

Surrounded by Blessing

Ascension Sunday, May 17, 2009

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Texts: Acts 1.1-11,
Psalm 47,
Ephesians 1.15-23,
Luke 24.44-53

There are a number of theological themes we celebrate on Ascension Sunday; themes that have been expressed throughout this service through liturgy and song. But there are some parts of the Acts account which have captured people's imaginations throughout the ages that I am going to step right on over if that's ok with you. It is the parts that have primarily to do with the way in which Jesus departs from the disciples on the day of ascension. Some of the artistic renderings of this passage look like they are story boards for bad science fiction movies with smoke filling the scene as Jesus ascends with tacky special effects. I read about one cathedral that has an image of the soles of Jesus' ascending feet as they would be viewed from the disciples below.¹ This doesn't strike me as the theological heart of these texts.

It is interesting to note that it is the same author writing the book of Luke as the book of Acts. I've often wondered why the fantastical, dramatic re-telling of this story of the ascension in the beginning of Acts when the author has already told such a beautiful and touching version of it at the end of Luke's gospel. In Luke's version you'd almost miss the part about his departure when you get caught up in the tenderness of the moment – the exchange between Jesus and his disciples. If you noticed the foot notes in this text you will see that some of the ancient manuscripts don't include the part about Jesus being carried up into heaven at all.² He simply withdrew from them and they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. I'm

¹ You can read about this artwork in the Peterborough Cathedral at:
<http://takeapewithme.blogspot.com/2009/05/peterborough-cathedral.html>

² The NRSV includes a foot note for verse 51 stating that some ancient manuscripts do not include the phrase *and he was carried up into heaven*.

not arguing about what really happened. I'm wondering about what is most significant about this day that the church celebrates which is called in some circles the feast of the ascension.

I want to take our cues from the text itself. When you look at the conversation between Jesus and his disciples in this text from Luke, one part of what Jesus is doing with them is helping them to understand everything that has just happened. There is a powerful impulse in the human soul to make meaning out of loss. If we cannot find ways to make sense out of the things that happen in our lives then we are in terrible danger of letting those losses and disappointments consume us. Viktor Frankl was a psychologist who survived the concentration camps in Europe during WWII. Out of that experience he developed logotherapy (from the Greek word *logos*) on just this premise: that our primary drive in life is not the pursuit of pleasure as Freud argued but rather the quest to make meaning out of our lives. Particularly we are driven to make meaning out of our suffering so that we can move forward with a renewed sense of purpose.³ That's part of what Jesus does here in the last moments with his disciples. He ties their understanding of what has happened in his life to the purpose they will have for their lives going forward. He commissions them for the next part of their journey where their paths will now depart from his.

What becomes clear in this farewell scene is the necessity of Jesus' leaving in order for this to take place. It is only by leaving that Jesus makes room for that transition in the disciples we've observed throughout Eastertide from their role as students and disciples that sat at Jesus' feet throughout his ministry to the apostles and teachers they would become after his departure. In his leaving Jesus makes space for them to "grow up" (as we named it last week) to become his friends and co-workers in the gospel. As long as the teacher remained, all eyes would be on him. He wasn't interested in creating a cult of personality. He was interested in the redemption of the world. In God's work of redemption, God's work of re-creating the world, God makes room for us to become the human beings we were uniquely meant to be. God does this in order to let us evolve

³ Frankl sets out this these in his book *Man's Quest for Meaning*.

into new creations. God does this in order to let the spirit of wisdom and revelation that we have from Christ (this is the language of Ephesians from today) do its work on us - understanding that the way it works on me is different from the way it works on you. There is a deep hospitality revealed in this text when Christ makes space for his friends to step out into some new ventures. Space is made for his disciples to be witnesses to what they have learned from him and seen in him but to take it out of the limited scope of their small world into all the corners of the earth. And you know that as they move from one place to another and as they encounter new peoples and cultures that spirit of wisdom and revelation will cause them to grow and evolve.

The day of ascension reveals that God is the one who makes that kind of space for us and calls us to this same practice of offering space to one another. One of my best friends from seminary just had a book published this month. She's an artist and loves people. She is a very funny person and a great story teller. All of that comes through in her spiritual memoir: *The Girl in the Orange Dress*.⁴ It's the story of how she made meaning out of her very tumultuous upbringing. She was adopted and then her adoptive parents divorced and remarried and divorced again. When I first met Margot and heard some of that story, she would just say "You have two parents who love you - I have nine parental units who love me." She had not yet come to terms with the profound sense of loss that goes with a story like that. I could feel the suffering. She could not. Coming first to feel that suffering - then to make some meaning out of it - then to discover a renewed sense of purpose moving forward from it: that is the journey that unfolded for her between the time I met her in seminary in 1992 and the publishing of this book in 2009. She tells a story in the first pages of her memoir that speaks to the importance of this truth that God makes space for us. Her mother who adopted her and raised her would always tell Margot that she was special because she was chosen. Other people are stuck with their children, but she chose Margot. Her mother would tell her

⁴ Starbuck, Margot. *The Girl in the Orange Dress: Searching for a Father Who Does Not Fail* (Intervarsity Press, 2009).

how she knew from the moment that she first held her that Margot was her daughter. Part of that story includes how she brought to the adoption a beautiful white dress with blue ribbons. The very first thing she did when Margot was hers was to change her out of that orange dress that she was wearing the first day they met.

You have to know Margot to get the full impact of this little piece of family lore. Margot would not be caught dead in a white dress with blue ribbons. Her mom shops at Talbots and is this petite, tasteful, stylish woman. Margot is six feet tall and when I met her she was most at home in fuchsia and orange – the louder the better. She was always a bit of an embarrassment to her mother when it came to her fashion sensibilities. The pain of her life with the revolving parental door was this deep-seated fear that she needed to fit herself into the image and expectations of the people around her so that maybe next time they wouldn't leave. Her spiritual journey was coming to terms with those losses and discovering that there was space for her to offer what it is that she had to offer in the way that she was made to offer it. That's what Jesus gave to his disciples in his departure.

I wonder why it is so hard for us to offer that kind of hospitality to each other. Margot's mom is not the only one in the world who struggled to let her daughter become her own person. I think about how hard it is for us in the church to let people have their own particular experience and journey of faith. We have a high need in the church to try to control the ways that people think and talk and worship....it isn't just families that struggle to make space for each other. We are in graduation season and that is a particular moment in a family's life where this practice of letting go and giving freedom to let your child make their own path in the world is really tested. Not all of us are so good at that. I heard a woman this week speak of her father saying "the only plans he had for us kids were the plans we had for ourselves." It was a noteworthy observation to make because that kind of unconditional love and trust in a family is so hard to pull off. She wasn't speaking about some kind of passive or permissive attitude on her father's part. And I'm not advocating some radical kind of relativism either.

There was content that Jesus expected from his disciples when they gave witness to the gospel: they were to bring the message of repentance and forgiveness with them. But as the disciples embodied that message of repentance and forgiveness in their own flesh and brought it to the vastly different circumstances their paths would take....it wasn't going to look the same. Jesus trusted that they had learned what they needed to learn and he trusted that who they had become and would become over time was exactly what the message of the gospel needed in order to find a home in the world. And so he blessed them.

This whole farewell was surrounded by blessing. When he leads them out to Bethany he lifts up his hands and blesses them, he withdraws from them while he continues blessing them. When they return to the city, they go rejoicing. The final note of this gospel is that they were continually in the temple blessing God. Perhaps the key to offering hospitality and freedom to people is found in the spiritual practice of blessing. I know there is a place for definitions and clarity and expectations - Jesus challenged people around those things. (We will be meeting with seminary students on Tuesday for Classis exams and we will be looking for just that kind of definition and clarity from them.) But when it came to his final moments - the ones he spent with his friends - he didn't lecture them. He didn't warn them about the state of the world. He didn't put the fear of God in them. What he did was bless them and then withdrew. And in that space and out of that blessing they stepped into their own.

It's a powerful thing to offer our blessing to one another. I hope you will stop by the table in the gathering area where we are collecting words of blessing to share with Marj Taylor, our parish nurse, as she departs from us. I mention this because it feels important that we don't wait until people leave to bless them in their ministry among us. I want to encourage all of us to find ways in our friendships - with our partners - in church life and family life - in our neighborhood and beyond....to join with Christ on this day of ascension in making space for one another. Not just to live and let live but to bless and bring forth blessing. This is the way God lives with us and this is the way God invites us to live.

Thanks be to God. Amen.