

**Left Behind? Now What!** Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53 Feast of the Ascension 5/16/21  
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And while Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew and was carried up into heaven. And while he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, the disciples were asked: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” *(Acts 1)*

How strange the biblical story is! Jesus comes. Jesus dies. Jesus returns from the dead. And now, he is returning to God, physically leaving behind his disciples. What do we make of this story of the Ascension and what relevance does it have for us today? This is the subject of today’s sermon.

In November of 1999, I was having my carpets cleaned. I had found a good carpet cleaner who did a thorough job and since my carpets were an off-white color, he came to the house frequently. He was somewhat of a religious fanatic. He belonged to one of those cultic groups who believed that the end of the world was near and so he and his congregation were waiting anxiously for the second coming of Christ. Since the year 2000 was just around the corner, he was hopeful that Jesus would come soon and take him and other faithful people up to heaven. Of course, in this theology, those who had been unfaithful and those who remained unbelievers, would be left behind to suffer in a painful world.

During past visits, this carpet cleaner would often preach to me, making sure I knew what would happen when Jesus finally came. But on this particular day, he seemed a bit out of sorts. So I asked him if he would be disappointed if the year 2000 came and went and the world continued as usual. His countenance fell and he shook his head. You see, he had been gazing up to heaven for years, waiting for Jesus to return. He didn’t seem happy in this life and my hunch is, he wanted to be released from all the disappointments in life. Maybe he didn’t want to be a carpet cleaner. Maybe he had mental health issues. Maybe he was lonely or his heart was broken. Maybe he struggled financially or was bullied. Maybe he had experienced a significant trauma during the Vietnam War. I do not know his personal history, but what I do know is that he was waiting for Jesus to come back and did not want to be left behind.

Left behind! Maybe some of you have heard the phrase “Left Behind” based on a series of 16 bestselling religious novels. The Left Behind Series tells the story of the end of times (set in the contemporary era), in which true believers in Christ have been ‘raptured’ (taken instantly to heaven), leaving behind the others in a world shattered and chaotic. This kind of theology is actually more prevalent in the United States than I had ever imagined. Unfortunately, it has had a toxic effect on how we as a nation make political decisions such as caring for our environment or our position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After all, why make long term goals to protect the environment or to strive for justice and peace in the Middle East if the world is going to end in the near future!

There is another kind of ‘left behind’ attitude held by a significant swarth of folks, some of whom claim to be Christian. These are the deists who believe that God created the world and then went away, leaving behind people to make decisions based solely on their own reasoning. These folks reject a belief in a God who interacts with or empowers humankind. While deism began as an intellectual movement in the 17th and 18th centuries, it continues to have many followers. Since deists depend on their own sense of reason rather than divine revelation to help make decisions, some of them fail to walk the way of Jesus, justifying their refusal to help the poor, the marginalized, and those in great need. You can often find some of these folks in Congress, failing to have compassion for all of God’s people.

Today’s account of the Ascension supports neither deism nor ‘left behind’ theologies. Before his final departure, Jesus promises his disciples the arrival of the Holy Spirit, a power from on high that attests to God’s continuing presence in our lives and in the world today. He tells them: “I will not leave you orphaned...I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you.” *(John 14)*

This Promise of the Holy Spirit has already been given to us. The Spirit reassures us that we have not been left behind nor should we spend all our precious time waiting for Jesus to return. This Spirit, the

Holy Spirit, is the same Spirit of God that was in Jesus; a Spirit that equipped him to speak out courageously to thousands in the face of political, cultural, and traditional religious opposition.

This is the same Spirit that that can counteract our tendency to descend into cynicism and fear in the face of all the chaos in our world today. We are not alone! And the good news is, that we do not have to depend only our ego strength or the strength of weapons to address the many problems in our personal and societal life. So why, when faced with challenges, whether domestically or internationally, does our nation often respond with aggression, violence, and distrust? Why when we are faced with our own personal problems, do we often respond with discouragement or fear? Why hasn't the promptings and power of the Holy Spirit featured more prominently into our psyches as baptized Christians?

Unfortunately, many of us do not recognize or allow the Spirit's voice to inform us on a daily basis. We have not been sufficiently trained to listen to that still small voice. I think we need a little more instruction and practice. Imagine the Holy Spirit as the wind hovering over the open waters. A sailor cannot control this wind. However, with time and practice, a sailor can learn to set his sails in order to capture the power of the wind and move the boat forward even in stormy weather.

And so it is with us. We need some more practice in setting our spiritual sails so that the Holy Spirit can help propel us forward, even in the face of adversity. We do not have to depend on our ego strength alone. How do we do this? We do this by practicing the spiritual disciplines! Let's take a look at today's readings and notice what Jesus advises his disciples before he ascended:

- Stay together in Jerusalem and wait for the Promise: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." (Acts 1; Luke 24)
- Remain together as a community of faith and pray.
- "Be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1)

The disciples did as they were told. They began to worship him with joy. They returned to the city of Jerusalem and constantly devoted themselves to prayer. When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were together and each was filled with the Holy Spirit. The rest is history. The apostles were so empowered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that they went out into the world with courage. They continued the ministry of Jesus, teaching people about the path of love even in the face of resistance and persecution,

Like the disciples before us, we too need to set our spiritual sails so the Holy Spirit can empower us and lead us into truth. **This is done by practicing the spiritual disciplines.** These spiritual disciplines include but are not limited to: *Prayer, Worship, Celebration, Meditation, Fasting, Study, Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, Service, Confession, and Guidance.*

I know that many of you already practice these spiritual disciplines. But how about if we do this together as a community of faith. There are 7 days until the Feast of Pentecost. What might happen if each one of us commits to seven days of prayer (like the disciples did 2000 years ago) with the intention of opening ourselves up to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Here is how it could work:

- Put aside 5-10 minutes each day for prayer, either alone or with another.
- During that time of prayer, listen carefully to that small, still voice and petition God to open up your heart to the promptings of the Spirit in your life.
- Lay before God any discouragements or fears that are depleting your joy.
- And finally, ask the Holy Spirit to descend upon this beloved community of faith, that it may rebound in joy and energy after being separated during this past year due to the pandemic.
- And then let's see what happens!

Finally, I want to say a few words about the strange gospel ending. It reads: "While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." (Luke 24:51) When read literally, this seems a bit like science fiction as if Jesus floats away on a cloud, lost in space. And while we use the term "the heavens" as the space above the earth, in theological terms, heaven is the space where God resides. So the Ascension is the recognition that Jesus now fully resides with God. And if you think

about it, residing with God is the goal of the Christian; not just when we die but now in our physical lives. And so we continue to pray: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Come Holy Spirit, Come!