

Sermon for Ascension, May 29, 2022

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Ascension, when Jesus was taken up into heaven. As one of my clergy colleagues once said to me, "It's kind of weird to celebrate Jesus going away from us." And he certainly had a point. We kind of wish Jesus had just stayed with us, and things had stayed the same. So what is the Ascension all about anyway?

Well, if you read the Bible, you will see that throughout it, from the very beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, there is an overarching theme: God loves the people he has made and wants to be in relationship with us. And, a second theme, the people God has made are not as keen on this as God is. They keep wandering away and doing things that are not good, like worshipping the wrong types of gods, oppressing people, relying on violence, and generally ignoring all the things the prophets keep telling them.

This situation hasn't changed much. I know it isn't fashionable right now to talk about sin. But whether we name it or not, there it is. In the news this week, we have a maniac who walked into a school in Texas and killed a whole lot of children, while the police delayed responding for some reason. We have the National Rifle Association lobbying against any kind of gun control but, ironically, not allowing anyone to bring guns to their convention. Apparently, it's different if they're the ones who might get shot. Closer to home, we had an attempted murder right here in Spryfield this week. Wherever we look, we can still find examples of humanity resisting the call of God to live caring lives, loving God, loving one another. And actually, though none of us has probably done anything that dramatic, in our own lives we often resist God and go our own way as well.

But the other theme is also still true. God does still love the people he has made and God still desires to be in relationship with us. As Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ was the centrepiece of God's planned way of trying to rescue us from ourselves. We call that "salvation." Interestingly, God's plan did not involve forcing anyone to do anything, because, as we all know, you can't force people to love you, or to love each other either.

God's plan involved God the Son coming to be with us, to live among us as a human being, in the person of Jesus Christ. This was the first plank in God's bridge over the chasm humans had dug between God and humanity. God the Son crossed the gaping chasm and became incarnate among us as one of us. That's what we celebrate at Christmas. That God was willing to come live among us, as a human being, subject to the same limitations we are subject to, and to show us how to live as children of God and to bless us with his presence and his example. That was God's first way to bridge the gap.

Then, still following the plan, Jesus confronted the powers that be and told them they weren't following God's ways and invited them to repent and change their ways. He invited the rich young ruler to give away his wealth. He invited those in power to do what was right instead of what was going to gain them the most. He invited the religious leaders to show some mercy and kindness. And, not surprisingly, they arrested him and killed him. And Jesus died. Think about this. The deathless Son of God submitted even to experience death. The same way we do. Because God loves us that much.

Then God raised him from the dead, showing that God has power even over death, and giving us hope that this life is not the end for us either. And then, after Jesus spent 40 days popping in and visiting his disciples and disappearing again, he gathered them all for this, his actual last day on earth.

In Luke and in Acts we have this story about the Ascension. Jesus first tells his disciples to wait. To wait until they receive what the Father promised: his Holy Spirit. Jesus says they will be clothed with power when the Spirit comes upon them. And when this happens, then they will be his witnesses to bring good news to the whole world. He sends them to tell everyone, in Jerusalem, Judea and the ends of the earth to repent, to turn back to God, that their sins are forgiven and to offer them a new way of living. In fact, the same message Jesus preached during his lifetime. He's sending the Spirit filled disciples out to keep preaching it.

And then Jesus is taken up into the heavens. Bodily. This is tremendously important theologically. What it means is that not only did the Son of God come and share our human nature, but then he took our human nature back with him into the heart of the Trinity. He didn't just put on a human body temporarily for his holiday on earth, the way we might put on a dress or a pair of pants. He became completely joined to his humanity, so that when his human life on earth was over, he somehow took that humanity back with him to his eternal life in God. He took our human nature back to God. This is the second plank over the abyss we had dug between God and ourselves. His coming to us was the first plank and his taking us back with him was the second.

By his life, death, resurrection and ascension, God the Son created an unbreakable link between God and humans, in himself. And on those two planks, we can go to God with confidence. That is our bridge to God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate as a human, becomes the path for us to also dwell within the heart of the Trinity eternally. That's what the Ascension means.

But for us, here and now, we are still living on earth, still surrounded by the various sins and problems that face humanity in general and in our own lives. What difference does this make for us? I'm going to talk a little more about that next week, the next phase of God's plan of salvation. But as we wait for that, Jesus' command to his disciples at this point is still relevant. Wait. Wait and pray. Wait until we are clothed with power from on high. Wait until we receive what the Father has promised. Wait for the Spirit. Pray for the Spirit.

For the disciples, their whole way of life was changing. It had already changed when they left their nets and their tax tables and started following Jesus. For 3 years they followed him around and listened to him and practiced doing his work. But those days were also gone now Jesus had ascended. What next? They didn't know. That's why they needed to watch and pray. And wait for God's Spirit to guide them. Actively wait. Not like you're early for your flight so you sit in the departure lounge and kill time kind of waiting. The kind of waiting that is actively praying and seeking.

It was a bit like me when I moved to Halifax 10 years ago. The life I knew was over. I no longer had to raise my kids and half their friends, because they'd all grown up. By the way, I saw two of their high school friends yesterday when I was helping Peter and Yukari move and it was so good to see them. Great kids I'd gotten to know because they practically lived at my house and we've kept in touch over the years. We had some big hugs. But those times were gone for me. All my volunteer work in Berwick was over. What was I to do now? I didn't know, so I spent about 6 months praying about it and waiting. Actively waiting and seeking and praying. And I ended up here.

Well, we are in a weird time right now. I don't need to tell you that. The Covid pandemic is kind of winding up, we hope. The church has changed dramatically in the last two years. We have changed too. Not just us in the church, but all society, is no longer quite so sure we know what's going to happen next. We're no longer sure what we want in life, but we're not content with business as usual, even if we could go back to it. But we can't. Everywhere you look there are help wanted signs, because people don't want to slave away anymore for minimum wage. All over this country, people are looking at their lives in ways they haven't before and trying to figure out what it's all about. This is actually a great opportunity for the church. Because when it comes to the meaning of life, we have something to offer.

And we in the church are also re-examining things. We personally, have to figure out why we go to church. After such a long break, it's no longer just habit. So why do we go? What are we looking for? What do we desire? And what are we supposed to do once we get here? All over NS, churches are closing due to loss of members. Is this what we want here? And if not, what should we do about it? Because for most of our lives, we didn't have to do anything about it. People just came. Now they don't. So, if we're not the church we used to be, and actually, those days are gone and won't come back, then who are we now? Who are we and what is God calling us to do?

For us, this is a time to wait and pray. I believe we could be on the verge of some exciting new things in this church. I believe that God the Holy Spirit still has the power to revive us, rejuvenate us and re-energize us. I do believe that. And I believe God is inviting us along on this project and it's up to us to say yes or no. And if we say yes, then God clothes us with power from on high, by sending his Holy Spirit on us, as Jesus promised.

I am calling you today to prayer. I call you to actively wait and pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon us in a fresh, new, powerful way. I am calling you to prepare yourselves, to be willing to fully say yes to God's Spirit and to be empowered in new ways. Our Lenten journey and the 40 days of Easter when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, prepare us for this, prepare us to say yes to God's Holy Spirit on the feast of Pentecost next week. Let's be ready to say, "Yes, I'm in!" when God calls.

I call you to pray for the Spirit to show us as she showed those disciples 2000 years ago, as she showed me 10 years ago, as she always shows the church, where we're going next and to give us what we need, wisdom and power and courage, to get us there.