

“Looking Forward”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 13, 2018

Ascension Sunday / Mother’s Day / Sacrament of Holy Baptism

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 1:6-16

John 17:1-10

What better occasion than the celebration of a child’s baptism to look forward: to dream about all that is to come in life. Today, we publicly affirm God’s blessings of creation, birth and family; and we remember the promises made at our own baptisms – that each of us is known, chosen, adopted and loved by God before life even begins.

These are some of the thoughts and memories that naturally fit on Mother’s Day; when we recall with wonder and thanksgiving our birth and our family; and all the ways that we have been shaped, taught and cared for by our own mothers and – in many cases – other nurturers and caregivers that have helped to mold and support us. Just as baptism joins us with a larger, more mystical divine family; our own lives are defined by those relationships of trust and love that have helped us to better understand the meaning of life.

In this passage from John’s Gospel, as Jesus prays to his Heavenly Father on behalf of his friends and fellow children of God, we are given a rare, straight forward definition of what life from God – eternal life – really means: that it is in “knowing” and being in relationship with God and Christ; and that it’s not just a future dream or destination, but available in its entirety now. As he is preparing to leave his disciples and friends, Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven and prays that they might be cared for in his absence; and that they might know and experience God in the same way that he has been visibly and personally known to them. What deeper desire exists than to know and be known, to love and be truly loved? According to John’s Gospel, this is the true meaning of life.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that this passage from John is paired this Sunday with our first reading from Acts – the story of Jesus’ final

ascension to heaven. This time, our risen Lord is speaking directly with his disciples – who are struggling to understand what is going to happen in this next stage of life, when they will be physically separated from their teacher and Lord. What now, they want to know; and when will the Kingdom of Israel be restored?

In other words, they wanted to know the plan, the schedule, the timetable – when would God bring about all that had been promised and expected? These are exactly the kind of things we imagine on the occasion of baptism – when will the first time sleeping through the night come, or the first steps, or the first words? When and where will schooling begin and continue? What will be his or her interests, abilities and dreams? Which personality traits and values will be carried through from mother, father, siblings and other members of the family?

The disciples of Jesus were uncertain about their future; looking for something certain to ground them, Jesus instead responds, saying: “it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set.” Instead of a definite plan, Jesus offers them a different kind of promise and purpose, saying: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.” (v. 7-8)

And just as Jesus reminds them of who they are and of their journey ahead, Jesus begins to ascend before the disciples’ eyes. Clouds carry him up to sit at the right hand of God. And on the earth below, his friends are left standing in awe of what they were experiencing. It must have been a beautiful, hypnotizing sight – like a plane taking off with a loved one or a balloon that gets away and keeps floating up and away; the disciples probably couldn’t do anything but stare and wait until Jesus was like a speck too tiny to see.¹

The disciples are awakened from their stupor by the sudden appearance of two men in white robes – certainly a divine sign – who

¹ Juan Carlos Huertas, “Why Are You Looking Up?” from *Day1.org*

ask what they're doing staring up at heaven. The implication, of course, is that Jesus has just given them a job to do, to go and be witnesses; a job that isn't going to get done standing still. Jesus will come again – that's a promise that we still believe – but as to the times or periods, those are not for us to know.

And so, the eyes of Christ's disciples are not meant to be turned backwards, longing for the return of what has already been; or heavenward, desiring to know what we are not meant to know; but instead forward, seeking to be God's witnesses to those who stand before us right now and in the moments, days and years to come.

Take note what Acts tells us that the eleven remaining disciples – and the women – did next; they went home, back to where they were staying, and “were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” (v. 14) We can imagine these prayers would not have merely consisted of mindless speculation about the time and place of Jesus's return; instead, they surely set their hearts and minds to the task of praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit, so they could be empowered to be Jesus' witnesses in the world.²

As we will be read next Sunday in the Pentecost story, their prayers are answered as the Holy Spirit does come; and the disciples are empowered through the birth of the church, Christ's body recreated on earth. It is into this same church that we are baptized and where promises are made to nurture, love and support one another. This church takes many different forms in different places locally and globally, but our adoption is into the same family of God; the bonds of unity sealed by the same Spirit.

Friends, it is when we keep our eyes looking forward that we can fulfill our Christ-given purpose as witnesses of God's good news and, specifically for today, the vows we make to those who are baptized into the family of God. Whether as infants, children, youth or adults, we

² John Holbert, “A Long Look at Heaven”

have a job to do as congregation members and adopted brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. In this role, we are called to pray and work for the welfare of those that will be taught, nurtured, cared for, mentored and celebrated in our midst. We are the ones to teach them to love the mystery of God and the magnificence of God's creation; to affirm the power of prayer, the majesty of song, the wisdom of scripture, the wonder for worship, the desire for selfless service and the joy of sharing in fellowship.

As many of you will surely attest, your love for God was revealed and made known to you by someone else who also loved and served God; family or church family members whose witness to you inspired your own knowledge and love of God – and therefore your understanding of the true meaning of life – eternal life in the here and now. I encourage you, therefore, to recall your own baptism – with thanks – and to bear witness to the promises made this day. AMEN.