

READY FOR THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT?



Scripture:

Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴Then 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.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And 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.”

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

(This is Luke speaking in) **Acts 1: 1-11**

¹In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While 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.”

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

⁸But 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.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward 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.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



READY FOR THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT?

Excellent leaders know how to delegate. Jesus knew how to equip leaders and delegate his ministry to his disciples. They were to minister on his behalf, spread his Word, and fully take on the responsibility for demonstrating Christ's healing love in action. (Pastors are supposed to do this, too, but delegating isn't always easy.)

Christianity spread far and wide beyond the Mediterranean region because Jesus trusted his followers to carry on with his ministry in the world, and because, he never totally left them to their own devices. He stayed with them, guiding them in the form of the Holy Spirit.

LUKE

According to the book of Acts, (which some call Luke 2) after he ascended, the disciples imagined Jesus sitting on the right hand of God in a heavenly kingdom-like setting. That was the traditional image of power in those days of rulers and monarchies. The disciples just couldn't let go of their hopes and dreams that Christ would be a conqueror, a ruler who would use his power to overcome those who had oppressed their people for so long.

Luke (the author of Acts) was also reflecting on the prophecies in the Old Testament, such as in Daniel and in the Psalms, that Christ would ascend to heaven and rule over all.

Daniel 7: 13-14 states: "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with *the clouds of heaven* there came *one like a son of man*, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

And Luke remembered that Psalm 68:18 had another prediction of Christ's ascension where it says, "When you ascended to the heights, you led a crowd of captives. You received gifts from the people, even from those who rebelled against you. Now the LORD God will live among us there." (New Living Translation)

The key point in these passages is not that Jesus became like a King but that God in Christ, along with the Holy Spirit, lives among us. So, out of respect and gratitude for setting us free from being captives to sin we are to humbly serve Christ all our days.

PREPARATION FOR PENTECOST

Now today's passage in Acts describes the way Jesus prepared his disciples for Pentecost (next Sunday). They are to get ready for the Spirit to come upon them and empower them by giving them gifts and talents for their work on behalf of Jesus.

Remember Jesus prepares them for the day of Pentecost by saying in today's passage, "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."

All of this seems pretty unbelievable doesn't it? I mean seeing Jesus rising up in their midst in a cloud, as if he was beamed up like in Star Trek? Then two angel-like figures in white ask them why they keep looking up? Their mouths were wide open staring up in amazement, which is a natural reaction to such a supernatural event! But the two angel-like figures basically say, "Stop marveling at the ascension of Jesus and get to work showing the world what he was all about! He will be back soon enough." (They must have said it in unison.) I don't know....

GRAND FINALE OR NEW BEGINNINGS?

This grand finale of Christ's personal ministry on earth should get more attention from the church as a whole, don't you agree? But was it a grand finale or a new beginning?

I like to acknowledge the Ascension of Christ every year for two reasons:

- 1) This story is directly linked to Easter and Pentecost in the Bible. We can learn from the symbolism in this story to understand how we are to respond to Christ's ministry today.
- 2) The work Jesus left for his disciples to do on his behalf was a way of ministering to them as well. He gave them a charge, a sense of purpose and a blessing of the Holy Spirit after his leaving. Now they had a mission to accomplish. Participating in ministries of the church still does all three things for us today.

We get meaning and purpose for our lives, and we feel the blessings of the Holy Spirit come back to us when we serve others on behalf of God.

THE ASCENSION

First let's try to understand the phenomenon of the Ascension.

Remember at the empty tomb, according to John 20, Jesus prepared Mary for his ascension. Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet *ascended to the Father*; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary was trying to hug Jesus three days after he had been on the cross, and he tells her not to hold on to him. His body must have been in a transcendent state of some kind. Remember, before that, first she thought he was the gardener. Mary didn't recognize him until he said her name. Jesus wasn't the same physically after his resurrection.

METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics might help us understand what was going on with Christ. "Meta" means beyond, or after, and "physics" refers to the physical. So metaphysics is a way of understanding things that are beyond the physical, beyond material matter. Metaphysics as a discipline has been a central part of scholarly education even before the age of Aristotle, who considered it "the Queen of Sciences."

I think something metaphysical was going on with Christ's body after he rose from the dead. He was in a different form beyond physical matter. Yet he still had the wounds on his body from the cross. We know that because he allowed Thomas to touch those wounds to help him believe it was truly him. When Christ ascends, the wounds are still on his body, like our wounds are still with us long after the trauma has passed. God shows deep empathy. God knows how we carry our wounds with us even many years later.

Besides the metaphysical explanation, another way to look at what happened in the Ascension of Christ might be to look at it supernaturally. The science of physics states that a metaphysical phenomenon still obeys the laws of physics where a supernatural occurrence does not. It is beyond the laws of nature, super or above nature, thus supernatural.

Perhaps Christ's ascension was a supernatural phenomenon that caused the jaws of the disciples to

drop open gazing skyward in amazement for a long, long time.

We may never fully understand how Christ ascended in a cloud. But it is less important to find concrete scientific evidence explaining the historical reality of his ascension, and more important to look at the way Christ passed on to us his ministry on earth.

PRELUDE TO PENTECOST

Today is the "prelude to Pentecost".

Jesus relationship with his disciples is one of teacher/Rabbi/shepherd, friend, redeemer and Lord. But it is time for him to reconnect with his origin and rejoin God and the Holy Spirit as the One Whole Triune God. His physical ministry on earth has come to a close forty days after Easter.

But Jesus continues to usher in the kingdom of God through the Holy Spirit's empowering and blessing of his disciples.

We remember in John 16 that before Christ was crucified he began telling his disciples about the Holy Spirit, how when he left, the Spirit would come.

In verse 7, it says, "But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

The Holy Spirit is our advocate, our comforter, our sustainer, and guide. The Holy Spirit is Emmanuel, God with us, in a metaphysical way.

This pre-Pentecost time period is an exciting moment in the life of the disciples and in our lives as well. It is kind of a launching pad. But it is a slow launch lasting about a week because Jesus asks his disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit. To be good at waiting for God, we must trust in God's promises.

PREACHING CONFERENCE

Last week I was at the Preaching conference in Denver. There were twelve hundred pastors at this conference of Progressive Christians from nearly all the protestant denominations, Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Pentecostals, and Presbyterians all mixed together! All the singing, lectures, preaching and

worshipping were so inspiring! And it gave me hope that someday we will unite as one Church of God. Some speakers were Jewish and Muslim.

Much of the conversation was about the changes happening in the church. There was talk of the church needing a re-birth, and some talked about the church being “pregnant” and expecting that a new way of being church will emerge in the next few years. But in this time of gestation we must patiently and faithfully go about the tasks of ministry we are all called to do:

Feed the poor,
Welcome the aliens and misfits,
Be companions for the lonely,
Water the thirsty and
Clothe the needy.

All this we do in the name of Christ.

But the most reassuring talk I heard last week was about the need for the church to be outside its walls and not just wait inside for people to come through our doors. If the church is going to survive it must be visible both inside and outside, showing the world God’s love in action with compassionate acts of service for others.

This was reassuring to me because *this* church congregation gets that. We already understand that we must bring the compassionate presence of God with us wherever we are.

When Gwen and Connie go across the street to deliver the snacks to the Boys and Girls Club, when we work outside in our community garden, when we feed the breakfast kids from the high school, when a group from our church rides bicycles with a team from our Presbytery for the hunger task force, when the Voyagers volunteer at the food bank, and when we send a team off to work in orphanages in Haiti to meet the needs of the desperately poor, that is when we are living into hope for the church of the future, showing our neighbors God’s love.

Guiding others to exemplify Christ’s acts of love in as many ways as possible leads to church vitality and less divisiveness.

God has blessed this church family in the same way God blessed the disciples as they waited for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We have been blessed with patience in the waiting as we trust that God is faithful to us. And God is working out a good

purpose through us for the benefit of the whole world.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS WITH US

Now our waiting time is over and the Holy Spirit is about to shake this place up. When the two angelic men told the disciples Jesus would come back in the same way he left, they were probably petrified! Going up in a cloud and coming back on a cloud is hard to imagine. But nothing is impossible with God.

And the message to carry out with you today from the experience of the Ascension is this: Don’t be afraid to jump in and carry on with Christ’s ministry here in this church or wherever you find yourself because, God is with us in the Holy Spirit. For Paul said in Romans 8, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The Ascension was not a finite ending but a new beginning of Christ’s ministry in a different form. And you are part of that new beginning today. But you can’t be wishy-washy. Your participation is essential so others can feel the presence of Jesus through your compassion, prayer and love. Amen

Benediction: Are you ready for the gifts of the Spirit that will help you accomplish great things for God here in Santa Rosa and beyond?? If you are willing to be a witness of Christ’s love to the world, God will empower you. Show up next Sunday and be prepared for the Holy Spirit to show up, too.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more. Amen



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