

FIRST LESSON: Deuteronomy 30: 11-14  
SECOND LESSON: Acts 1:6-14  
May 21, 2023

### ***“Doing the Next Right Thing”***

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A family had been at a big Christian revival event. There were activities for all ages with music and food and games and lots and lots of talk about the end times. The day after they got home, they realized that they needed to reset the message on the phone, because they had left a specific message that they would be away. Being old school, this was a land line. They thought it would be cute if the five-year-old left the message. She was supposed to say, “Mommy and Daddy are out right now but they will get back to you as soon as they return.” Instead, she said, “Mommy and Daddy are out right now but they will get back to you as soon as Jesus returns.”

In between times are hard for us. Jesus has left earth, and we have no idea when he is going to return. Even on a mundane level we’re not good with this. Imagine you’re on a sports team. There’s a big game coming up . . . in a week. You have to wait for a whole week! You just got a new job. You start . . . in a month. *What do you do?* You’re moving, **but not till next year**. There are big changes happening. . . eventually. Like Tom Petty wrote: “The waiting is the hardest part. Every day you see one more card. You take it on faith, you take it to the heart. The waiting is the hardest part.”

The disciples were gathered around the risen Jesus. They asked the most logical of questions, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” This question was perfectly reasonable because according to messianic prophecies the Messiah was expected to purify Israel and restore it to a position of power and prestige. The redemption of Israel was central.

Jesus appears to be answering their question when he said, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” I say he “appears” to be answering their question because it is clear that what Jesus was talking about was not limited to Israel at all. The kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of God just might not be the same thing. The kingdom of God seems to be a bit larger. Nationalistic messianic ideas were too limited in scope. The disciples were thinking about the restoration of Israel’s political power on the world stage. Jesus was speaking of a different kind of power, and a far broader audience.

There is a very human tendency to divide the world up into “us” and “them.” This was especially true with Israel which understood itself to be the

unique and chosen people of God. To be called to be witnesses in Jerusalem made sense. Judea, absolutely. Samaria, now you're pushing it Jesus. To the ends of the earth? Have you lost your mind? It's not that the goal of reaching all nations is not found in scripture. It is. God promised to bless all families of the earth through Abraham. Isaiah promises that God's servant will bring justice to the nations and be a light for the nations. (Isaiah 42: 1, 6) God's holy mountain will be a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isaiah 56: 7) But the Israel first and Israel only voices were much louder. Gentiles were inferior. Gentiles were excluded. And now Jesus says they will be empowered to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, which kind of includes. . . Gentiles!

And then in one quick sentence we are told that Jesus ascended into heaven. He was "taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." That's it. No long description. No drama. No grand act of levitating into the sky. No thunderclaps, no angelic hosts, nothing. He was lifted up and disappeared behind a cloud. And since we know that heaven is not literally "up" even though they didn't, we can assume that the reason God used this method was because it suited the audience. Jesus could have "ascended" to heaven in many ways, but God used the conceptual framework they would have understood. He was there, and then he was gone. And he was not coming back for a long time. And as they gazed into the sky two men dressed in white stood beside them, saying "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

The ascension of Jesus closes a chapter. Jesus will no longer appear in bodily form and talk to his disciples. Now they must wait for the Spirit. And of course, they had no idea what that involved. They returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which was a Sabbath's day walk from the city. That is a very specific distance. The law forbid working on the Sabbath, but since some walking was always necessary the rabbis came up with a standard for people to follow. They decided that the limit was about 3000 feet, or slightly more than half a mile. That is how far the disciples walked. Once they arrived back they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. It may have even been the same room where they shared the last supper. We don't know how long it was rented for. But everyone minus Judas was present, including the women, Mary the mother of Jesus and Jesus' brothers. They joined together in prayer, and they waited on God.

The two men in white seemed to be giving urgent instructions to the disciples. But once they got back to Jerusalem the only thing they could do was wait! How many people here like waiting? Most of us hate waiting! Waiting in line, waiting in traffic, waiting to leave on a trip . . . we consider waiting to be lost time. We want to be constructive. We want to be doing something. But sometimes we have to let things settle before it is time to act. The Holy Spirit could have come immediately, but God chose Pentecost, probably for its symbolic importance, and therefore they had to wait. But waiting can be active or passive. This group waited by praying. They were expectant. They were ready. They were seeking God. They were prepared to respond.

Most of life is not a mountaintop. Most of life is not the grand climax of something long in coming. Most of life involves just doing the next right thing

day after day. Life is spent in the waiting periods between great events and turning points. We read the bible and it sounds incredibly exciting. They just go from one miracle or conflict to the next! There's adventure and drama! There is no gospel record of Peter waking up with a head cold, or James cooking a meal. The gospels don't once tell us how Jesus did his laundry. We do know that he could cook fish on an open fire. Of real daily life, however, we know nothing, and yet it's there.

I always want to know the whole plan, the overarching purpose of God, the end goal we are aiming for, and you know what, God never tells me that! Just as Jesus said to the disciples, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority," we are rarely given the whole vision. God knows we would get overwhelmed and lost in the process. Instead, we are to take things one step at a time. I know that it will be a surprise to you all but when God called me to the ministry the second time around when I actually did it, the one thing I firmly believed I could NOT DO, was preach. I could not imagine standing in front of people leading worship. The prospect terrified me. So I ignored it, and just took the next step. I went to my Session and the Presbytery, I came under care of the Committee on Preparation, I went back to school to do Greek and take a preaching class. I did everything as it came one day at a time without worrying about the end result. And now I can't imagine it being any other way.

The elders of this church and I are engaging in a time of thoughtful prayer and listening to God about our future in Penn Wynne and we invite you to join us. We want to know God's purposes. We're here for a reason. And over the years of discernment one thing has become clear. **Penn Wynne is a healing community**. It is a place of welcome and unconditional acceptance. It is the "church of wing it" where we don't take ourselves too seriously and know that we will all make mistakes. But how we reach those in most need of this love has so far eluded us. We are in our own "upper room," asking for the Spirit to direct us. We don't actually need to know the whole picture. God is in control of that. We just need to know the next right thing and do it. Amen.

Deuteronomy 30: 11-14

<sup>11</sup> Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. <sup>12</sup> It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" <sup>13</sup> Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" <sup>14</sup> No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

Acts 1:6-14

<sup>6</sup> Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

<sup>7</sup> He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit

comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

<sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

<sup>12</sup> Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. <sup>13</sup> When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. <sup>14</sup> They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.