

“Departure Stories”

Ascension Sunday – May 16, 2010

Luke 24:44-53

Acts 1:1-14

This time of year, we celebrate departures in graduations, beginning with colleges, universities and seminaries, and then extending into high schools and grade schools. In pomp and pageantry, we seek to mark these moments of transition. Honoring the past experience of students, while anticipating the future into which they move.

There are other departures that shape each of our experience and the experience we share together in this place. Family members move on with their lives to other regions of our country or the wider world. This my household is experiencing as we prepare to send off our daughter Lean and her husband Frank to the greater Phoenix area.

Our congregation faces the departure of friends in faith as jobs change, relationships draw people elsewhere, or a new future beckons. I was reminded this week of the potluck in which we celebrated and sent out our dear friend Steve Crow, as he headed off to his new retirement home in Portland, Oregon.

Departures stir up a deep mix of feelings. We seek to be excited about the new chapter of life unfolding for our friends and family members. Yet we begin to grieve the loss of their presence with us in the life we share together.

Today we mark the departure of Jesus from his followers, a second time. We observed his first departure in Holy Week and Easter in his death on the cross, and then his resurrection. We have now celebrated 40 days of his return as our risen Lord. On this Ascension Sunday, we recognize his final departure from his followers.

Luke gives us two different accounts. First, in the concluding verses of his gospel, Luke records Jesus' instructions to his disciples. Jesus reminds them of the connection between the Hebrew scriptures and his life and ministry. And we are helped, in the process, to realize that there is a clear continuity between the earthly and the heavenly Jesus, too.

There is a concise, powerful charge to the disciples in these words of Jesus. Repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be preached in Christ's name to all the nations. For Jesus' followers are the witnesses entrusted with this life-changing, world transforming message.

Repentance means a turning around. We are to turn from other dominant forces in our lives and turn back to God. Only then can we be open to receive the loving forgiveness that our Holy Parent seeks to offer us through Christ.

This continues to be a powerful portion of our worship each and every Sunday. We turn in trust to our merciful sovereign, confess our sins, and seek God's help in turning our lives around. Then we celebrate the forgiveness and new life with which we are graced in Christ. We continue to be Christ's witness in and through this worshipful practice.

Yet our memory of Jesus' teachings in Luke's gospel broadens this witness beyond our personal lives. Jesus announced a very social gospel. He challenged the religious and civil leaders of his day, standing with the poor and the marginalized.

Thus we are called, as Jesus' current day followers, to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to the broader world. To the nations, and yes, to the states.

Recently, a law was passed in Arizona that makes it legal to stop and question any individual suspected of being a so-called, illegal alien. This legislation clearly discriminates against our Hispanic friends and neighbors. It is a distinct threat to their well being. Religious leaders have been speaking out and calling for the church to find its voice. Arizona needs to repent, to change its mind, to change this misguided law.

If we are truly Christ's witnesses, we need to proclaim his message individually and socially. Repentance and forgiveness of sins apply to our lives, our neighbor's lives and the life of society. There is a vibrant sense of equality in Jesus' message and his ministry. All people are to be treated equally as children of God. And welcomed into our lives, and yes, our land.

Back, then to Luke's gospel. We are encouraged to read that Jesus did not leave his followers on their own. He charges them to remain in Jerusalem, awaiting the power of the Spirit that God has promised. Next Sunday, on Pentecost, we will celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit upon those first believers, enlivening their witness.

Our second scripture lesson is the opening portion of Luke's second volume, the acts of the apostles. Like Luke's gospel, it is addressed to Theophilus, meanings lover of God. Whether that describes all faithful readers, or a specific Roman official, we can only wonder.

Like a series of television shows, those verses give us flashbacks to the episodes that precede this one. "Previously, in Luke's of account.....we are thus helped in reading the book of Acts independently. These words also contain a key caution for us. We are not to focus our attention on the specifics of a cosmic timeline. All in God's good time.

I was visiting with someone who was wondering out loud whether all the turmoil in the world meant that the end times were in sight. It can be tempting to take Jesus' own teachings about the end times literally, as well as the scenario in the book of Revelation.

The risen Lord counsels his followers that these sorts of questions should not be their concern. Instead, he reminds them that they are to await the guidance and empowerment of the Spirit. That is the beginning of the next chapter of God's work.

Then comes the actual moment of the ascension itself. Jesus is lifted up into a cloud, we are told.

Let's reflect metaphorically on the presence of God portrayed as a cloud. The earthly Jesus, now the risen Lord, leaves the lives of the friends of the friends with whom he has shared his ministry. He is drawn into the innermost presence of his loving Holy

Parent. Where we trust, in faith that Christ advocates for us and prays for us. Giving strength and substance to our limited human efforts of prayer and action.

We are told of the disciple's very human response to the ascension. They stand there gaping at the departure of their beloved friend and teacher. He was gone, a second time! They are caught up in the glory and the mystery of the moment.

That is, until they receive a divine nudge. Two heavenly messengers appear and ask them just what they are doing, gaping upwards. Jesus will return in the same way, they are assured. Which we affirm every time we celebrate the Lord's supper. That Jesus will indeed come again, bringing God's realm to fulfillment. Of course, in God's good time.

Let us allow our human experience of departures to shape our understanding of the scriptures. If we glory too quickly in our ascended Lord, the king of kings, ruling over all of life, we miss the depths of human friendship he shared in his earthly ministry. Which would leave his followers grieving.

At the same time, we cannot get too caught up in their sorrow, or in the glory of the moment. Just as we should not stay too long with our reactions to the departure of friends and family. Or in looking too longingly to the past. We are excited, after all, for those who are moving on in a new venture in their lives! So Luke was seeking to nudge the church of his own time. God has moved on. And so must we.

The disciples did move on. They returned to Jerusalem. There they wait. For what, they are not quite certain. However they do what is faithful in the moment. They join in prayer together. They seek sustenance and support from their God. And from their risen Lord, present and active with our holy Parent.

Stories of departures are accounts of vital transitions in our lives. We can be grateful to Luke for his two different stories of Jesus' departure. Our challenge is to be present to these accounts of our Lord's ascension. But like his first followers, we are not to stand gaping up into heaven. We are to move on, following our God who is always on the move.

We are to wait in prayer for the leading and empowerment of the Spirit. In worship next Sunday, and in each and every day of our lives. Renewing our commitment as witnesses to the repentance and forgiveness of sins that mark the new life in Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.