

When I was working on my Doctor of Ministry in Chicago I attended a pentecostal, mostly Black, Baptist church one Sunday. It was a rather cross-cultural experience. I attended to hear some very moving, and powerful music, and a spirited sermon by a gifted preacher.

I remember that at one point he began telling a story from the Gospels, but he added a few features to the story that weren't in the Bible. He paused from time to time to tell his congregation that he was using what he called his "sanctified imagination."

This week's reading from Acts tickles my sanctified imagination. It tells of a rather pivotal moment in the lives of Jesus' disciples, and in the history of the Church. For weeks, for forty days actually, the disciples had numerous encounters with the risen Jesus.

Since Easter morning he had eaten with them, encountered them along the road, and taught them about this new reality that God had wrought. Now they have gathered for a stroll on the Mount of Olives, or the mount called Olivet, as Acts notes.

The Mount of Olives is, and was a prominent landmark of Jerusalem. For centuries it had been a lookout for the holy city. From it you can see great distances in nearly every direction. It also provides a great view of Jerusalem itself. It was a favorite spot for Jesus. He went there often to pray. He led the disciples there on the night before his crucifixion, and it was where he was arrested.

I can see this scene occurring in the late afternoon, in the cool of the day, as the Bible calls it. I can see our Lord leading the disciples to a particularly picturesque spot, and all of them taking a rest while enjoying the view.

Certainly the anticipation was high. It had been a remarkable 40 days, and it was clear God was up to something. Here in front of them, sitting with them, talking with them, as if it were just another beautiful afternoon, was their resurrected Lord, alive and vibrant. What was going to happen next? Why had he brought them up there? What did he want to tell them?

“Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” one of them finally spoke much to the relief of all the rest. It was surely a logical question. Centuries before that afternoon the prophet Zechariah had described this very scene. He said that the Lord would stand on the Mount of Olives, and fight against the nations.

I can imagine the tension, and expectation was palpable. I also imagine that Jesus was bemused that, once again, just like so many, many times before, the disciples had misunderstood.

In the cool of that peaceful afternoon with the words still hanging in the air, I can see our Lord look slowly over the disciples surveying their hopes, and then gazing into the distance at Jerusalem.

Surely the silence was awkward, even painful. But slowly I imagine our Lord pointing his finger to a house they all knew well; to the place where they had been staying, as if to say, “Look you can see your house from here.”

Then he told them to return, and wait. “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority,” they heard him say as their expectations turned to quizzical looks.

“Go home,” he just might have added before he told them what would happen. “Go home, that is where I need you, and 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.”

This was clearly not what the disciples were expecting. Zechariah had spoken of God fighting against the nations. Now Jesus was telling them to go into those very same nations, and beyond, as his servants, his messengers, the ones who would tell the good news.

I can very well imagine that he told them to go home. I can imagine this because that is where we often meet the will of God. It rarely comes to us on mountaintops, or in great epiphanies, or from stunning shows of divine strength.

We are not often so sure of our ways that we can step strongly into the day with certainty of purpose. Instead we simply put one foot in front of the other. Just like the disciples did. I can imagine that is what Jesus was telling them to do.

It is not for us to know the grand plans of God. It is for us to be faithful. Faithfulness does not mean standing by and watching God triumph over his enemies. Faithfulness means walking day by day through the sometimes twisted, sometimes stony, paths God has given us knowing that we are bearing his grace, and love.

That grace and love is our power. It is our power to live faithfully. It is our message as well. This is what our Lord told his disciples just before he ascended to heaven.

God’s work is not done. God’s work is now with us, alongside us, and we will receive the power, the grace, and the strength to do that work with God.

What exactly is that work? I am not always sure. But I believe our Lord has told us how to begin to understand it. Go home, live faithfully, and put one foot in front of the other. God is there, and God will be there.

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