

Coming and Going

Acts 1: 6-11

When your first book is a blockbuster, a best seller, what do you do next? That's easy, you write a sequel! You write another book with many of the same characters having further adventures. In some sense, that's what the writer of Luke's Gospel did according to the prologue of the book called *The Acts of the Apostles*. It might easily have been called *Luke's Gospel, part 2*. Neither book actually had a title to begin with. In fact, none of the biblical gospel was titled in its original form. I suppose there was no publisher to insist and no agent to be creative.

Luke and Acts was originally a single work written in two volumes. The first volume, the *Gospel According to Luke*, tells about Jesus and what he did during his earthly ministry as relayed by eyewitnesses and later compiled by the author, likely that companion of the Apostle Paul – Luke the physician.

The second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, picks up after the resurrection with Jesus appearing to the disciples during a period of “forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there.” Then he gave them a promise. “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

That's how we come to find the disciples with Jesus, at the beginning of *Acts* as he prepares to leave them. Jesus was lifted upward toward the sky in the direction of God, until he was hidden by a cloud. The cloud is a familiar biblical symbol for the presence and glory of God. Jesus going from being physically present with the disciples into an intimate presence with God – within the heart of God.

Simultaneously, two men were standing there. Here is where we need to check the parallels with the Gospel of Luke. Are these the same two men as stood at tomb on Easter morning? They wore “dazzling robes” then and just “white robes,” but I think they are the same guys – the same angels with an important question. At the tomb, their question was, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? Jesus told you all this would happen.” The question they ask here at the beginning of *Acts*, after Jesus has ascended to the cloud, is, “Why do you stand looking into heaven? He'll come back.”

The disciples expected the kingdom to come even now. They still had the same idea, however, that it was a political kingdom. Jesus did not address that issue of the kingdom. He said that only God knows what will happen, but here's what you need to do. Here's the next step and it's time to take it. The only answer Jesus gave was that you will receive power – the Spirit – to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

This is the trajectory of the book of *Acts*. Beginning in Jerusalem, the message of Jesus is shared, expanding to the territories beyond: to Judea and Samaria -- to familiar Jews and to outcast Samaritans. The culmination is where all roads lead to Rome. *Acts* ends

with Paul in Rome teaching people about Jesus. It's not the disciples who are the main characters in Acts. It is the Holy Spirit working in the lives of Peter, John, Stephen, Barnabas, and Saul of Tarsus who became Paul.

When Jesus ascended into the heart of God, the Spirit came and the church was born. This transition of the Jesus of history to Jesus held in the heart of God is marked by the presence of the Spirit in our lives. Jesus has come back to us in the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is our way of experiencing God breathing through us in the world.

Many brilliant, and not so brilliant, theologians have tried to explain God as Trinity -- as Father, Son, and Spirit. This doctrine developed as a way of expressing our faith experience of God. It is true as an expression of that experience. It is not true as an objective description of God because human beings cannot know God objectively. We can only know God subjectively, in relationship.

What Luke was describing at the beginning of *Acts* was how the earliest disciples experienced God through Jesus after Jesus' death on the cross and what they believed their mission was from that point on. After the first Easter, the disciples experienced Jesus' presence close to them for forty days. This was not a literal six weeks was the symbolic number used in the Bible to describe a rite of passage. Remember how Noah experienced forty days of rain on the ark. Israel spent forty years wandering in the wilderness toward the Promised Land. Jesus spent forty days fasting and praying in the wilderness before his temptation.

Forty days was the period of time in one's life that changed your life forever through encountering the Holy. After forty days, the disciples released Jesus into the heart of God and received the power to spread Jesus' message to the whole world. This passage from Acts is not intended to be an account of Jesus taking off into the sky, beyond the clouds into heaven. The message is not to convert the world into Judaism, Christianity, or any other religion. And the message is not the prediction of a second coming by Jesus in judgment and destruction.

The message of this passage was and is much more specific and liberating. To the disciples who followed Jesus, it was a message of vindication. Jesus who had died so shamefully on the cross, who was a big loser in the society of that day, has now been lifted into God. This depiction of Jesus ascending until being hidden by a cloud means that Jesus has been raised up. His life and death have been justified and he is held eternally in the heart of God.

The message for us is that you and I and all creation live in God. The author of Acts placed this truth on the lips of the Apostle Paul when he spoke to the philosophers of ancient Athens, that each of us is held in love. Each of us lives in the depths of holiness and divinity in the heart of God "in whom we live, and move, and have our being." This is the natural state of our existence. But until Jesus, most people were out of touch with that truth.

Even today, so many people live unaware of the hope that we are enfolded and embrace at the heart of God by Jesus so that we can be awake to the truth, more fully aware of the blessedness of existence. The message of Acts was that Jesus, who had been taken from those disciples was coming back in the Spirit. This Spirit would continue to teach and empower them to tell and show others the wisdom and love of Jesus. In other words, they were to be Jesus' witnesses from Jerusalem, the heart of the old faith of just a few chosen people, to the ends of the earth. The heart of this message was and is that God chooses all people and that all are held in the heart of God through Jesus.

One of the prevalent images in the Bible is the movement from captivity to liberty, from exile to homecoming, and from an attitude of scarcity to an attitude of abundance. The good news of Jesus is that the underlying movement of the universe is from despair to hope. We have the message to call our world out of darkness into light. How many people, including us, live out of touch with unconditional love as the fundamental truth of life. Certainly, much of our world and our society seem to flow in the opposite direction. The promise of our faith is that the power for us to live against the flow of our world is available to us. In fact, this power has already been given. We are already set free from exile, set free from darkness, and set free from loneliness and despair.

Following Jesus is *a personal change of heart and a reorientation of our lives*. In other words, the purpose of our following Jesus is to be changed so that our lives reflect the perspectives and values Jesus taught and lived. As a church, this means that our reason for existence is to help people have a *change of heart* and a *reorientation of their life*. We exist to help each other grow more into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Spirit. We are here to reach out, invite, and welcome all who want to experience hope and love through the Spirit. Our mission, as a result of our being changed inwardly, is to change the world according to God's vision of *Shalom*: justice, peace, mercy, and love.

I like that vision for why I am a Christian and why we are church. It excites me and motivates me to be the best Christian and the best pastor I can be. At the same time, I realize that living in the vision of *Shalom* is like swimming upstream. There is so much pressure not to change the *status quo* that most of us lose the sense of possibility for our lives and our world. It seems just too impractical and the forces aligned against fundamental change are too powerful for us to resist. Yet, that is what it means to follow Jesus in this world today. He went to the cross to show us how committed he was to God's vision. He and countless other heroes of faith, many of whom laid down their lives for that vision, have shown us the cost of faith. They stand before us as examples of how much commitment is required. They surround us like a cloud of witnesses, cheering us on —“You can do it! Keep swimming!” This community of faith surrounds each of us to encourage us —“You can do it! Keep swimming! Keep living!” We can do it together in the name of Jesus, by the grace of God, and through power of the Spirit.