

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
“Looking Up into Heaven”
Acts 1.1-14
June 5, 2011
Pastor John Guthrie

I'll bet many of you have seen “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.” Jones, played by Harrison Ford, is on a search for the Holy Grail with his father, played by Sean Connery. In one scene, Jones is contending with German soldiers on the top of a tank which goes over a cliff. His father and two friends believe he is dead. His dad is obviously distraught and regrets out loud not spending enough time with him. The other two friends are also visibly distressed. In the meantime, the invincible Jones, who has obviously leaped off the tank at the last minute, manages to crawl up the side of the cliff and walk up behind them. He sees his friends and father looking over the edge of the cliff. He is obviously stressed and bedraggled, but curious to see what they're looking at. So he stands behind them and looks over the cliff as well, until they finally recognize his presence and rejoice that he is still with them.

I was reminded of that scene by today's reading from Acts. Jesus is taken up into heaven, leaving the disciples behind, looking up after him. All of a sudden two men dressed in white robes appear and ask, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

The book we know as the Acts of the Apostles is, of course, the second in a two-volume set which has been attributed from the very early days of the church to Luke, traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. At the end of the first volume, the Gospel of Luke, Jesus appears to his disciples and others after he is raised from death. Jesus reminds the eleven remaining disciples that everything that happened to him, his arrest, trial, torture, death, and resurrection, were all predicted in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. Then Jesus tells them that they are witnesses of all these events, and furthermore that they are to go and preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name, to all nations. But they are to remain in the city of Jerusalem until they have been clothed with power from on high. There follows the account of Jesus ascending into heaven, here at the end of the Gospel of Luke.

The event is described again at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, the second volume, as we have just read. According to Luke, Jesus spends forty days with the eleven, continuing his teaching, before he ascends into the sky. He also informs them that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit very soon.

The disciples come to him wanting to know if he is now going to restore the nation of Israel to its former greatness. Jesus replies, “It is not for you to know the time that the Father has set for that restoration. But listen: you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. Then you will be witnesses to me in Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.”

There immediately follows Luke's second account of Jesus ascending into heaven, with the eleven gaping in astonishment. That's when the two men in white robes appear, asking why they are standing there and looking into the sky. The men in white tell them that this same Jesus will return some day, in the same way that he has left.

In today's context it is impossible to read that statement, “It is not for you to know the time that

the Father has set," without being reminded once again of the brilliant failure of radio evangelist Harold Camping two weeks ago. That's the guy who predicted Jesus would return on May 21. Since that time he has claimed that Jesus really did return, but only in a spiritual way. Right.

We noted three weeks ago that Jesus has previously told his disciples that no person can know about that day or hour, yet various persons keep working at it. The gospels do impress on us that we are to be ready, to be prepared for that day, because it will come like a thief in the night, we are told.

In all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus tells his followers as they pass through the amazing temple complex only a few days before his crucifixion, that there will come a day when not a single stone there will be left resting on another. The disciples immediately take that comment to refer to the coming apocalypse that has been foretold by their prophets for generations. And they want to know when it will happen. In all three gospels Jesus tells them what the signs of the approaching day are, but he also tells them that no one can know the day or the hour.

Nevertheless, the gospels also relate rather compellingly that being ready for that day means being about the work that Jesus has given us to do in his absence. Part of that work, according to the gospels, is caring for those among us who are helpless, poor, forgotten, neglected, and vulnerable. But another part of that work, according to the gospels and very much according to Luke, is to be witnesses to Christ both nearby and even to the ends of the earth.

They are told, however, that they need to wait to be clothed with power from on high, to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Then, and only then, are they to go and be witnesses. In the meantime, they return home from the Mount of Olivet, and they pray.

We are not told about the content of their prayers. I can imagine that they are praying most fervently for this baptism of the Holy Spirit, but they can hardly know what form that baptism will take. They may remember that Jesus' cousin John the Baptist had preached to the crowds that he, John, could baptize them with water, but there was one coming, one much greater than he, who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit, and with fire. If I were praying with them in that upstairs room, I would certainly have been wondering what that meant.

I suspect they were also praying that they could be faithful to the mission that Jesus had given them, to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. I suspect they were praying for strength and courage to carry out that mission. Can you imagine how frightening that must have been? Before they had Jesus with them, to lead and guide, to provide direction and vision. It was so easy, so natural for him. And now they were expected to carry on that work, to continue preaching the Kingdom of Heaven. I would have been praying about that.

And if I had been among their group, I would have been praying about something else, as well. Jesus said: to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. All of the eleven remaining disciples were good Jews. So to be a witness in Jerusalem: fine. In Judea: fine.

But wait a minute: in Samaria? The homeland of the detested Samaritans, the ancient antagonists of my people? Those half-breeds who had distorted the Law of Moses, who rejected the writings of the prophets, who worshiped in a false temple, who had opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the true temple after the Babylonian exile?

And now they are to go preach the good news of Jesus the Messiah to these people? And even beyond, to the Gentile world, much of which has never even heard of the God of Jacob, much less of Jesus of Nazareth. How do we preach the good news to a strange and foreign people? I would have been praying about that. What in the world is the LORD up to?

Probably the same thing that the LORD is up to today, here in Cedar City, Utah, where you and I are the eleven disciples and the others, including women, who gathered with them to pray and to wait. Waiting is, of course, very difficult for most of us 21st century folks. We are used to instant messages, instant texts, instant email. We hate to wait. But sometimes, we are commanded to wait so that God can prepare us for the mission we have to do.

And furthermore, we are called to pray. I encourage you in the strongest way, to include our church, its people, its ministries, its mission, and most especially its faithfulness, in your prayers. And I encourage you to do that daily.

What does it look like for Holy Spirit to come upon the church of today, and in particular the Community Presbyterian Church of Cedar City? Our charismatic and Pentecostal sisters and brothers are much more familiar with that kind of baptism. But if we are also a legitimate expression of the body of Christ, then the Holy Spirit must come upon us, baptize us, as well. The Book of Acts records several instances in which the Spirit falls on groups of new believers. So it must be true that that has happened continuously throughout the history of Christ's church.

It is very good for us to pray continuously for that baptism of the Spirit, as well. That God will move us and direct us by the power of that same Spirit, even if the place where we are moved and directed is not comfortable. You can already see that the eleven disciples and the others with them are going to be going to some uncomfortable places.

On this last Sunday of the Easter season, we remember that we are not left abandoned, but that we follow a risen and ascended Lord, who continues to this day to direct and guide us with and through that same Holy Spirit. We are not to stand looking up into heaven. We are to be waiting, when told to do so. We are to be praying, without ceasing. We are to be looking for the continuous and powerful baptism of the Holy Spirit. And we are to be witnesses to Jesus the Messiah, in Cedar City, in Utah, in the US, and even to the ends of the earth.