

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ²until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, "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."

Commentary

Luke and Acts are two volumes by a single author. Luke first reviews the Jesus story- his deeds, teachings, suffering, resurrection, and command to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. He then describes the Ascension of our Lord. The gathered disciples are still under the wrong impression that Jesus is a political messiah who will restore an earthly kingdom. Jesus reminds them that only God knows what the future holds. Jesus has far better news. They will be given the power of the Holy Spirit and will be sent both near and far throughout the world to represent the risen Christ. They were astonished when Jesus was then "lifted up" from their sight, but received assurance from angelic messengers that Jesus would return. The presence of the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and the annual observance of the Ascension in the

liturgical church calendar, points to the strong belief through the years of the historical accuracy of this event. The significance of the Ascension is threefold. First, the power of the Holy Spirit was promised. Even though the visible Jesus is gone, the Spirit is with us and gives us strength. Second, we have received a commission to bear witness that Jesus is Lord of our lives and of the world. Third, we are reminded that God is in charge of history and the ultimate ending is sure.

Reflection

1. The Ascension of our Lord is one of many stories of our faith with significant miraculous and supernatural elements. How do you relate to these stories of our faith? What do you believe about the Ascension?
2. Reflect on God as the one who is in control of all human history. Are you comfortable with this concept? How do you reconcile the tragedies and atrocities of history with the plan of God?

Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Commentary

Like a beautiful piece of classical music, this passage begins quietly and builds to a great crescendo and a ringing declaration of God's universal power. After expressing gratitude for his reader's exemplary faith and love, the writer (Paul or one of his disciples writing under his name) moves to intercession as he asks God to deepen their understanding of the hope (soft), rich heritage (louder), and majestic power (louder still) of God's work on their behalf through Christ. This work involves nothing less than Christ's resurrection from death and his ascension to reign with God on high (resounding). The Son of God is exalted above all kingdoms and powers of all time (deafening). His honor and glory are for the sake of his body, the church, which is the full and final completion of his mission and destiny. The point being made is that the Ascension is not only about Christ. It is about the church – us – as we live into and fulfill

what Christ began. The church is the body of Christ – human yet godly, broken yet raised, humble yet exalted.

Reflection

1. It is easy to see the shortcomings of the institutional church. Where do you see the church shining through its shortcomings to be the body of Christ in the world?
2. Reflect upon your own Christian life, and the ways in which you have embraced faith and lived out love. What words of praise or correction would you hear from one who intimately knows you?

Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Commentary

This is Luke’s first account of the Ascension. After suddenly appearing in the midst of his disciples, and offering physical proof that he is not a ghost, Jesus begins a final teaching session. Once again, Jesus explains that he is both the fulfillment and interpreter of Scripture. After promising them that they would receive power from God to wipe away their confusion and impotence, Jesus leads his disciples out of the city, down through the Kidron Valley, and up and over the Mount of Olives to Bethany. He gives them a final blessing, walks away and is taken. The disciples return to the city with great joy, and begin to spend much time in worship and praise. The grief of losing Jesus was replaced by the joy of having been with him one last time. These early followers of Jesus were challenged by the task of continuing his mission, expectant about the gift God would soon bestow on them, and drawn to worship to prepare their hearts for what would lie ahead.

Reflection

1. To be a witness is to share what Christ has done for us. What has Christ done for you, and how would you articulate and share that experience?
2. One response of the first believers to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus was worship. Reflect on how you approach worship and what you get out of your worship experiences. What areas could be improved?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 47:1-8

¹Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.

²**For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.**

³He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

⁴**He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves.**

⁵God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.

⁶**Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.**

⁷For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.

⁸**God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what has been said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.