

Blessing All He Sees

Luke 24:44-53

Ascension Sunday

June 5, 2011

Such love does the sky now pour,
that whenever I stand in a field, I have to
wring out the light when I get home.

- St. Francis of Assisi

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Listen to Jesus long enough, I'll wager, and you will find yourself confused. Seems like every time you turn around he's talking about leaving, returning to the Father, being lifted up from the earth, ascending... all that or he stops talkin' and just vanishes. For several weeks, for example, we have reflected on his abrupt disappearance at the conclusion of the Emmaus meal, wondering what that means for his disciples and for us. Today we celebrate his ascension in preparation for Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit. None of this would be a problem, however, were it not for the numerous times Jesus promises to abide, remain, and accompany his followers. In fact, the underlying promise of faith from Genesis to Revelation is the abiding presence of God in our lives.

It's confusing, then, when Jesus appears to withdraw from us, and hard to avoid the suspicion that God is somehow distant, absent from our day to day lives. But appearances can be

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deceiving, and they may be so in this instance. It may be that the ascension of the risen Lord is preparation for a more pervasive and expansive presence of God in the Spirit. At any rate the disciples could only hope that was the case as they watched their Lord ascend, and were instructed to return to Jerusalem and wait.

Waiting is not always a bad thing. We don't like to wait, mind you, but sometimes it is the appropriate thing to do... sometimes, but not always. Children are amazed when they look at a calendar and see that it is less than a month from Thanksgiving to Christmas. No way! That wait is excruciating and painfully long. I'm sure you can recall times when waiting seemed like anything but the appropriate thing to do. I know I can. One of my worst experiences of waiting occurred at my senior voice recital in college. I shared the stage with a friend; she sang a set, I sang a set, and then we performed together. By luck of the draw, she sang first, and as I waited alone in the rehearsal hall I made a horrendous mistake. I attempted to recall the opening lyrics to my first song. Attempted is the operative word, because try as I may, I could not remember the lyrics. And as I heard my friend sing song after song, getting ever closer to the end of her set, I nearly panicked. So I went out into the hallway where it was quiet. Perhaps there I would calm down and remember the lyrics. No such luck. Finally I heard the applause break out, she walked past me pleased as punch at her performance, slapped me on the back and told me to break a leg.

Long story short, I finally had to walk on to stage not knowing what I was going to sing. I stood in the crook of the piano and looked out over the audience... still no lyrics. I was fit to be tied. I finally figured the only thing to do was trust myself and the hard work I had done memorizing the lyrics in the first place. So I nodded to my accompanist, she started the introduction, I opened my mouth, and at the appropriate time... I sang.

This story had a happy ending but, let me tell you, the wait was excruciating! Waiting was anything but a good thing. But sometimes it is a good thing, as when Jesus instructs the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit. This is because the promise of Jesus is always the promise of presence; the promise of power, the promise of living relationship, the promise of being with us in intimate ways day after day. So even as the disciples think they are waving "bye-bye" to their teacher turned Lord, they are soon to experience a broader more pervasive presence of the Christ. That's right, the one who appeared to withdraw from them into heaven.

The most telling part of this ascension story, from my perspective, is the way it's staged by Luke. Luke tells us that Jesus withdraws as he blesses the disciples. He never stops blessing them; he never stops blessing all he sees. Can you imagine this scene? As he ascends, arms outstretched, his blessing embraces more and more people. His blessing becomes more expansive, more profound, until he sees all... and blesses all he sees.

Blessing; that is what God has been doing from the beginning. That is what God has been doing since first uttering that well known phrase, "Let there be..." bestowing the initial blessing of life. This blessing continued through the years, especially in Jesus, who broadened the embrace of God's blessing. Our Lord didn't withdraw from his disciples. Our Lord hasn't withdrawn from us. He only needed to gain a more expansive embrace. He ascended in order to be pervasively present in God's world; to be intimately present to each and every heart.

Waiting for this blessing, it would seem, was and is the appropriate thing to do. There would be no Pentecost, there would be no celebration of God's faith community that we call church, were it not for the expansive embrace of the Christ's blessing. We would not be church if it weren't for the presence of the Spirit within us. It is the Spirit that draws us together. It is the Spirit that defines our personal spiritual lives and our communal spiritual lives. It is the presence of God as Spirit that makes us church; nothing else. If anybody tries to explain church differently, don't believe them. They're either ill-informed or ignorant. The only thing that makes us church is the presence of God; it's not the institution, it's not the building no matter how beautiful it may be, no matter what tribute it pays to the majesty and the grandeur of God. It's not the programs that we offer. All of these things happen because we wait on the Spirit to be our heart, to be our center.

It is appropriate to wait on the Spirit. I can cite too many examples of times when the church has not waited for the Spirit; when the church decided it was mature and autonomous, that the church could make its own decisions, that the church knew what was right. It can be a terrible burden, you know, being right all the time. And it can lead to monumental mistakes. Was the church right in mounting crusades in the middle ages? Or should they have waited for the discernment of the Spirit? Was the church right in ridding itself of perceived heretics by execution? Or should they have waited for the discernment of the Spirit? Was the church right in defending slavery, or being slow, ever so slow on the uptake, to dispel bigotry and discrimination in our society? Or should they have waited for the discernment of the Spirit?

The church doesn't have a good track record when it comes to waiting on the Spirit. If we did, I think we would see more evidence of compassion, acceptance, shared support and encouragement wherever the church goes. We, like the risen Lord, would bless as we go; we would rise to new heights and bless all we see. Waiting is not always a bad thing. Waiting on the Spirit is appropriate for faith, and it is appropriate as we await Pentecost, and the celebration of the life and mission of God's church.