

Acts 1: 6-14; John 17: 1-11
May 28, 2017, Olivet Church --- Charlottesville

Ascended into Heaven but Present on Earth

The prophets of the Old Testament viewed human history as a long continuum of God's working toward the goal of establishing God's kingdom on earth. In the beginning God had created the world good. But human sin corrupted God's good creation, and God was working to restore creation to what was intended from the beginning.

And so in the kingdom of God to come the prophets spoke of nature itself being transformed. In the peaceable kingdom the wolf would lie down with the lamb. There would no longer be a struggle between humans and the natural world; the child would play over the den of the adder.

The prophets also spoke of the peace and justice of the coming kingdom of God on earth. Nations would beat their swords into plowshares, and spears into running hooks according to Isaiah. And Micah gives us a vision of each person sitting under their grape arbor and fig tree, and nothing making them afraid.

The prophets were told by God that in the new age of the kingdom, human sin would be done away with and humans would be reunited with their Lord. Jeremiah speaks of God forgiving our iniquity, remembering our sin no more, putting a new heart within us, and writing God's law on our hearts.

And of course, God revealed to his prophets that the coming of the new age would include the coming of God's anointed Davidic messiah, who would rule over a universal people in justice and righteousness.

The disciples of Jesus in our text from Acts, believe that God's Messiah has come. The new age of the kingdom of God had broken into human history in the person of Jesus who had been raised from the dead. He had forgiven human sin and established the new covenant; and all the realities of the fresh, new age had been exhibited in his ministry. The blind received their sight, the lame walked, lepers were cleansed, the deaf heard, the dead were raised up, and the poor had good news preached to them.

As a result the disciples look to the risen Christ for all of the other manifestations of the kingdom of God. "Lord" they ask him, "will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" They are expressing further Old Testament beliefs, that at the end of human history, when God brought in his kingdom on earth, Israel would be exalted among the nations.

Jesus responds by chastising them, and along with them the thousands of subsequent disciples through the ages who have sought to establish a timetable for the return of Christ and the consummation of God's kingdom on earth. "It is not for you to know the time or periods that the Father has set by his own authority," he says. But in the meantime, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. Jesus

shifts the emphasis from speculation about the future, to action in and transformation of the present. God's promise to redeem and restore the creation is not a matter of when, but how.

There is an old legend which says when Jesus had ascended into heaven, the angel Gabriel asked him, "Lord what plans have you made for carrying on your ministry in the world? How will people learn of what you have done for them that they may enter new life in the kingdom you established and will consummate when you return?"

Jesus responded, "I left that to Peter, James and John, Martha and Mary. They are to tell their friends and their friends will tell other friends until the whole world has heard the good news."

Gabriel then asked, "What if Peter gets too busy with his nets, and Martha too caught up with her housework, and the friends so preoccupied that they fail to tell their friends? What is your back-up plan? What is your "Plan B"?"

Jesus answered, "I have no Plan B."

You may know that the author of the book of Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke. And you may remember that in Luke's account of the first Easter morning the three women who found the tomb empty were suddenly confronted by two men in dazzling clothes who asked them "why are you looking for the living among the dead?" And then they reminded them of Jesus' words about being crucified and after three days rising from the dead. Well, 40 days after Easter, after Jesus' ascension, the two men in white robes suddenly appear again, asking the disciples "why are you standing looking up toward heaven?" And they reminding them that Jesus would come again on the clouds, as Psalm 68 describes and Jesus himself spoke of.

But between his resurrection from the dead, and his return in glory, Jesus, as we affirm in the Apostle's Creed, "ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." Which does not mean that he made a space trip to arrive in some way off place; but rather that he passed from this earthly reality into the heavenly dimension. And in that heavenly dimension by his Spirit he is able to be present in our earth dimension anywhere and anytime; and everywhere and all the time. He is no longer bound by earthly limitations: constrained to being in one place at a time, walking at two miles an hour. To have ascended into heaven makes Jesus, through his Spirit, accessible and available anywhere on earth.

We are used to thinking of 'heaven' as a place separated from earth, a glory land "way beyond the blue;" far away in the same space-time continuum as earth. But that's not how the Bible sees it at all. Heaven is God's space, and earth is our space. But heaven is not a place far removed at one extreme of our world, but rather a further dimension of our world. And heaven and earth, though in different dimensions, interface and interconnect with each other. Heaven is all around us. It is glimpsed among us in every act of generous human love, every occasion when the words of the Lord's Prayer are fulfilled, "thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

The border between the heavenly and earthly dimension is porous. The Celts speak of "thin places" where the boundary between the earthly and heavenly, material and spiritual realms, is

more permeable. The Bible, and people of faith through the ages, speak of theophanies of God, encounters with angels, being touched by the Spirit of God, manifestations of heaven penetrating into our earthly realm. Heaven is God's space, and it intersects with our space but also transcends it. And one day, as prophets foretold, and the book of Revelation makes very clear – one day heaven and earth will be joined, heaven will transform earth completely, the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven to earth, the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. Death, war, hunger, and suffering will be no more. God will wipe away every tear and will dwell with us.

Heaven is the extra dimension, the God-dimension, of all our present reality; and Jesus, who ascended there, and is seated at the right hand of God, is present to us, present with us, sharing our joys and our sorrows, working and longing as we are for the day when his whole creation, heaven and earth together, will perfectly reflect God's love, wisdom, justice, and peace.

That is the hope that enables us, as Paul says, "to be steadfast and immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that our labor is not in vain" but is woven into the very fabric of God's everlasting kingdom, the transformation of earth by heaven, God's will being done fully here on earth as in heaven.

As the National Cathedral was being built in Washington a laborer mixing mortar was asked what he was working on. "A cathedral," he replied, understanding that his work, though small and limited, was given permanence in a glorious building to be. And so it is with us. What we do in the present through our work, our relationships, our service in the world, our sharing of our time and talents in the ministry of the church — lasts into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether. They are part of what is eternal, what has been planted among us and will come one day in all its fullness: the beauty, the justice, the peace, the joy, the restored creation and reclaimed humanity of the kingdom of God.

Jesus' ascension affirms not only the lasting value of our labor, but the true and lasting value of our being as humans. People sometimes talk as if Jesus started off just being divine, then stopped being divine and became human, then stopped being human and went back to being divine again. But the ascension rules that out. The Jesus who has gone into God's dimension is the human Jesus. He bears human flesh, and the marks of the man-made nails and spear to this day, as he lives within God's dimension.

A writer remembers as a little girl, sitting with her best friend in a pew in church, and the preacher telling the congregation how precious, valuable, and dignified they were as humans; that in fact they were each "a temple of the Holy Spirit." Therefore, they ought not ever to use their bodies in such a way as to deny their value or defile that temple of the Lord. The little girls thought this was a hilarious concept. From that day on, they began referring to one another as "Temple Number 1" and "Temple Number 2." And yet the naming, though in jest, bore its fruit as they grew up and wrestled with the messages of a culture that encouraged them to value themselves not by the indwelling of the Spirit of the Maker of Heaven and Earth, but rather by their looks, popularity, accomplishments, possessions, and the color of their skin.

I love the words of the 4th verse of the hymn, “Gather Us In” that we sing periodically in worship: “Not in some building small and confining, not in some heaven, light years away. Here in this place the new light is shining. Now is God present and now is the day.”

In the late sixties, there was a great liturgical and theological reform in the diocese of Cuernavaca, Mexico. Other Mexican cathedrals remained virtually empty while it was standing room only at Cuernavaca where sermons and rousing Mariachi band music had the people fairly shouting the songs of the mass. And there were no quiet “amens” or solemn exits at the end of the service. Instead, the Mariachi struck up the last tune with loud trumpets and strings and led the people out of the church into the courtyard singing. The vision of heavenly glory was not left behind in the church building. The vision of the reign of God made it possible to look again with hope at the beggars in the cathedral courtyard and the poverty of many who inhabited the streets of that town. The reign of heavenly glory had not yet become the rule in Cuernavaca, but it provided a vision that began to rule the hearts and minds of many who attended those services. The kingdom of God expanded from there to infect others in such a way that it began to break into the mundane, touch and transform the present reality.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,” Jesus said; “and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.”