

Why Do You Stand Looking Up Toward Heaven? Joel 2:23-29; Acts 1:1-11

Every year I look forward to the NFL draft because I enjoy seeing where certain players end up, but I also enjoy watching the strategy involved. Some teams focus more on drafting the best player available, while others draft more by team need. And the question each year is, “Are certain positions more valuable than others?” Or “Is a particular draft filled with more talent at one particular position and less in others?” The whole goal of course is to draft those players who you think can make your team better for the next ten years. And so as a longtime fan of the NFL I enjoy watching the draft as it plays out asking which teams bettered themselves, and which teams missed out. This of course means that as a fan of the Oakland Raiders I normally come away frustrated because Al Davis the owner and general manager of my team has his own method of drafting players which really entails not worrying so much if someone can play the game of football but focuses more on how fast a player can run in gym shorts, how far they can throw the ball while sitting down, and how big they look when they flex their muscles... all things that are very impressive at the combines, but don’t necessarily translate to building a better football team.

I wonder what people thought when Jesus went out and chose his 12 disciples because, for the most part, Jesus goes to and calls people that nobody else would have even considered... people such as fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots instead of seeking out those who were trained to become disciples. These were ordinary people, and before it was all said and done, they were going to be asked to do something extraordinary.

But before we get into that I want to go back to the Gospel of Luke chapter three beginning with verse 21. Jesus has just been baptized and while he was praying, we read that heaven opens.

Using the words of John Ortberg Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church... this is Kingdom of God language... the things of heaven are coming down to earth... and God’s presence is being manifest in a new way as the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. The writers of the New Testament want to be real clear. The Spirit of God is in the person of Jesus and something new is beginning. Jesus, in a sense, is a new kind of life... a new kind of creation, and Jesus shows us what it means to have life in the Spirit because everything that Jesus does he now does through the Spirit.

Reading on, Jesus returns from the Jordan filled with the Spirit and then is led into the desert by the Spirit to be tested. And when the testing is done, Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returns to Galilee to teach.

And from there to Nazareth where Jesus stands up in the synagogue, takes out the scroll of Isaiah and reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, he has sent me to preach liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to preach the year of the Lord’s favor.”

William Loader in his studies called, “Being the Church Then and Now” reminds us that over 500 hundred years earlier the prophet Isaiah had spoken of God’s people

Israel, broken in spirit, living in poverty and hunger, captive in a foreign land, and he had promised liberation. They would return home to their own land, to worship God in freedom, and all the nations would rejoice in Jerusalem as a centre of peace and justice, and God's reign... God's Kingdom would be restored to Israel.

And so when Jesus looked upon the dejected, broken spirit of the people of his day, and he saw their poverty, their hunger, and their oppression at the hands of the Romans and local authorities, Jesus, using the words of Isaiah which we just heard, declares that God has not forgotten or abandoned them, but that God has heard their cries and has seen their pain, and this is why Jesus has come. And he begins his ministry proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near, but also by then going out and living it as he feeds the hungry, gives water to the thirsty, comforts the outcast, heals the broken, and builds relationships where they were forbidden before.

Fast forward to our Acts passage... Jesus has been with the disciples for 40 days following his death and his resurrection and the disciples are all gathered together as Jesus is preparing to ascend into heaven. But before Jesus can share his last words with them, the disciples ask, "Lord is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus had given the disciples a vision of what the Kingdom of God looked like. He proclaimed it, he promised it, he lived it, and he died for it, but when the disciples looked around, the poor were still poor... the hungry were still hungry... and the people were still in need of liberation. The vision of the Kingdom was still just a vision.

So now that Jesus has been raised in glory conquering death, the disciples want to know, "Jesus, will you at this time restore the kingdom?" 2000 years later, many of us are asking the same question.

On May 21st I spent about five hours with my daughter Kallie going store to store looking for a nice but affordable dress that she could wear for the ceremony at Summit Drive Elementary School celebrating the accomplishments of the 5th graders. At 6pm I got a text message from a friend asking if I was still here? Not sure where here was, I asked. The answer was... earth.

I forgot that May 21st was to be the end of the world or maybe it was the rapture or who knows what was supposed to happen... whatever it was it didn't which meant that I was still shopping for a dress.

I believe that this was the third time that Harold Camping's end of the world predictions had been proven false and like the times before, he blamed it on a calculational error or miscommunication and moved the date again, this time to October 21st. So it looks as if we have around 4 more months.

Was Jesus just another religious fanatic declaring that something grand was going to happen? Was there a calculational error or a misunderstanding? Was Jesus' vision too big? What do we do now? Do we postpone the Kingdom and relocate it to heaven saying that Jesus never intended for the Kingdom to come to earth and do we instead say that Jesus was always speaking about what happens when we die and when we go to heaven?

Jesus responds to the disciples question saying, “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.”

I’m not sure the disciples realized that the restoration of the Kingdom was being placed in their hands.

When Jesus was done speaking, the disciples watch as he ascends into heaven, and as our Scripture closes, two men in white robes appear and say, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

When I was in Seminary there was a road in between the University of Texas and the seminary that was much like our main street but busier. The sidewalks were filled with people walking from store to store, sitting on benches talking, or just hanging out. One afternoon I was going to get a haircut... back when a haircut made sense for me... and I noticed several people stopping and looking up and then with a puzzled look they would simply lower their heads and move on. Then I noticed why they were looking up. There was a man standing in the middle of the sidewalk just staring at the sky. After observing him for close to ten minutes I just had to know what was going on, and so I asked what he was looking at. He smiled and said, “I just wanted to see how many people would look up simply because I was.”

I thought to myself, “There is a sermon in there somewhere,”... If we direct our attention to God others will notice and soon their attention will be directed likewise.

The problem though, as I now realize, is that too often we stand looking up at heaven waiting for God to act, and in the process we miss out on what we need to be doing. The disciples still had work to do.

As we read on in Acts, we hear that on the morning of the Jewish Festival of Pentecost, the disciples are all together when a violent wind fills the house and they are filled with the Holy Spirit and they begin to speak in other languages so that all those who had come for the festival heard and understood them in their own language.

And when people began to accuse them of being drunk, Peter stands up and begins to speak, and he tells them all that this is the fulfillment of what the Prophet Joel has said about God pouring out his Spirit upon all people. When Peter is done speaking about 3,000 people are baptized and we read that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer... And that they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to help where any had need. And day by day, they spent time together in the temple, and in homes praising God with the goodwill of all people in mind.

Thus the Church is born, and as Acts unfolds, we hear about the work of the Spirit in the lives of this community of believers and how over a thirty year period of time this community of faith grows in numbers and the Good News of Jesus Christ spreads to Rome.

This morning we began by talking about these twelve ordinary men who Jesus chose to be his disciples and throughout the gospels we watch as they fail time and time

again, but now we are talking about how on Pentecost they become an integral part in the birth and growth of the Church.

Filled with the Holy Spirit they stand up, and in confidence through the knowledge of the Spirit's presence, first Peter and then the others, they begin to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Spirit gives them boldness where they were afraid before, and with the vision of the Kingdom setting their agenda, they can go out as witnesses to the world. It is the Spirit who gives them the ability to do what God has equipped them to do.

So what actually happened on Pentecost?

Next Sunday is Trinity Sunday and so we will spend some time talking about the doctrine of God as Trinity. So clearly that is something to look forward to. Good times will be had by all.

But for now what is important to realize is that when we talk about the Holy Spirit coming, we are not talking about one third of God coming, but that God in God's entirety is present in the Spirit and is given fully to the disciples.

Remember back to Jesus' baptism when the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove? In Jesus Christ, God is fully present within him, and now when the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, we once again witness a new beginning... new life as God comes into their lives to teach them, to guide them, to empower them so that they might be able to take up Jesus' mission to the lost and the lonely; the broken and the poor.

Looking at it another way, while Jesus was on earth he was bound by time and space. He could only be in one place at one time. But now God's Spirit is poured out on his disciples, and God's Spirit begins to work through them, and as this community grows, the work of the Spirit grows...the work of God grows.

Today, we are this community. We are the Body of Christ, a people gathered and led by the Holy Spirit to become the visual Kingdom... reaching out and caring for those in need.

Bible Scholar Walter Brueggeman says, "Pentecost is a pregnant moment in the life of the people of God and in the relationship between that people and God. Or to put the matter more graphically, but also more accurately, Pentecost is the moment when gestation ceases and birthing occurs. Thus, it is both an end and a beginning, the leaving behind of that which is past, and the launching forth into that which is only now beginning to be. God's Spirit is unleashed. Thus Pentecost is a moving forward into new dimensions of being, whose basic forms are clear, but whose fulfillment has yet to be realized.

When Jesus proclaimed, "The Kingdom of God is near," he was not making a prediction as to when it would happen, but he was telling all that the Kingdom is within reach.

In the words of Brian McLaren well known Christian writer and speaker...The most striking single element of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom may have been "The time has come!" The Kingdom of God is not a distant reality to wait for someday, Jesus

proclaims; the kingdom is at hand, within reach, it is near... now. Everyone agrees the poor and downtrodden should be helped someday, oppression and exploitation should be stopped someday, the planet should be healed someday, war and violence should end someday. But for Jesus, the dream of Isaiah and the other prophets—of a time when good news would come to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed, and the indebted—was not five hundred or a thousand years in the future: the dream was being fulfilled that day. The time has come today to cancel debts, to forgive, to treat enemies as neighbors, to share your bread with the hungry and your clothes with the naked, to invite the outcast over for dinner, to confront oppressors not with sharp knives, but with unarmed kindness. No wonder Jesus called people to repent: if the kingdom is at hand, we need to adjust our way of life and join in the joyful, painful mission of reconciliation and care for one another right now.

Each Sunday in worship we are reminded of the presence, the power, and the work of the Holy Spirit as it is in our liturgy, in our baptism, in our confession of sin, in our affirmation of faith, in the Lord's Supper, and in our benediction, but too often when we walk out of these doors, we leave the Spirit behind. We are called and empowered by the Spirit to make a difference in this world and to help bring the Kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven...today!

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