

Waiting for the Spirit

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

...lift up a song to God who rides upon the clouds...

*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?"

To be people of faith, growing in Christ's spirit and teachings, and in awareness of our relationship with God, means living fully in THIS world. And yet, we live fully in this world aware of the sacred, ultimate dimension of life. The earth as the creation of God. Other people as sharing with us God's image, our brothers and sisters. Theologians call these the immanent and transcendent dimensions of life. We are created to live fully in the immanent, the near, the present, in life as God created it. We are also created with awareness of the transcendent dimension of life, including our own lives, that all of life is rooted in and flows from the sacred, from God.

In Psalm 68 we find the image of God who "rides upon the clouds." God is the ultimate and mysterious Power of life itself, transcending 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, always beyond our thoughts and grasp, is also the God who is intensely concerned with and on the side of those who are in need. "Widows and orphans" is a biblical phrase meaning all who are threatened by injustice or wounded by life experiences—the poor, the powerless, the suffering. This is the God who appeared to Moses and said "I have heard the cries of my people in Egypt and have come down to save them." It is the God who appeared to the prophets in visions of divine majesty and mystery, calling them to speak of justice, peace, and right worship in a society that had become full of injustice, violence, and false piety.

God is the ultimate and mysterious Power of Life itself, always moving in the direction of the well being of people and the whole creation. This is the fundamental biblical understanding of God. The life of faith, therefore, includes wonder, praise, and thanksgiving, AND a devotion to compassion, justice, mercy, and peace.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles gives us a similar picture. This part of the Jesus story is closest to us as Christ's community after his resurrection. How are we to live today as his community? What is to be the nature and direction of our life and ministry? How is Christ present with us?

Jesus is leaving the disciples and they will stay in the world. The disciples ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They want to know if this realm or reign of God, the core of his life and message, is finally going to happen in and for Israel.

Jesus first of all says that this is none of their business! He consistently taught that we are not to concern ourselves with the ultimate outcome of things. When and how God finally brings about the transformation of life is not within our concern or grasp as human beings. Many religious leaders and movements have been certain that THEIR time was THE time. And they have all been dead wrong. We are to live in the here and now, not the there and then.

Jesus 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." We are to be receptive to God's spirit that makes us witnesses to Christ, starting from where we are. 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 as

taking the side of one political, religious, or national group 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. This is part of why people got so upset about the Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s words. They simply cannot imagine that God might condemn our national self-interests and expose the delusions we have about ourselves.

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 Francis of Assisi put it, an instrument of God’s peace. To be Christ’s witnesses means embodying his spirit and teachings, the kind of life God created us to live on this earth. Being witnesses, or martyrs, in this sense, is not really about spiritual heroism or dying for one’s beliefs. It is about living in ways that embody the life Jesus embodied, the life of a true human being as God made us.

Suddenly Jesus is “lifted up” and removed from them by a cloud. Luke does not explain how this happened or give us any details. He knows that such things belong to the realm of mystery and are beyond our understanding or concern.

The disciples stand there agape, necks craning upward. Two angelic figures appear: “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 bring the disciples back to earth, 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, where they are from and who they are. The angels’ question 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.

Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that the real miracle is not to walk on water but to walk on this beautiful green earth. This is the same thing. The kingdom of God is not about getting out of this world but living in this world in ways harmonious with God’s loving purposes as its Creator. We are not to live staring into heaven but looking with compassion and understanding at our own lives and the life of this world, and living in ways that breathe life into the world. When we live this way, we are content to let God handle the ultimate things, to let heaven take care of itself.

Whenever I read the story of Jesus’ ascension, I remember an Edwards family legend. My father grew up poor in Carroll County, Virginia, the only one of thirteen children to go to college. As a young man, he made his first visit to the “big city” of Roanoke. He was walking the streets, staring up bumpkin-like at the buildings, and did not see or hear the trolley that was on a collision course with him. The impact resulted in back problems that dogged him the rest of his life. Just so, when we perceive religious faith as walking around staring into heaven and not living fully on this earth in attentive, discerning, and compassionate ways, we are out of harmony with our God-given purpose and nature, contributing to the problems of the world.

The story ends with the disciples back in Jerusalem, waiting together for the coming of God’s spirit. This leaves us poised just where we always need to be—looking clearly and compassionately on the world around us, our feet firmly on the ground, keeping ourselves open to the power God gives us to be witnesses 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.

It is finally about waiting. Waiting is the primary work of the spiritual life. It is not sitting around doing nothing. It is keeping awake, aware, open, with listening hearts and minds. It is keeping ourselves empty so that we can be filled with God’s spirit, letting go of encumbrances, worries, anxieties, as well as our incessant planning and plotting and activities. I think that is what this community has discovered through the years, that if we wait with our attention fully on our lives and life around us, and with our hearts and minds aware of the transcendent dimension, the sacred ground of life, then we will be ready to receive the word God speaks, the mission God calls us to, and the persons God sends us to do and be what God has made us to be for the sake of the world.