

May 8, 2016
Acts 1:9-11
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“Dream, Plan, Action!”

According to the lectionary calendar, today is the last Sunday of the Easter season, or Ascension Sunday. We don't hear much about this event. The life of Jesus on earth -- from the over-the-top announcement of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to the pre- and post-Easter drama--is spelled out in great detail in the gospels. And so it is surprising that the events between the resurrection and Pentecost are given such sparse attention. We only know that Jesus appeared to the disciples on several occasions to share a meal, but the story ends abruptly when Jesus, quietly and without fanfare, ascends into heaven.

Luke shares the story both in Luke and Acts. Perhaps Luke gave it double attention because he wanted to tidy up the story a bit. 1) All that the Law and Prophets said about the Messiah has been fulfilled. 2) The ascension gave closure to Jesus' life on earth. 3) The ascension of Jesus adds one more layer of confirmation that God's divine plot went according to plan. The crucifixion of Jesus was no tragic accident.

Jesus had a specific dream. The purpose of his coming was to create the kingdom of God on earth. Now Jesus was passing on this task to the disciples. He had spent a lot of time with the disciples teaching them what they needed to know to accomplish this assignment, shown specifically in John 15-17.

First, he warned them how the message of the kingdom would be received. *“They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God.³ And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me”* (John 16:1-2).

Second, he explained why he must go away. *“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵ But now I am going to him who sent me; [and] because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you”* (John 16:1, 5-7).

Third, Jesus promised to meet their needs. *“If you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete”* (John 16:24).

Jesus finishes his discourse with a prayer to the Father. He prayed, *“⁶ I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them; they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me”* John 17:6-8).

Having prepared them for their mission prior to his death and resurrection, we don't see Jesus feverishly trying to finish up his teaching before the Ascension so they can take over. Things were in place. It was a time for affirmation. *“The Law of Moses and the Prophets were fulfilled, and you are witnesses of these things,”* he told them. *“You will be given boldness and confidence to share what you have seen, and I will always be with you.”*

After giving his disciples a vision and training, Jesus laid it all out for them. Instead of Jesus being bodily present with them, they will become his body. Instead of Jesus' words to guide them, they will speak his word for him. Instead of his physical presence, they will have his Spirit and be his presence in the world. They were to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to empower them for the work ahead (Acts 1:4-5). The plan was to take the story of Jesus and the vision of the kingdom from a local to a global scale. And then, Luke says, *“as he blessed them, he was lifted up to heaven.”*

The disciples' response? Acts says, "They were of one accord, and they devoted themselves to prayer." I like The Message's addition, "They agreed they were all in this for good, completely together in prayer, women included." Think about the diverse personalities in that group, yet they were of one accord. Together they shared a spirit of anticipation and great joy. What a great way to transition from Ascension to Pentecost!

There is a humorous little story that came out of Hollywood many years ago. A famous and handsome movie star checked into a hospital. As might be expected, every nurse on the unit was attentive to his needs. One particular nurse was at his side nearly every time he moved. When he finally indicated that he would like to be alone for a while she said, "Now if you want anything at all you only need to pull this cord." The movie star gave his irresistible smile and said, "Thank you, my dear, but what is the cord attached to?" She smiled and answered, "Me."

There was a cord that attached the disciples to Jesus as well! It was the promise, "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

When the wife of Albert Einstein was asked if she understood her husband's theory of relativity, she replied, "No, but I know my husband and that's enough." The disciples knew they could trust God because they knew Jesus. That was enough.

In the Ascension story of Acts, we find the disciples, having seen Jesus disappear into the clouds, stood staring into heaven. Two angels appeared in white robes. "You Galileans," they said, "why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? The very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly -- and mysteriously -- as he left."

In other words the angels asked, "What are you looking for?"

As we join in the assignment to create the kingdom of God on earth, that's a good question to ask. What are the heart needs people seek to answer? Studies have been done that tell us people are looking for three things.

- 1. People are looking for meaning, for purpose in life. Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, sold over 32 million copies. This spring, Journalist Jane Pauley was recently a keynote speaker in South Bend at a Real Services Age of Excellence luncheon. Jane shared a story of a volunteer who, having been given an award, was asked to say a few words. The volunteer faltered for a moment, then thanked all the people she was privileged to serve, because they gave her a purpose for life. This volunteer, as well as many of you who serve others, are helping bring about the kingdom of God.**
- 2. People are looking for relationships. The most powerful examples are the phone calls and voice messages that came from the Twin Towers in New York or the doomed airplane in Pennsylvania on Sept 11. You can sum up the messages in one phrase: "I just want to tell you that I love you."**
- 3. People are looking for power for living. They want the strength to get through the day, confidence for the journey, courage to face life's uncertainties. I hear Christians say often, "I don't know how people in my situation make it without faith or a church family."**

How does Jesus' message resonate with what people are looking for? The truth is, what people need is met in Christ and in the people who help bring about the kingdom of God. In response to these three needs,

***Jesus offers a purpose worth dying for and a vision worth living for.
The church offers loving relationships that strengthen faith.
The source of power is found in the Spirit of Christ.***

A sermon I read was titled FANAFl, which stands for "find a need and fill it." As Creekside examines how we can expand hospitality beyond this building, that sounds like a good mantra. Where are the needs? Pay attention this week to conversations and facial expressions or body language that reflects a need for relationships, purpose or power for living life. As a member of Christ's kingdom, consider what you are called to do. If we open our eyes, we can see the needs

around us. May God help us FANAFl -- find a need and fill it -- in order to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. Amen.

SOURCES

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