

“Blessed to Be a Blessing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 2, 2021

5th Sunday of Easter

Psalm 113

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 24:50-53, Acts 1:1-5

One of the familiar stories from my home church in Louisville, KY was about a time in the early 1970's when they called a new minister from Michigan named Morgan Roberts: a gifted and confident young orator who would one day be named one of the top 20 preachers in the United States. Upon being told by elders that this vibrant congregation would be closed the Sunday after the Kentucky Derby – because that day was traditionally reserved for attending or emulating the Governor's Brunch consisting of Hot Browns, cheese grits and Bloody Marys; and to recover from the previous day's pageantry – Dr. Roberts defiantly responded that “no,” things would be different now that he had come. Almost no-one was surprised that, when the day arrived, the usually full pews stood mostly empty; and never again during his tenure there were the doors of the church opened on the first Sunday in May.

Moving several hundred miles to the south, from Michigan to Kentucky, he discovered a whole new world. But, as I would learn from him later – when, unknowingly at the time, I met as a seminary intern in Pittsburgh this man who had also been my minister when I was a toddler – he came to appreciate the unique Derby traditions; and, more importantly, how God intervened in his life and guided him to that city and church for reasons beyond his understanding at the time. I have a signed copy of his book of collected sermons entitled, “Are There Horses in Heaven?”; one of my favorites, named for a question asked by a young girl during children's time at that church in Louisville; likely when I was sitting with them on those same chancel steps.

The Acts of the Apostles begins where the Gospel of Luke left off: with the growing recognition that God is creating new possibilities and bringing long-promised things to pass. The followers of Jesus are instructed that, after he departs, they will receive power through the arrival of the Holy Spirit. In the second chapter, this Spirit descends upon them like a rushing wind and with Pentecostal fire. God intrudes in the world and establishes a new community of worship,

prayer, and sharing called the church. They find themselves in a truly new place; in a world where God has, does and will continue to disrupt and intervene.

At one point in the Book of Acts – when the apostles are establishing a church in the city of Ephesus – a complainant accuses them of *turning the world upside down*. (Acts 17:6) What these followers are teaching about Jesus asks people to embrace new social, political, economic and religious values; often putting both the proclaimers and audience at odds with the established social order. That “social order – consisting of the various cultural pockets that together make up the Roman Empire – doesn’t like being turned upside down.”¹

Does God still disrupt lives and social orders today? For most of human history, people spoke of God, or the gods of whatever their local religious practice, as intimately engaged with and influencing both the ordinary and extraordinary happenings of life. Belief in God’s presence and activity played a large role in people’s everyday existence; whether the fertility of the land or the family; in matters across the whole range of health and prosperity.

But these types of beliefs create problems for many of us today. We react warily to claims of divine action as the cause for lottery ticket windfalls or game-winning touchdowns. More seriously, discoveries in science have made certain claims about God’s activity – God’s role in influencing the events of our lives – more dubious or in need of greater nuance. We do not naively think of God as a cosmic puppeteer who arranges every detail of human existence; most Christians today find it problematic to explain natural disasters, random violence, climate change, and virus pandemics simply as being God’s will.

In the Gospels, and the Book of Acts, God is described as intruding in the world in many powerful and, for many of us, unbelievable ways: like healing illness and calming storms. Even the mighty Roman Empire is powerless to thwart the preaching of God’s word. We ask ourselves whether these things really happened and, if so, whether they occurred in the way described in scripture. Has God – and the way God acts in the world – somehow changed since then? Or, instead, maybe the question should be, “have our imaginations and expectations of God changed; have they become too confined?”²

¹ Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*

² Skinner, p. xiv

The Book of Acts, like the gospel written by the same author, is dedicated in the opening verses to Theophilus, a name that means “dear to God” or “lover of God.” This may have been a patron or sponsor of the writer, or it could instead be a general descriptor for his audience. Its opening verses foreshadow the ascension, the final departure of Jesus, as well as the coming the Holy Spirit: what he described, near the close of his Gospel, as *power from on high*. (Luke 24:49)³

In the concluding verses of Luke – which we read today – Jesus blesses his disciples. Even at the moment of his departure from them, the Son of God offers them a gift, a purpose. In time, they will be instructed what they are to do. Though Christ will not be with them, they will not be left alone; the divine will intervene. They need not accept the violent social order of their day; instead, God will disrupt the accepted way of being in community.

The Book of Acts asserts God’s activity in the growth, movement, struggles, and changes experienced by the early church. It was a normal thing in the ancient world to believe that divine forces or invisible beings would guide or influence history. But, what makes Acts so distinctive is its insistence that the God made known in the story of Israel, and in the person of Jesus Christ, is the One who does so. Acts looks back at the earliest years of the Christian church – to all of its trials and triumphs – and sees in them a demonstration of God’s active, persistent commitment to bring salvation and make it known to the world.

The intrusion of the Holy Spirit – as the Book of Acts will reveal; and as we will discover in our readings over the next twelve weeks – arrives when, how and to whom it chooses; the same Spirit comes to Jews and Gentiles, either before or after baptism, sometimes accompanied by ecstatic language – like speaking in tongues – sometimes not. God shows no favoritism; in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter will speak of the young seeing visions and the old dreaming dreams, of sons and daughters offering prophecy, about all flesh receiving the Spirit and everyone who calls of the name of the Lord being saved.

The direct affect of the Spirit’s descending upon all these people is that they give witness to God and about Jesus. The Spirit’s power to encourage testimony is not restricted to any one language or geographical space; it will compel all the apostles – male and female, young and old – to testify about what Jesus said and did. Time and again, God is described as intruding in the course of human history –

³ Gilberto Ruiz from *WorkingPreacher.com*

in opposition to the social order of the day and in the lives of called and chosen people of God – and offering a different, purposeful and compassionate way.

As the church, we are challenged to discern where God might be intruding in the world today. While our enlightened minds may not allow us to believe God would cause the suffering of a global pandemic, is our imagination expansive enough to see what we can learn through our response to it? While God still sometimes calls us to stand up against the social order, we know it is unhelpful to blindly oppose every cultural change. Being a faithful member of Christ's body today requires us to use both our hearts and our minds; to be willing to allow our imaginations to expand while constantly discerning how God is at work, and how God is calling us to join into that work, in this particular time and place; in our distinct context and culture.

We believe that, just as Christ blessed his disciples before commissioning them to be apostles called to share the message of good news, we are likewise blessed in order to bless others. Old and young, male and female, lifelong believer or dubious skeptic; the Holy Spirit – the power from on high – descends upon us with guidance, wisdom, and strength.

At times, it may appear like the church, as an human institution, is conflicted or divided, outdated or irrelevant, stuck in the past or resistant to change. But, if we open our eyes and ears, if we use our hearts and minds, we may just discern that God still has a purpose for followers of Jesus today. In a world that is longing for justice, looking for purpose, and seeking deeper relationships, God is intruding with a message of hope and peace and love. Through the practices and sacraments of the church – as with the sharing of fellowship around Christ's Table – God is disrupting a social order, the cultural pockets which make up the world we inhabit today, with a whole new way of being.

Today, believing in God, and in God's activity in the world, is no easy thing. Some of the time, the blessings we receive – amid all the trials and tribulations we experience – do not seem like blessings at all. So tempting it is, then, to view our purpose not as being about the blessing of others but, instead, about looking out or getting more for ourselves. Friends, let us together be about the vital, nuanced process of discerning how God is intruding, disrupting, and even turning things upside down. God has always heard the cries of God's people; God has been made known to us through the flesh and blood, the words and acts of Jesus; and God is not done with us yet. Amen.