

## **Acts 1:1-11**

1:1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach

1:2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

1:3 After 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.

1:4 While 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;

1:5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

1:7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

1:8 But 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."

1:9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

1:10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

1:11 They 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."

### **Sermon: Spirited Waiting**

At my ordination service, Dr. James Dunn, a mentor and friend, reflected on Christian calling. Dr. Dunn said that ministers, deacons, and other faithful servants should exhibit the qualities of confidence and humility; confidence in their training, in their spiritual giftedness, in their connectedness, in their rootedness to the communities that love them. And humility before God, before neighbor; a willingness to listen, to learn, to forgive and be forgiven, to share and receive, to be partners with those around them. Then he held up Frank Stagg's commentary on the Book of Acts. He said: "I've just paraphrased this commentary for you, Bob. You need to get a copy of this book. And make sure you read it. But you can't have mine!"

I'm grateful to Brent Jones, who heard Dr. Dunn's advice, and saw Stagg's commentary at a second-hand bookstore, and delivered it to me with a very nice note. Stagg remains a source of inspiration for my preaching, and I used his commentary to prepare for today's lesson in Acts.

Three points from Stagg's analysis caught my attention. I want to share his thoughts with you, and then, add a few of my own. Here are the three things: 1) universal not particular 2) active waiting and 3) geography is the easy part.

*Universal not particular.*

Stagg writes that the earliest Jesus-followers expected, perhaps even craved particularism. The God-stuff was for Israel. The movement was local. The benefits exclusive. This kingdom was gonna be for insiders. It's not so much that the disciples expected a new world order, but rather, they expected to be leaders in ordering this new world. They'd sit at the right hand right now. And all would be right with the world.

But Jesus stresses universalism. This is no longer a regional cult, constrained to inward-facing rituals. This is no longer a world limited to human creativity. This is a movement of transcendence, of redefinition, of divine possibilities. And most importantly of divine rule. God's world's is gonna be God's world. The God movement is fluid, open, inclusive, expansive, affectionate. Even its new authority, the Holy Spirit, is boundless, shapeless, and formless. How's that for particulars?

Our text today, launches us, at least in a literary sense, from the awareness and learning phase of the Jesus movement, the teachings of Jesus, into the doing phase, the acts of the earliest apostles. And central to the Acts of these Apostles, is the movement of the Spirit, something universal for all people.

*Active Waiting.*

Our text tells us that there is a forty-day interim between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. I hope it's not lost on you that at the beginning of Luke's gospel, the prequel to Acts, there is a forty-day

interim between the Baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his earthly ministry. This is the wilderness period, and it's one we acknowledge liturgically with the Season of Lent. In Luke, Jesus repents, or turns toward God, enters the baptismal waters, and having been baptized, also receives the Holy Spirit. And filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus enters the wilderness for an extended period of fasting and discernment. And Jesus' decision is prudent, because the Holy Spirit – the very force and presence of God – is a powerful thing to be reckoned with. Such a force changes us.

Stagg notes that Jesus instructs the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the receipt of the Holy Spirit. But not just to wait, to wait together in fellowship and community. Stagg notes that such waiting is not passive or futile. The disciples are about to receive a power beyond reckoning, and they, like Jesus, must be prepared to receive such a gift.

We live in a volatile world. I'm not sure if it's any more or less volatile than it's ever been, but I would argue that no anxiety is more prescient than the anxiety we experience in the present. Therefore, we tend to be a people of doers, and fixers; we tend to have an urgency about us; sometimes we feel like we must document, and labor, and never be idle. And in our anxious urgency, we can struggle to imagine the idea that waiting can be both active and purposeful.

I, and I believe, we, faith in the movement of the Spirit. We, do, generally believe, that God's goodness, God's umph, God's love is gonna be the final word. But the movement of the Spirit isn't always linear, nor is it scheduled in precise intervals. If it was, the disciples would have taken their exams, received their diplomas, and fulfilled their callings all in time to enjoy their pensions. Instead, the Spirit moves as They are ready, unbounded by any protocol.

Yes, a thousand times yes, I believe we should intentionally engage in good works – we have a responsibility to care for those around us in a consistent, compassionate, and creative manner. But we have got to, GOT TO, stop asserting that worship, that prayer, that fellowship, that waiting in community is passive, is sitting on our hands, is oblivious to a world in need. When done well, discerning, loving, intentional community steels us for the moment the Spirit arrives, and emboldens us to live and serve with unbounded purpose.

When Jesus fasts in the wilderness; when Jesus labors to train new disciples; when Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, he is not downplaying the severity of Rome's grasp on the world. Instead, he's refusing to be constrained and governed by Rome's parameters. Jesus is on God's time. Jesus is filling himself with the Spirit, in order that he might empty himself in the service of others.

Easter awakens us to new life, and I believe reminds us of the tools and gifts at our disposal to help resurrect a broken world. Undoubtedly, many of our gifts are economic, political, and social. This interval, this waiting, this pre-Ascension time, is, I believe, a way for the Spirit to shape the expression of our gifts, in order that their power reflects God, and not Caesar's same-old, same-old; not us reordering the world in our image, but us being re-ordered and reoriented in God's image.

Yes, we're waiting, but it's active.

Universal not particular. Active Waiting. And finally, geography is the easy part.

*Geography is the easy part.*

The text tells us that the apostles will be witnesses in Jerusalem, this big city, where they will first meet the Spirit, and the site of great miracles; in Judea, their home region and the place they feel most comfortable; in Samaria, a place where they feel least comfortable, and whose citizens are construed as enemies; and even to the ends of the Earth, in this instance, Spain, the farthest corner of the Roman empire. Stagg says that commentators often label this growth or outreach as the major trajectory of Luke's two-volume gospel, but to do so is a mistake. Yes, the earliest Christians are on the move, but the hardest boundaries to cross are not geographic; they are religious, national, political, and racial, just to name a few.

The presence of Jesus is felt, wherever and whenever two or three are gathered in Christ's name. Distance does not impair our receipt of the God stuff. Rather, it's our insistence upon, and our loyalty toward systems and constructions that distances us from the Spirit. Even here at Millbrook, we have profound relationships with faith communities in places like Honduras, Zimbabwe, England, and dozens more across the globe. I wonder, are we able to say the same about the 66 zip codes that comprise Wake County, especially those with demographics that don't mirror our own? Is systemic injustice a biproduct of geography? Or is it indicative of the distance between our hearts, souls, minds, and strength from the Spirit, and our stubbornness to bridge that chasm?

Universal not particular. Active waiting. Geography is the easy part.  
Thanks, Rev. Stagg.

Jesus gathers disciples, yes, back then, but now, too, urging us to exchange our tribalism for globalism. As Jesus waits for God's inbreaking realm, he teaches and instructs, reminding us that living and

loving together are a readying for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. And upon receipt of the Spirit, Jesus bids us to travel outwardly, in order that we may one day be transformed inwardly.

And now, today, Jesus is ascending to what's next for him, a rejoining with the Creator. And as Jesus ascends, we wait for what's next for us, the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

The Spirit is coming, y'all, and when They come, I pray that we might be confident in the spiritual gifts They reveal to each of us, and humble, in the sharing and receiving of such gifts with one another. And I pray, that ours might be a ministry, universal in nature, readied by the Spirit, and equipped to cross any boundary.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.