

Not Many Days from Now

Acts 1.1-14

May 16, 2010

We tend to be a people who put prayer last. When everything else fails, we turn to prayer. To put prayer first means that prayer and our grounding in God is the source from which we live.

- Jane Vennard (adapted)

The Reading

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'⁷ He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ 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.'⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.¹¹ They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Not many days from now you will be scorched by the flame; touched, transformed, and empowered by the very Spirit of God. Such is the promise of Jesus to the disciples gathered with him at the time of his ascension. These words apply to us equally well; not many days from now we will celebrate Pentecost; a time of new beginnings, always new beginnings; a time

to be touched, transformed, empowered, and challenged by the Spirit of God to move into the vision of ministry God has for us, and of which God alone is yet aware. So, I would like for us to focus for a few moments today on our preparations for Pentecost, and our preparations for the Sixtieth Anniversary Celebration of Overland Park Christian Church. It's no accident that we will celebrate this anniversary on Pentecost Sunday; it was chosen precisely because it is a day of new beginnings; not a day of endings, not a day of looking back to completion or finality, but a day of new beginnings for which we should be ready. Not many days from now the Spirit will transform and empower us yet again. Please pray with me as we begin our meditation.

Loving God, we await your spirit, we await your presence, because only in your presence are we animated; only in your presence do we know life in its fullness, only in your presence do we know courage, peace, and joy. Not many days from now, but also today, we yearn to know your transforming Spirit in our midst. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

Today is Ascension Sunday, the day on which we celebrate the ascension of the Christ to the right hand of God, the Creator. This year I have chosen to focus not on the ascending Christ but on the disciples who are left behind. This is appropriate because I'm not sure there are any words that I can add to the mystery of ascension. The ascension, like the resurrection, is shrouded in mystery, beyond the reach of reason altogether. It's a symbol that assures us of the unity of the triune Godhead – God the creator, God the redeemer, and God the Spirit – and the promise of ultimate fulfillment in God's good time. It is also a reminder of God's call to mission and ministry. We are called not to stand gazing up into heaven, but to be about the mission and ministry of God's emerging reign in our spirit and our world.

This is precisely the challenge Jesus gives to his disciples in the last moments of instruction before his ascension. Go and wait, Jesus says, for not many days from now the Spirit of God will descend to empower you and send you forth as my witnesses. Remain in Jerusalem until you have been transformed and empowered. And, as we know, the disciples remain in Jerusalem awaiting the day of Pentecost.

I find it inspirational. I find it inspirational yet surprising that the disciples of Jesus waiting in Jerusalem devote themselves to prayer. Jane Vennard, who led our recent prayer retreat, is on target when she notes that most of the time we don't put prayer first in our lives, but rather last. We rarely begin our ventures with prayer, but tend to wait until they begin to

unravel and we sense failure; this is usually when someone says, well, we'd better pray about this. Some time ago in a church much like ours, for example, a special board meeting was convened to deal with a challenging situation. After hours of discussion that yielded no satisfactory solution, one board member said, I think we should pray about this matter. Another looked up and added, well, we might as well, nothing else has worked.

This seems to be our attitude about prayer. It's a last ditch effort when all else has failed. And this blows my mind! Think about it. Prayer, being in the very presence of God; enjoying a living relationship with the Creator of all things ...and we are reluctant to pray? Prayer, being so intimate with God that we can share our innermost concerns and desires with the assurance that they are heard ...and we would wait to pray? Prayer, that quiet time in which we feel the loving embrace of God, in which we know that we can be totally and completely honest with God about what we need, about what we want, even about things we're angry over ...and we would put off such a time?

We tend to put prayer last when prayer should be primary, it should be first, it should be the default setting of our lives; because it's only in prayer, it's only in being aware of God's presence that we can be empowered and transformed; it's only through prayer that we can know peace, joy, and goodness, and that we can be challenged and sent forth as witnesses, like the disciples so long ago. You will be my witnesses when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

As Jane Vennard has said, to put prayer first in our lives means that it is the grounding out of which we live. It means that the first thing we think of when we wake up and the last thing we think of before we fall asleep at night is that God is real and present to us; that God will accompany, that God will inspire, that God will chasten, that God will challenge, to be sure, but the entire day will be lived in God's presence. Thus, I find it inspirational that the disciples choose to spend their time praying as they await God's Spirit, as they await God's inspiration, as they await God's transformation ...but I can't help but wonder what they pray for. What do you think the disciples pray for in this time of waiting, huddled together in Jerusalem? They would not have been quite sure, I am certain, what they should pray for, because they could not yet envision the mission God had for them.

The disciples were, in fact, still possessed of some pretty wrongheaded ideas about what the Kingdom of God is and when the Kingdom of God will be realized. Moments before the ascension they're asking Jesus, is this the time that the Kingdom will come? And what is this but another way of asking if the kingdom of Israel will be raised to its former glory, showing the Romans what for along the way; this is far from the spiritual kingdom of which Jesus spoke. Jesus doesn't challenge this wrongheaded notion, perhaps he thinks that at this point they'll just have to wait and see, but he gently responds that it is not theirs to know when the kingdom of God will be established in their midst.

I'm not sure what the disciples would pray for, because they have no clear vision of the scope of God's mission and ministry for them. Ideally they might pray for discernment, for patience, for the courage to put aside their expectations and see at God's pleasure the vision that God has for them. This is the only way anyone can prepare for God's future; by opening up to God and yielding to God's vision.

It's inspirational; it's commendable that the disciples spend their time in prayer as they await the Spirit's descent in wind and fire. And I am convinced that we are in the same position today, because not many days from now the Spirit will descend on yet another new beginning, and clearly the best way we can spend our time in waiting for the Spirit ...is in prayer. We may think we see God's vision for us, we may think we understand God's mission for us in the world but, to put it bluntly, we ain't got a clue. So we should pray.

We should pray, because God's vision for us, the mission to which God would have us commit ourselves is far grander, far more ambitious, and I dare say far more demanding than anything we could envision; so I suggest that, like the disciples, the best way for us to pray during this week as we approach Pentecost, as we approach our sixtieth anniversary celebration, is to pray that we can let go of our vision determined by the past, and that we can look forward to God's fresh vision and mission for our faith community. We should pray that we can give up our expectations, that we can give up our demands on what this faith community should look like or what it should engage in; we should pray that we can discern God's vision for this faith community.

I also think that we, like the disciples, should pray for patience, should pray for discernment, and for the courage that will be needed to look forward in mission and ministry. Make no mistake about it, in God's vision the ministry of this church lies *ahead*, and not many days from now the Spirit will descend to scorch, transform, empower, and challenge us to live into that vision, into the ministry that has as yet only God sees. I invite you, I encourage you, I challenge you to take some time every day this next week to pray not for the past but for the future dynamic ministry of Overland Park Christian Church, because not many days from now that future will be upon us.