

Bethesda Lutheran Church
Easter VII
June 5, 2011

Restoring the Kingdom to Israel
Acts 1:6-14

The book of Acts continues the story of Jesus and his disciples in the days after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus presented himself alive to them with many convincing proofs, Acts says, appearing to them during the forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. John had baptized with water, Jesus said, but now the disciples would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. But the disciples didn't understand. Instead, they asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" In reply Jesus told them, basically, that they still didn't get it. "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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."

The disciples had just gone through a very difficult time, a time through which we have followed them for the past forty days. It began with Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered into the city of Jerusalem as in a royal procession, with his disciples right behind him. Surely, this triumphal entry was the beginning of the end game, when Jesus would seize the reins of power. Surely, the kingdom of God of which he had spoken was about to become a reality. Surely, he would now instill them in positions of authority and power to help establish that kingdom. But Jesus' triumphal entry was soon followed by the trauma of Good Friday. Faced with the mob that had come to seize Jesus, the disciples fled. Jesus had not seized authority—the authorities seized him! And then, three days later, the women who followed Jesus found that his tomb was empty. They saw an angel at the tomb who explained that Jesus had risen from the dead. And then, the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples themselves, not once, but several times. They were overwhelmed, and could not make sense of it all. A risen Messiah? If God could raise Jesus from the dead, there was no limit to what was possible! Surely, this must

mean that now was the time for the coming of the kingdom of God! And then, much to their surprise, Jesus was lifted up—he ascended into the heavens! What would be next?

The disciples returned to Jerusalem to the upper room where they had gathered with Jesus for the Passover. There they devoted themselves to prayer, awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised them. Exactly what that gift would be, they still did not know. But they would find out soon enough—stay tuned for the big surprise! That story will continue next week.

During the last weeks we have journeyed with Jesus and his disciples. We have been told that we are a Good Friday People, a people of the cross. We remember the suffering and death of Jesus, we remember how he died for the sins of the world that fateful day. We focused on the cross and on Jesus redemptive activity. We considered how, as a Good Friday People, we seek to obey Jesus command to take up our crosses and follow him.

We also have celebrated the fact that we are a Resurrection People. We are a people who have been baptized into the death of Jesus, so that, like Christ, we might also be raised. With this promise, anything is possible. The world is born anew! Christ is a risen! Alleluia!

Today we celebrate the fact that we are also an Ascension People. We, like the disciples in the book of Acts, acknowledge that Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father. From there, we confess, he will come to judge the quick and the dead.

But what does it mean to be an Ascension People? First of all, it means that we acknowledge the mighty acts of God that we witnessed during this season of Lent and Easter. We remember Stephen, who looked into heaven and saw the Son of Man sitting at the Right Hand of God. When Stephen said this, the religious rulers of the time condemned him for blasphemy. Jesus seated at the Right Hand of God? That just proved that nothing good would come from this story, or so they thought. With a man named Saul as their witness, a man who soon was to be renamed Paul, they stoned Stephen to death.

The story of Stephen is instructive of what an Ascension People are all about. Ascension People are not triumphalistic—that is, they do not believe that they will go from one victory

onto another, they do not believe that they are in control. Rather, acknowledging that the Son of Man—Jesus—is seated at the right hand of God, they, the Ascension People, are left in the world to witness to the good news of God in Jesus Christ. They, the Ascension People, are still in the world continuing the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. They, the Ascension People, carry on Jesus ministry to the sick and the poor, to those possessed by demons, to the hungry, and to those who thirst for righteousness.

As they carry on the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Ascension People know that they will be opposed by the powers of this world, by those who oppose God. We are reminded of this by the Epistle reading for today. There we read, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” The fiery ordeal of which First Peter writes is not something strange, but something to be expected. Those who would follow the risen and ascended Jesus can expect to be opposed by the same powers that opposed him, by the same powers that put him to death.

For this is another characteristic of the Ascension People. They live at a period between the times, between the time when Jesus was enthroned on the Right Hand of God, and the time when he will come again. We were reminded a couple weeks ago that some have tried to predict just when that time will be, despite Jesus’ explicit warning that no one knows the times and seasons when all this will come about.

Yet we needn’t make too much fun of those awaiting the Rapture. They point to the Christian belief that the kingdom of God is, in some sense, with us here and now, but that it is also yet to come. The disciples were almost right when they asked whether now was the time when the kingdom would be restored to Israel. It was just that they imagined the kingdom as something other than what Jesus proclaimed. They imagined an earthly kingdom, the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel as a nation among other nations, as it had been before. They imagined throwing off the yoke of bondage to the Roman Empire and re-establishing their independence. But Jesus proclaimed a kingdom not of this world, a heavenly kingdom. That kingdom has already been established, and God has welcomed us into it. But that kingdom is still to come. What we see and experience now is incomplete. “Thy kingdom come,” we pray

in the Lord's Prayer. With these words we pray that the kingdom of God will come to us, and we pray for the end-time, when God will rule in all glory and majesty.

We are the Ascension People. We are the people who have been baptized with water and the Spirit. We are those who have been elected by God to be among his faithful people. We are the people whom God has brought to this community to live out our faith. In doing so, we gather to hear the word of God proclaimed in word and in song. We take part in the Sacraments God has ordained, through which God's people receive his grace and mercy. We confess our faith, we make the sign of the cross, and are reminded of our baptisms. We eat and drink at the Holy Eucharist, gathered with God's people of every time and place, to give thanks and to be strengthened in our faith. And we go out from here to continue the work of the Lord. We are the Ascension People.

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