

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 means growing in Jesus' spirit and teachings, which bring us to our true humanity. It means growing in and deepening our awareness of our relationship with God. And it means doing so as 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 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. Nowhere in scripture is this two-fold nature of our humanity made clearer than in the second creation story, in Genesis 2. The story pictures God stooping down to fashion the human being out of the dust of the earth. Yet, it is only as God breathes into the *adam* ("of the earth") the spirit of life does *adam* become a *nephesh*, a living being. Earth and spirit. We are both.

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. And yet, God is also 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 in need. “Widows and orphans” is a biblical phrase that can stand for all who are vulnerable, threatened by injustice, or wounded by life experiences—the poor, the grieving, 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 revealed 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, greed, 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 who we are and who God is. The life of faith, therefore, includes wonder, praise, and thanksgiving, AND a devotion to compassion, justice, mercy, and peace, to the wellbeing of the earth and all its creatures, including the human. I say all of this as a backdrop for the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. 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?

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 Jesus’ 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. Some religious leaders and movements have been certain that THEIR time was THE time. We have just gone through such an experience. They have all been dead wrong and will always be so. We are to live in the here and now, not the there and then.

Jesus goes on to say that his community “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 open and receptive to God’s spirit that makes us witnesses to the kind of life Jesus taught and embodied, starting from where we are. We do this through the work of what we call the inward journey--silence, inner listening, prayer, study, and so forth. Notice that 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 transcendence of “God who rides on the clouds,” whose “holy habitation” is beyond temple, church, nation, 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 Francis of Assisi put it, an instrument of God’s peace. To be Jesus’ 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. That may well bring us into experiences of resistance and suffering. But the point is not suffering; it is faithfulness to what we believe God has called us to be and to do.

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 reminded

that 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.

The Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher and peacemaker 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. That he went on to seminary in Kentucky and at the University of Chicago was far beyond the bounds of his family's life in Southwest Virginia. 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 notice the trolley that was on a collision course with him. The impact resulted in back problems that dogged him the rest of his life. When the life of faith is understood 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. We only contribute 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 to which God calls us, and the persons God sends us to do and be what God has made us to be for the sake of the world.