First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

May 21, 2023

Anticipation

Acts 1:6-14 - MSG

**6**When they were together for the last time they asked, “Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?” **7-8**He told them, “You don’t get to know the time. Timing is the Father’s business. What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world,” **9-11**These were his last words. As they watched, he was taken up and disappeared in a cloud. They stood there, staring into the empty sky. Suddenly two men appeared—in white robes! They said, “You Galileans!—Why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—as he left,” **12-13**So they left the mountain called Olives and returned to Jerusalem. It was a little over half a mile. They went to the upper room they had been using as a meeting place:

Peter,

John,

James,

Andrew,

Philip,

Thomas,

Bartholomew,

Matthew,

James, son of Alphaeus,

Simon the Zealot,

Judas, son of James.

**14**They agreed they were in this for good, completely together in prayer, the women included. Also Jesus’ mother, Mary, and his brothers.

When I was growing up, I spent way too much time in front of the TV, according to my Mother. She referred to it as the idiot box, because watching too much TV would surely turn our brains to mush and leave us drooling idiots. I’ll let you to decide if mom was right, in my case. Now, she did her best to limit our screen time, but somehow, I always managed to find a way to sneak more time in front of the tube than my parents would ever allow.

I loved watching just about anything that was on, even the commercials. And one of my favorite TV commercials from back then, was that old Heinz catsup ad, which showed a kid trying to put catsup on a hot dog. You all remember that one? The kid has the bottle turned completely upside down and the catsup is every sooo slowly making its way out of the bottle. The kid is laser focused on the catsup, to the exclusion of everything else, all while the Carly Simon song “Anticipation,” is playing. (OK, apologies if you’re going to have that song running through your head for the rest of today.) I’ll tell you though, it was a brilliant piece of advertising, because from then on I wouldn’t eat any other catsup but good ‘ol Heinz, and nothing tickled this 10-year-old boy more than recreating that scene, complete with the song, whenever we had hot dogs. Yeah, I’ll admit it, I was a pretty weird little kid.

Today’s reading shows a similar laser focus on the part of the disciples. They’ve gathered, with Jesus, on the Mount of Olives and they ask Jesus if now is the time that the Kingdom will be restored. It seems that after everything that’s happened; the crucifixion, the resurrection, all of it, there’s still this nagging question about *when.* When is the Kingdom going to be restored? Some of the commentaries suggest that the disciples, in asking this question, are *still* expecting Jesus to overthrow the Roman occupation. I like to think that the disciples had actually caught on to what Jesus was all about, at this point, and that the question was more about when the Kingdom of God was going to be manifested here on earth. I suspect, however, that it’s probably more the former than the later.

The response is pure Jesus, and he says you don’t get to know the time. Timing is God’s business. But Jesus goes on to say, what you *will* get is the Holy Spirit, which will give you everything you need to be my witness to the ends of the earth.

Then Jesus is lifted up to heaven and the disciples are left staring at the empty sky, probably with their mouth agape in suprise. Suddenly, two men in white robes appear, (why is it that whenever angels appear, they’re always men)? But I’m not going to go down that rabbit hole today, as that’s a topic for a different sermon. So, two men in white robes appear and ask “Why do you just stand there looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—as he left.”

Now that’s one heck of a reality check. So, all those who had witnessed it, returned to Jerusalem and agreed that they were in it for good and the passage ends by naming the members of what is the very first congregation. As an aside, I think verse 14 is significant, because the writer takes the time to note that the women of the group were included, without any restrictions.

The timing of Jesus’ return has been the subject of endless debate and discussion since the very day Jesus was taken up into heaven. There have been so many attempts to predict the Second Coming, that if I were to list them all, we’d be here until next Thursday, so I’ll be nice and not inflict that very large list on you. All of these attempts made to figure out when Jesus will come back are simply doomed to failure. Matthew 24:36 reminds us, *“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* No one, not even Jesus, himself, knows when that will happen.

So, why do we Christians spend so much time and energy anticipating an event that we have no control over, and not a single clue as to when it’ll happen? I suspect that part of the answer lays in the promise of a better life; a better existence than the one we’re experiencing in the here and now. That’s valid, and in line with the promises made to God’s people. What comes to mind for me, of course, is the anticipation of a better life that is expressed in African American spirituals. The hope of something better, the faith that things would change, in the sweet by and by, were often the only thing that kept an enslaved people from giving up entirely.

The belief that Jesus will return and the anticipation of a better life to come, is hard wired in our Christian faith. It does provide comfort and strength to help us all get through hard times. But…, what happens when that assurance of the Second Coming becomes our only focus? What happens when the life ahead is all we think about? Twelve step programs refer to this type of behavior as “future tripping.” What that means is that when we are only focused on what will be, instead of what is, that can be a problem. We see that even Jesus’ closest friends had to be nudged out of a future tripping mind set, in order to carry on with Jesus’ mission.

Too often, we become so laser focused on the hope of things to come, that we lose sight of the fact that we live in a world that desperately needs the message of love, peace, and mercy that the good news of the Gospel offers. When we gaze up into an empty sky, anticipating Jesus’ return, we can’t see, much less react to, the needs of the hungry, or the poor, or the needy.

The purpose of the church is to do more than simply save people’s souls. The purpose of Christ’s church is to be the hands and feet of God in *this* world. Everything we do here on Sunday morning should be geared towards preparing us to fulfil God’s call, as laid out in Micah 6:8, “to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God,” along with Isaiah’s command to “seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, [and] plead the widow’s cause” (1:17)

What it comes down to, is this: there’s nothing wrong with anticipating a better life in the world to come, it’s a cornerstone of our faith. But here’s the thing, I don’t believe that the world to come is some place up in the sky, where we’re all going to be dressed in white robes playing harps. The Kingdom of Heaven will come about here on earth, when the work of justice and mercy for all of God’s creation is finished. So yes, there’s much to anticipate regarding a better life, but we can’t just sit around dreaming about it. We have to do our part to make it happen.

One of my favorite hymns growing up, which my mother used to sing to us every day, is entitled “Have I Done Any Good in the World Today?” The words go like this: Have I done any good in the world today? Have I helped anyone in need? Have I cheered up the sad or made someone feel glad, if not, I have failed, indeed. In response to the question of have I done any good, part of the chorus goes like this: “So wake up and do something more, then dream of your mansions above.” It was mom’s way of reminding us that we are called to put our faith in a better world, into action each and every day.

So, folks, here’s a question for you: will you answer God’s call to do good in the world today, and do what you can to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven by helping others, or will you simply sit back and dream of your mansion above? The choice is yours. AMEN