

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

You Are Witnesses

Ascension Sunday - June 5, 2011

**Psalm 47 & Luke 24:44-53
(Hymns –281, 275, 530, 563)**

This Sunday and next Sunday,
we take a bit of a break in our series on the parables
to pay attention to important days in the Christian year –
Ascension Sunday and Pentecost Sunday.

These days celebrate the completion,
according to Scripture,
of the ministry of Jesus Christ himself on this earth.
Here's the narrative flow of what God does in Jesus Christ
as the church has understood it:

Incarnation,
God becoming flesh and dwelling among us in grace and truth;
Ministry,
God in Christ teaching and healing in the service of the kingdom;
Crucifixion,
God giving himself up for the redemption of the world;
Resurrection,
the triumph of God over death and all the forces that oppose the kingdom;
Ascension,
the return of Jesus Christ to his place of power with the Holy Trinity;
Pentecost,
God's sending of his Spirit to fulfilled the promise of being present
with us and for us in steadfast love.

When we are invited, called, indeed, compelled
to witness to the ways God has acted
in order to empower us to be blessings in his world
and thus be nourished to flourish in his grace,
this is the primary story we tell –
the story of how God took flesh to redeem his creation
and restore us to our central role in that redemption
as beings created to praise and bless.

Ascension Sunday has not been a major focus for Protestants.
We've focused primarily on Christmas and Easter.
Pentecost gets a bit of a nod.
But the Ascension gets largely ignored.

I think that's a shame.

This is an important event in the whole story of God's redemption.
Jesus is raised up to heaven to rejoin the fellowship of the Holy Trinity
in his resurrected human form.

He takes again the place he had prior to the Incarnation,
in the most intimate communion and community with Father and the Spirit.
I don't pretend to understand precisely how this happened.
That is beyond the capacity of human understanding.

I accept in faith that it did happen
and that it happened as an essential part of God's redemptive action
for my salvation as a beloved friend of God
for whom he has a special role in the healing of creation.

That is really the focus of our witness as Christians.
The God who is the source of all that is
is a loving God who seeks to be in intimate communion with all his creatures,
especially his human creatures.

While we have wandered away from and ignored that reality of life,
God has pursued us with passion and desire
to the point of becoming one of us
in a final act of reconciliation.

We are all invited to enjoy that reconciliation
and in its power flourish as blessings in this world and the next.

As Jesus said to his disciples just prior to the Ascension,
this is what all the Scriptures are about –
the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms –
all about what God is willing to do to restore his original vision in creation,
his vision of a kingdom of well-being, peace, and mutual blessing.

After 40 days of post-resurrection appearances and teaching
(and 40 is a significant Biblical number – Exodus and Wilderness),
Jesus concludes his earthly ministry
with a call to his followers to be witnesses to all these things.
He promises again the gift of the Holy Spirit as the "power from above"
to work with us in being such witnesses.

(We'll consider that event further next week.)

Then he blessed them,
as he invited them to bless others,
and was taken up into heaven.
And they returned to the city joyful and grateful.

There are a couple of things in the Ascension story that struck me this week.

First, we witness with gratitude
to the joy that comes from God's grace in Jesus Christ.
It's not just to the story that we witness,
but to the way in which the story changes our lives,
takes us from sadness to joy,
from fear to courage,
from surviving to flourishing,
from death to life.
The story reveals to us the true meaning of life
as God intended it to be lived.
We see that most clearly in Jesus' life.
It's a life of deep intimacy with God
that empowers us to be a blessing in everything we do.

Second, we do this best by being the church.
We witness best to God's redemption in Christ
by being Christ's body on earth.
We gather in welcoming community.
We listen again, freshly and anticipating new depths of meaning,
to the story of our salvation in the context of the world's salvation.
We learn together what that means for us and our communities.
We celebrate rituals that reconnect us with the true meaning of our lives.
And we go out of our gatherings to be a blessing to all we encounter,
to serve the world in the strength of God's love.

There is the community, the message, the learning, the rituals, and the service.

Together, they form the foundation of our witness to Christ in this world.
We are together in this witness,
each adding our own unique gifts and talents
to the privilege of making God's redemption
more widely and more deeply known
by his beloved human beings.

We are nourished for that witness at the Lord's Supper.
So let us gather as the friends of God in Jesus Christ
and feast with joy.