

Sermon for the Solemnity of the Ascension
Sunday, May 21, 2023
“Dazzled, not dazed”

Text: Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Ascension is a major milestone in the story of the Resurrected Christ. The story is so important that the lectionary presents the story twice: from the Acts of the Apostles and then from the Gospel according to St. Luke. This is actually told in reverse order; St. Luke is the author of both the Gospel and Acts. The shorter version occurs in the Gospel and the more detailed version occurs in Acts. In the Gospel version, Jesus simply lifted his hands, was carried away up to heaven, and the apostles went back to Jerusalem rejoicing and praising God; but in Acts, the apostles seem unprepared when Jesus gave them more specific instructions and seemed to take the apostles by surprise. They were left completely dazed.

The actual day on which we celebrate the Ascension occurred this past Thursday, which is forty days after Easter. Forty is a very important number in the Bible—so important that it occurs 159 times. The number forty is often, but not always, associated with trials, temptation, and judgment, but whenever it occurs in scripture, it is a display of God’s movement in the lives of humans. In the Book of Numbers, God called forty years a generation. Forty is the number of days and nights of the Great Flood and the number of days Noah waited before he opened the windows of the ark. Moses spent the first forty years of his life living in Egypt in the house of the Pharaoh, then another forty years in Midian, and the final forty years leading the Israelites out of Egypt toward the Promised Land. Forty is the number of years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt and they were sustained by manna those forty years. Moses spent forty days and nights with God on Mt. Sinai, and he did that twice. For forty days, Jesus fasted and was tempted in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry. And for forty days Jesus remained on earth after his resurrection to show the mighty power of God over death, to demonstrate humanity’s ultimate fate, and to prepare his disciples to take over his ministry and be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The Ascension marks the completion of God’s incarnation here on earth, the day that Jesus went back to the place where he came from, just like he said he would. The second nature of the Trinity has returned to the Godhead. We signify the departure of God’s light among humanity by extinguishing the Paschal Candle after the Gospel.

Christ’s ascension left the apostles completely dazed and bewildered. First, Jesus gave them instructions on what to do after he was gone, but they weren’t ready for him to go. In their minds, he had unfinished business to complete. They were expecting the Messiah to free their people from being ruled by the Romans and restore an independent kingdom of Israel. “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Remember when Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus? “We had hoped that he was the one to set Israel free.” The apostles felt

that Jesus hadn't finished the work that the Messiah was supposed to do. They were expecting some ultimate display of God's power on a cosmic scale that would restore the Kingdom of Israel. But Jesus told them that wasn't what they should be concerned about; leave God's business to God and focus on the charge that I have just given you.

See, Jesus could have fixed everything in an awesome display of divine power and set them free. But what do you think would have happened if he had? If God had simply expelled the Romans, the Israelites would have just messed everything up eventually, because they were human and prone to make bad choices. Instead, Jesus left them instructions on how to continue declaring how God is always with humankind in its struggles: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." I taught you many things you will need to survive in this earthly life, and your job when I go away is to teach the rest of the world. Start with the people you know—the people you feel most comfortable with—then go even into the places where you don't feel welcome, where you might have enemies, and tell them; then, go into the places you don't know, among people whom you don't know and are very different from you. Go to the places where people believe differently from you and tell my story. When God sends us on a mission, or when we are in the midst of God calling us to some purpose, it often takes us by surprise, we don't feel prepared, we want God to do most of the work and wait until we're ready.

The message of the Ascension that we are supposed to take away is that God told his followers to go out and show the world that God is real, God is love, God is forgiving, and that God saves. God takes care of us in all the situations of our lives. We start with the folks we know; that's us right here, right now. We are gathered here now among other believers to share the witness of God's movement as Jesus the Christ taught us how to do. But then, we are to be witnesses to people after we leave today: in our families, in our homes, on our job, on the bus or subway, anywhere, and even among people who haven't heard the message, who don't believe, or even those who refuse to believe. That does not mean we preach to them and tell them they're damned if they don't. No! It means that how we conduct ourselves, how we live our lives daily by being faithful, being devoted, by showing love and respect for everyone, by respecting and celebrating each other's differences, by saying that no matter who you are or what you're going through, I love you and God loves you. We testify to the mighty power of God by showing others that we can survive anything life throws at us because we trust in God, and we depend on God's guidance. That's how we live into the message of the Ascension.

The Ascension left the disciples in awe, but it also left them scared, because they felt that Jesus left too soon before he fixed the ills of the world. But the world was broken when God became incarnate in the world, it was still broken when he ascended back to heaven, it is still broken today, over two thousand years later, and it will continue to be broken until he returns.

The Ascension story is our story. As Jesus was lifted high into the heavens, so he lifts us up. God became incarnate and lived among us in the person of Jesus Christ to show us how to live in the image of God more fully, even in this broken world. In taking human form, Jesus experienced the things that we experience. He experienced the best and the worst that humanity had to offer. He came into a broken world, and left the world still broken, but in his time with us on earth, he instructed us as to how we deal with the brokenness, how we live in the messiness of the world, and in the end, how to rise above all the messiness and get a glimpse of heaven while here on earth. The good things that God has done and is doing for us should dazzle us in the midst of the turbulence of our lives. The world will continue to bear down upon us; events will still befall us that are beyond our control. But the Ascension reminds us that God gives us what we need to rise above it and survive.

The hard work of bringing about the kingdom of God on earth is up to us. We are the hands and feet of God—his eyes and ears and mouth ready to tell the story, ready to pick up where Jesus left off. We have big shoes to fill, but if we can tell our story, about how God has dazzled us at critical points in our lives, then we might leave someone else totally amazed, much like the apostles as they witnessed Jesus going up into heaven with a merry noise and a triumphal shout. That is the good news the world wants to hear: that with God’s help, it can rise above it all. That’s the message the world needs. Jesus knew the task would not be easy and that we would need to be reminded that God is always with us, so he told his apostles: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Next Sunday, we will remember how God reminded us how his spirit is always with us at Pentecost. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word for Ascension of the Lord (Year A, Volume 2)

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ascension-of-our-lord/commentary-on-acts-11-11-8>