

May 8, 2005/Ascension of Christ/David L. Edwards

## Poised for the Spirit

### Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

*Father of orphans and protector of widows  
is God in his holy habitation.*

*God gives the desolate a home to live in;  
God leads out the prisoners to prosperity,  
but the rebellious live in a parched land.*

### Acts 1:1-14

*They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"*

Two images stand out in our readings from Psalm 68 and Acts 1. They are images that can clarify and deepen for us something very important about the life of faith. To be people of faith, living in Christ's spirit and teachings, seeking to live out of our relationship with God, means that we are to live fully in THIS world, not some other world. We are to be concerned and involved with matters of human and creational life in response to Christ's call to discipleship.

That may sound so simple and obvious! But I don't think it is simple or obvious. Christian faith can be a confused and confusing business. Through the centuries, there have been two basic kinds of Christians and Christian viewpoints—those who see their faith as placing them responsibly and joyfully in the world as the object of their concern and love, and those who see faith as directing them to another world, another life beyond this one. In the first view, salvation is a matter of God's love transforming our own lives and the life of the world. In the second view, salvation has to do with going to heaven, and the only purpose of this life is as a kind of proving ground. The first view is the one that is truly biblical.

In Psalm 68 we find the image of God who "rides upon the clouds." God is the ultimate and mysterious Power of life, who transcends the world as its Creator. At the same time, God is the "Father of orphans and protector of widows...in his holy habitation." The transcendent God who is beyond all our thoughts and grasp is also the God who is intensely concerned with those who are in need. "Widows and orphans" is a biblical phrase meaning all who are in need, whose lives are threatened by human injustice or wounded by life experiences—the poor, the powerless, the suffering. This is the God who appeared to Moses on the mountain in a mysteriously burning bush and said "I have heard the cries of my people in Egypt and have come down to save them." It is the same God who appeared to Isaiah in a vision of God's utter majesty and mystery, and yet who called the prophet to speak on behalf of justice and peace in a society that had become unjust and unpeaceful (Isa. 6).

This image of God as the ultimate and mysterious Power of Life and at the same time the One who seeks the well being of people and the whole creation reveals the fundamental biblical understanding of God. So the life of faith includes awe, praise, and thanksgiving, AND a devotion to this life so that it reflects God's own compassion, justice, mercy, and peace.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles gives us a similar picture. The Acts is Luke's second volume. It is a continuation of his Gospel story, telling of the life and mission of the apostolic church in the generation after Jesus' death and resurrection. I read more than the lectionary portion this morning to give us a feel for this transition of Luke's from his gospel to his story of the early church. In a way, this part of the story is closer to US, to our situation. We are Christ's community after his resurrection. How are we to live as Christ's community in the time after his earthly life? What is to be the nature and direction of our life and ministry?

The disciples ask the risen Christ, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They have known the presence of the risen Christ for some days. Now he is about to be taken from them and they will stay in the world. They want to know if this kingdom he has taught about and

pointed them toward is finally going to happen in and for Israel. Jesus first of all says that this is none of their business! Jesus consistently taught that we are not to concern ourselves with the ultimate outcome of things. When and how God finally brings about the kingdom, the transformation of life, is not within our concern or grasp as human beings.

So Jesus tells the disciples, first of all, that this kind of knowledge is not for them to know or be concerned with. Then he goes on to say that they “will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon” them. They will be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus’ community is not in the business of predicting the “times and seasons” of God’s ultimate purposes. Ours is to be receptive to the power of God’s spirit that makes us witnesses to Christ starting from our own communities. Jesus expands God’s purposes from one nation and one people to include all nations and all peoples, the whole earth. God’s kingdom embraces the whole creation and its renewal, not just one group, one religion, or one nation. This exposes the “God bless our nation” rhetoric for what it is—a tribal view of God who is assumed to be on the side of one political, religious, or national group in a war against others. Here again is the “God who rides on the clouds,” whose “holy habitation” is beyond temple, church, and any structure or boundary made by human beings.

God empowers us to be witnesses in this world, in our communities, our places and circumstances. The word “witness” comes from the Greek word from which we get “martyr” (*marturios*). It means one who gives her life to God’s purposes, as St. Francis put it, an instrument of God’s peace, love, and compassion. To be Christ’s witnesses means to embody his spirit and teachings, the kind of life God created us to live on this earth.

Then suddenly Jesus is “lifted up” and removed from them by a cloud. There are no detailed descriptions. Luke isn’t interested in describing either heaven or how you get there. This keeps within the theme of such things being in the realm of mystery and beyond our understanding or concern.

The disciples stand there staring “up toward heaven.” Two angelic figures appear and speak to them: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Men of Galilee. These words are meant to bring the disciples back to earth, to wake them up from preoccupation with things that are beyond their concern and grasp. They are people from a particular place and time. Galilee. That’s their home, not heaven. That’s where they are from and who they are. The angels’ question about why they are staring up into heaven is a wakeup call. That’s not where you are to be looking. Heaven is not your concern, but this world, God’s creation and its needs. That’s where we are to be witnesses, living in ways that express God’s sovereignty and love, God’s kingdom.

The Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has a saying that the miracle of our lives is not to walk on water but to walk on this beautiful green earth. This is the same thing. The kingdom of God does not have to do with our getting out of this world but living in this world in a way that is in harmony with God’s loving purposes as its Creator. We are not to live staring into heaven but looking with compassion and understanding at this life, this world, and living in ways that breathe life into the world.

There is an Edwards family legend that I thought of here. My father grew up in near poverty in Carroll County Virginia, the only one of thirteen children to go to college. He experienced back trouble his whole life. It stemmed from a visit he made to the “big city” of Roanoke as a young man. He was walking the streets, staring up bumpkin-like at the buildings of the city and did not see or hear the trolley that was on a collision course with him. The impact resulted in the back injury that dogged him ever after. Just so, when we perceive religious faith as walking around on earth staring into heaven and not living fully on this earth in a wise, discerning, and compassionate way, we are living out of harmony with our God-given purpose and nature, and tend to become part of the problem.

The passage from Acts ends with the disciples doing as Jesus had told them. They go back to Jerusalem to wait together for the coming of God’s spirit. This leaves us poised just where we always need to be—our eyes looking clearly and compassionately on the world around us, our feet firmly on the ground, ready to receive the power God gives us to be witnesses, servants and instruments of God’s steadfast and redeeming love for the world. Our spiritual journey, in the inward and outward

dimensions, is precisely this deepening of our awareness of the world, its beauty and its needs, of our gifts and where they can touch the world with life, all the while keeping ourselves open and receptive to the Power that comes “from above,” from the God who rides upon the clouds yet remembers the widows and orphans.