

June 1, 2014 / Ascension of Christ / David L. Edwards

Why Look Toward Heaven?

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 live as people of faith means growing in awareness of our relationship with God. It means living fully in THIS world, conscious and respectful of the sacred 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...this world. We are also created with awareness of the transcendent dimension of life, that all of life is rooted in and flows from the sacred, from God. This is vividly pictured in the second creation story, in Genesis 2. God fashions the human being (*adam*=of the earth) from the earth. Yet, only as God breathes the spirit into the man does *adam* become a *nephesh*, a living being (2:7). We are earth and spirit.

Eternal life in the teachings of Jesus is not leaving this earth and going to some far-off unearthly dimension called heaven. In the prayer we heard from John's gospel, Jesus says that eternal life is "knowing" God and Jesus. Knowing, in this sense, means having a relationship with. Eternal life is living with awareness and love of God, and, as we follow Jesus, fulfilling our true humanity in the world.

Jesus, in the prayer, says that the disciples are those whom God has called out of the "world". The "world", in this case, is not the good creation of God. It is the world of human beings that is in darkness, without regard for God, the sacred, transcendent dimension. The disciples are to remain in the world of humanity as light in the darkness. They are to live in that world while belonging to the world as God created it to be. They are to live in the immanent as channels of the transcendent, of God's enlightening love.

In Psalm 68 we find the picture of God who "rides upon the clouds." God is the ultimate and mysterious Power of life, 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 and definitions, is also the God who is intensely concerned for and present with those in need. “Widows and orphans” is a biblical phrase that stands for all who are vulnerable, suffering injustice, or wounded by life experiences—the poor, the grieving, the powerless, the resident alien or immigrant. This is the God encountered by Moses(Ex. 3:7-8), saying, “I have heard the cries of my people in Egypt and have come down to save them.” This is the God experienced by the prophets of Israel in visions of divine majesty and mystery, calling them to be God's voice for justice, peace, and right worship in a society that had become full of injustice, violence, greed, and empty, habitual religion. God, as the ultimate and mysterious Power of Life, always moves in the direction of the well-being of people and the whole creation. Living in harmony with this Power we call God means caring for one another and for those who are in need, as well as for the earth itself. 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 well-being 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. Jesus is leaving the disciples, who remain 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. 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. 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. 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. The “God bless our nation” rhetoric makes God into a tribal deity, 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 fabricated 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. Or as one of our disciplines puts it, to endeavor to be channels of God's love and forgiveness in every relationship. 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 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, and probably will, bring us into experiences of resistance and suffering. The point is not suffering, but 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. We need not get hung up on "did it really happen" or "what did it look like". What is important is the meaning of the story. 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 wake-up 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 long for some other world, but live with compassion and understanding and joy, in this world, 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 his Southwest Virginia roots. 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.