

Feast of the Ascension, May 9, 2013
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Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9; Ephesians 1:17-23; Luke 24:46-53

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. (Luke 24:49)

When I was small I took this Gospel pretty literally with the advantage of knowing how the story would end in Pentecost. Later, after both science and scripture studies were part of my education, I began to think about the choices made by the liturgists for this feast. The responsorial psalm indicates praise at the majesty of God; congratulations to the Son, the one who completed the mission given him by his Father. The letter to the Ephesians clearly describes what hopes Paul had for the sincere follower of Jesus: the disciple of the risen Lord is graced with the spirit of wisdom and clear insight into the mystery of Jesus. This disciple recognizes the immeasurable heritage to be shared with others. Richness to be shared. This liturgy presents both of St. Luke's accounts for this day: his introduction to Acts and the close of his Gospel. We are faced with Jesus being "taken up." How to understand this?

We can surmise that those days between Resurrection and Pentecost were for the disciples a time for getting their heads around extraordinary events. We can identify with their fear, their hope, and their incredulity at hearing that the Master was alive, not dead. They dealt with guilt. They experienced his presence themselves, and heard him bestow peace on them, a gracious forgiveness for their cowardice. On their part, they had to absorb that he had inaugurated a command about a power they had no idea how to employ.

We read that during those significant 40 days Jesus came upon them unexpectedly and did things like preparing and sharing a meal with them, and then abruptly disappeared from their circle. There were days when it might have seemed that they were back to the times before that awful crucifixion. He was teaching them, they were feeling free to ask their usual questions of their Rabbi. Some of his responses were laden with mystery. The disciples were taking in all of Jesus, but were clueless as to know what to do with their experiences or with his promises.

Is this Luke's way of showing us readers that Jesus, bit by bit, was preparing them for an absence, not that total void and dread they'd experienced of a dead Master, but were these appearances and disappearances his way to prepare them for another way he would be present to them?

When the day we call Ascension Thursday arrives, Luke sets the stage by reminding us of the significant time period of 40 days. Jesus speaks again with them, giving a teaching, a promise, an instruction to remain in Jerusalem until empowerment comes from his Holy Spirit. And then they are alone. Just as they had noted before, Jesus is no longer visibly in their presence. While they stand awestruck, two messengers appear to mark the moment and reinforce Jesus' words.

“Don’t stand there looking up, go to Jerusalem and wait.” This was probably not what they expected to hear. But if their 40 days with Jesus were likened to a retreat, then this return to the others in Jerusalem was to be the apostles’ decisive pause before action. This was their intense reflection time. It gave them the opportunity to talk over and mull together about their experiences with Jesus. It was prayerful gestation time. They were all being brought to readiness for the Spirit to come upon them and bring them to indescribable joy and love, passion and exuberance. Jesus’ mission-sending would be inaugurated, and they would take their good news to the world.

Gestation time in our day? In our city this year, our pastor and his pastoral assistant, with the help of our parish Community Advocacy Committee, made plans to mark our Lenten Monday evenings by studying Gospel values and Catholic social teaching about rights of workers. Added to the group were representatives of United Workers, a union which advocates for workers’ rights especially in Baltimore’s Inner Harbor entertainment/dining/hotel arenas. This area is known for corporations with poor employment practices. We recognize these as problems chiefly for temporary employees who do not progress to benefits, have little control over their working lives, and never achieve an adequate living wage. The weekly meetings occasionally enjoyed the presence of two young women who are PhD candidates at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Both are members of the End Poverty Initiative. They provided studies of the Lenten Sunday Gospels which included contemporary issues dealing with injustice. In this way our group had the opportunity to consider the Gospels in the light of local employment practices. At the end of this Lenten practice we are feeling called to continue to pray and mull over what we learned about neighbors in our city. What will this mean for us? Will we be moved to share our immeasurable riches with others?

Wonderful things have been written about human rights and the dignity of the worker, just compensation for honest labor. Philosophers write about the creative quality of work. When we meet persons whose labor never yields satisfaction and who have no hope for a better future, we know something is missing from the vision God has for humankind.

Our study group learned of a number of actions that can be taken in favor of fair development in this city. We need to discern right actions and prepare ourselves to join with others who can make a difference in our world.

What does this Gospel mean for all of us? We are Christians reaping the full benefit of Jesus’ liberating us from sin and giving us of new life. Again this year we are in the midst of celebrating this Good News. We hear Jesus’ message to his disciples: “Stay here ... until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49) Could we be inspired to not only relish our Lenten meditations, the ensuing joy of Easter and this mysterious period of Jesus’ teaching and promise, but also to be ready disciples, mature witnesses of Jesus’ Good News to our neighbors in these days?

On this Feast of Ascension we ask the Holy Spirit to grant us the vision and power to take steps in favor of our sisters and brothers, to share the Good News of Jesus.