

Acts 1: 1-11 and John 17: 1-11: For the Graduates

This morning, on the last Sunday of the Easter season, we are on a threshold ready to leave one season behind, the Season of Easter, and step into a new season ushered in by the Coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, which we'll celebrate next Sunday.

So, imagine yourself standing on the threshold, about to step into a new chapter in your life... just like many young people graduating this time of the year. Whether it is a move from a kindergarten to the first grade, or from being a student into an adulthood; we gather up all that we have learned and experienced, and step into the unknown.

And this threshold event in the life of the first disciples was the Ascension of the Lord, Jesus's return to God in heaven, leaving them behind. It thrusts them into an uncharted water of life after Jesus's departure from the world. They were just graduated, ready or not, from the school where Jesus had been the hands-on teacher, into the world to teach what their teacher taught them.

The First Reading this morning is from the Acts of the Apostles, which is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, written by the same person. The beginning verses Dee and Miguel read for us work like a hinge between the Gospel of Luke, which ends with Jesus's ascension to heaven, and the Book of Acts which tells of the works the followers of Jesus carried on in the world.

Here the writer describes Jesus's ascension as him having been "taken up to heaven" as if from a launch pad, but the ones really being launched were his followers. Jesus's return to God actually sent his **disciples** into their ministry in the world as his **apostles**. The word disciple means "one who learns," so, a student, and the word apostle comes from the Greek word that means "to send forth", so the disciples in Luke's Gospel, crossed the threshold, or graduated, when Jesus returned to God, and began their lives as apostles in Acts.

We also learn in this passage that the risen Jesus stayed with them for 40 days. In the Bible, number 40 often signifies a time of preparation before something new can start: just to name a few examples, 40 days and 40 nights Noah spent in the ark, 40 years Israelites wandered in the wilderness, and 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tested before he began his ministry.

And we observe Lent, the period of 40 days to Easter, to prepare ourselves to die to sin, so we may be raised with Christ to new life on Easter. So also, the writer of Acts tells us, for 40

days the risen Jesus prepared the disciples for their life in the world without him. Now are they ready to graduate? Not quite yet.

Just as Jesus promised his disciples “I will not leave you orphaned,” at the last supper in John’s Gospel, here in Acts, too, the risen Jesus tells them “not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father,” for “they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” not many days from now.” 10 days later, on Pentecost, which means 50 days, and we’re counting from Easter, the Holy Spirit descended upon those who were gathered and gave them the power to do the work they’re sent forth to do. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Truth staying with them forever, they are ready.

Hearing Jesus talk about the Holy Spirit, someone asked “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” Among the early believers, there was a tradition that regarded the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a sign that the end of the world was near. So, this question was coming from the “end of the world” perspective, where God will restore the kingdom of Israel.

To this, Jesus answers “It is not for you to worry about the timing that God has planned.” He doesn’t say the person who asked the question is wrong, for God will restore everything in God’s time, but Jesus adds “but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Judea and Samaria were the divided kingdom of Israel, and they will be brought together; in fact, all the world would be brought together.

So, no, you’re not wrong about me restoring the kingdom, AND here is how God is going to restore not just the kingdom of Israel, but the whole world: by empowering you, by the Holy Spirit, to be the Christ’s witness to the end of the earth. Jesus turns our passive, “just waiting for the world to end” attitude to the attitude of empowered co-laborer of God who would do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Remember how afraid and sad disciples were on the day of resurrection? The disciples huddled behind the locked doors; Mary Magdalene weeping in the garden; the two disciples on the road to Emmaus walking away from Jerusalem all sad and depressed? During the forty days from Easter to Ascension, Jesus stayed with them to turn their fear and despair into assurance and hope, promising the coming of the Holy Spirit who would empower them and stay with them forever.

The disciples-turned-apostles, generations of them, have been spreading the Word, and their witness has reached across time and space to you and me. This story, their story, is now our story. We now cross this threshold again, like newly graduated apostles, in our own time and place, to live newly into the mission of being Jesus's witness to the world, and particularly here in Jemez Valley and uniquely as a body of Christ that is Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church. And the Holy Spirit continues to empower us.

Christian mission is never merely a matter of human efforts. Jesus was very clear in his final words to his followers; it is divinely ordained and guided by the Holy Spirit. And that's the reason we won't lose hope, no matter how broken our world is.

So, on one hand, in the passage from Acts, we have the story of looking forward, with the apostles as the graduates, ready to cross the threshold, to begin their work with assurance and in hope, waiting to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, in today's Gospel reading from John, we look back, and in a flashback, we hear the earthly Jesus, praying to God on behalf of his followers for their protection. The scene is his farewell meal with his disciples. He is praying in his last moments with them, before he faces the cross to complete the work that God had sent him to do.

The desire to communicate one last time what is at the heart of one's life and hope is an enduring human experience.

I left my home, and my native Japan and my family, literally on the day after I graduated from the 8th grade. On that morning, my mother led me into a quiet room, slid closed the Japanese paper door behind us and sat me down. Then she sat down facing me, and she prayed. She asked God to protect me, before I flew away to a world that was unknown to her, the world that may not always be safe and friendly; she entrusted me to God's care, to guide me and show me the way, to lead a life God had planned for me that she could not yet see.

Some of us may be surprised to hear Jesus prayed "not on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me." What is meant here by "the world" is a dangerous and hostile place that opposes God's hopes for justice and love and mercy. Jesus knew it is into such world the disciples would be sent forth.

Jesus prayed that God protect his followers in God's name, that is to say, in God's identity and character, which shape the identity of the faith community, to ensure the unity of the

faith community, which mirrors the unity of God and Jesus. Jesus prayed, that we may be one, as Jesus and God are one.

This is a prayer of Jesus not just for individual graduate, but for the graduating class, that year and for all the years that followed,

We are still carried in this prayer Jesus prayed for the graduates, those who are soon to be apostles sent forth into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are invited to live in the assurance and certainty his prayer provides, even now, in the midst of this messy crazy world. It is the time, again, to cross the threshold. Come Holy Spirit, Come.