I’ve been with you, it’s been present to you in me. But I’m just one person – limited like you in time and space. So I have to leave – so that “you can receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” So *you* will do what I have done *and* bear witness to me, even to the ends of the earth.” But for that to happen, there must be a parting of the ways, which is the ascension, the climax of salvation history as narrated in the bible.

The ascension is important for several reasons, but let me highlight just one, which feels appropriate for today, as fourteen of our young people prepare to become active members of the church. In a little while we will affirm our faith in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, saying these words: “He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” The place of authority, the seat of power. “Jesus is Lord” is the earliest and simplest creed of the church, a statement that declares Jesus is ruling this rebellious world and will one day return “to judge the quick and the dead.” But the reality is, two thousand years later, the world looks little like the kin-dom of God which Jesus both proclaimed and embodied. Hunger, homelessness, racism and all the other -isms are still very much with us. So, to say that Jesus is Lord of all, and we are his agents in the world, seems almost ridiculous. Especially when many of us find ourselves unable to live up to our own expectations, let own what we find laid out for us in the bible! So, here’s some good news for our confirmands. And for the rest of us:

The ascension means we are not in charge.

It is not on us to usher in the kin-dom of God in all its fullness. And if we try to do that, we’ll either end up exhausted, or disillusioned. Or both. We may feel full of the joy of the Lord one moment, and then do something in the next that causes us to despair of ourselves.

After I’d been trying to save the world for a while, as well as become a sparkling Christian while I was at it (and failing miserably at both) someone gave me a battered copy of Brennan Manning’s book, “The Ragamuffin Gospel.” They’d inscribed a short passage from the book on the inside cover. Something Brennan said he heard Jesus whisper to him when he was in the depths of despair about his own life:

“Somewhere you got the idea that I expected your life to be an untarnished success story... The truth is, I expect more failure than you expect from yourself.”

That was good news to me thirty years ago. It still is.

The ascension means Jesus is Lord. And we are not. Which means we can heave a great sigh of relief, because it's not all on us. And yet, in the words of another Jewish rabbi, rabbi Tarfon,

"It is not your responsibility to finish the work of *tikkun olam*, of healing the world, but you are not free to desist from it either."

So, confirmands, as you choose to become an active member of the church and continue your lifelong journey of learning who God is and who you are, of where you fit in this kin-dom, of the work that is yours to do, know that there will be days when you will despair of the world, despair of those around you, and quite possibly despair of yourself.

But the ascended Jesus will still be Lord.

The kin-dom of God will still be there to be found somewhere around you. May you have the courage, the resilience and the hope to continue to seek it: together with us, now, and then with whatever community of the Spirit you find yourself belonging to in the years to come. Knowing that whatever happens in your life, one day, as the two men in white robes said,

"this Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven,  
will come again in the same way."

To bring the kin-dom in all its fullness. To heal the world, including us, once and for all.

Amen, and amen.