

The Promise

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Acts 1:1-11

It all began with a fall in a garden. Not just any garden and not just a typical tumble but God's garden, the one called "Eden" and the catastrophic human fall into sin. Almost hidden in God's curse on the Tempter disguised as a wily serpent, is a promise. God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). "He will crush your head..." What Luke describes here in the first chapter of Acts should be seen in the light of that promise.

I invite you to reflect on the ascension of Christ this morning under the heading of WHY? Why did he stay? Why did he leave?" Why is he coming back?

First, why did he stay? When he walked out of that stone-sealed tomb 3 days after his crucifixion and burial his heaven-sent purpose was accomplished. One of the last things he said on the cross before his death was "It is finished!" Three years earlier John the Baptist had pointed to him and said, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That was finished. "By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy," says the writer of Hebrews (Hebrews 10:14). He could have gone from grave to glory; he didn't have to add anything. His foot was already squarely placed on the Tempter's head. So, why did he stay for 40 days?

The answer is in the opening verse of our passage: "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach..." His sacrificial saving work was finished but his work on earth was only beginning. And he was about to turn it over to a small group of people who were known more for their fear than for their faithfulness. He stayed to give them "many convincing proofs that he was alive." If they were to be his witnesses, they had to be eye witnesses of their risen Lord. If they were to tell the world that "He lives!" they had to do it with conviction.

He stayed to continue teaching them about the kingdom of God. Clearly, in spite of all that he had taught them to the contrary, they were still hoping he would restore the kingdom to Israel as in the days of David and Solomon, but that was never his intention. As he told Pilate who asked him "Are you the king of the Jews?" "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." In the words of an old hymn "it's not with swords' loud clashing or roll of stirring drums – with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes." The power of his kingdom is not the power of military or political might but the power of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

He stayed to reiterate the promise of the Holy Spirit and to commission his followers to be his ambassadors. He stayed for their sake and for the sake of their mission to the world. But maybe it's not quite correct to say he "stayed." He "presented himself to them...he appeared to them...he spoke to them." He even ate with them. But he did not live with them. That phase of his work was over, now he was what N.T. Wright calls, "the prototype of the new creation...the new creation in person." His place was at the right hand of his Father and after forty days he left them.

He left them because it was time; he had finished the work he had come to do. As the writer of Hebrews put it, "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Hebrews 1:13b). What does that mean for us? Why is that important to know? Because it means that we have an intercessor in heaven. In I John 2 the Apostle writes "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin, but if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world" (I John 2:1-2). "He speaks to the father in our defense," that's incredibly good news! I think of that scene in the book of Esther when her Uncle Mordecai challenged her to intercede with King Xerxes on behalf of the Jewish people. She agreed to do it at the risk of her life because though she was the queen if she entered the court without being summoned by the king, if he didn't hold out his golden scepter, she could be condemned to death. What a different picture the writer of Hebrews paints of our intercessor. The exalted Christ stands before the Father and says, "Here am I, and the children God has given to me" (Hebrews 2:13). Here are

my wounds and here are my beloved ones. “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

He intercedes for us; he is our advocate with the Father. And he is our forerunner. Christ’s presence with the Father assures us that because he is there, we will be there. On the night before his death Jesus told his disciples that he would soon be going to his Father’s house to prepare a place for them and one day he would come back and take them to be with him “that you also may be where I am” (see John 14:1-3). It is powerful that they actually saw him ascend, he didn’t leave his body behind; the cloud that represented God’s glory received him bodily. If you have gone to an Ash Wednesday service chances are you received a smudge of ash on your forehead while these words of Genesis 3:19 were intoned, “Dust you are and to dust you will return.” Sobering words but here’s what Christ’s ascension means for us: “The dust of earth is on the throne on high” as one commentator puts it. His bodily presence there is a guarantee of ours! Think of it this way. Maybe you have ancestors who came here many years ago from another country. In many cases a father would come first to get established, earn some money and get a place to live. Then he would send word to the family, “It’s time, come and join me!” Christ has gone ahead of us and one day we will hear that summons: “It’s time, come and join me.” We too will be in our Father’s house, not as disembodied spirits but the dust of earth will be before the throne in glory.

Jesus left because it was time for his coronation, his enthronement as the one who is now in charge. The prophet Daniel had seen it in a vision centuries earlier: “In my vision at night I looked and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14). It turns out that Pilate’s mocking sign on Jesus’ cross was prophetic. The sign read, “The King of the Jews,” but he is more than that. He is the King of creation and “his kingdom will never be destroyed.”

On the night before his death he told his disciples, “It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you” (John 16:7). It was only through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that that fearful band of Jesus’ followers became fearless ambassadors. And so the work of Christ’s kingship goes on today. On that day the disciples could not have imagined in their wildest dreams that their tiny band of believers would one day grow to be more than 2 billion. They could not dream big enough to see Christ-centered schools and universities, Christian health care systems, Christian counseling centers, Christian programs for at-risk young people, Christian adoption centers, Christian shelters for the homeless, Christian foot-washing spas, programs that help prison inmates get college and seminary degrees, and so much more.

Someone recently said to me, “What’s this world coming to.” I understood what she was saying. There’s enough wrong in this world to cause despair. In the May edition of *The Banner* there’s an excellent article by Rev. Bob DeMoor titled, “Make Every Day Ascension Day.” He quotes this sobering limerick by Oliver Wendell Holmes: “God’s plan had a hopeful beginning, but man spoiled his chances by sinning. We trust that the story will end in God’s glory. But at present the other side’s winning.”

But it’s not, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. In the words of an old hymn, “This is my Father’s world; oh, let me not forget that, though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.” It isn’t always obvious. It is the nature of Christ’s kingdom that it often grows quietly, underground so to speak. During those 40 days when Jesus appeared to his disciples he continued to teach them about the kingdom of God. Maybe he re-told some of his parables so they would remember that it’s like a tiny mustard seed, like leaven in dough, like the forgiveness of a debt, like a simple word of kindness and deeds of love and mercy unknown to anyone but their recipients. Christ’s ascension assures us that the work he “began” on earth will go on until the day he returns.

Why will he return? Because he promised it: “I will come back and take you to be where I am.” The angels promised it that day on the Mt. of Olives: “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.” And God promised it all the way back in the Garden of Eden: “He will crush your head,” he said to his greatest adversary. There will come a day when “he will put all his enemies under his feet; the last enemy to be destroyed is death” (I Corinthians 15:25-26).

As he reflected on Christ's return the late Andy Kuyvenhoven wrote this in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism: "When all things belong to God again, when the Father's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, and when God is our one and all, and we are all one in him, then he will say for a second time, 'It is finished.' And of the renewed creation he will say 'It is good; it is very good.'"

Many years after he had watched his Lord ascend the Apostle John had a vision. In the vision he saw the restoration of that Garden of Eden where there had been a tragic, far-reaching fall: "Then the angels showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 22:1-5).

As that final chapter of the Bible draws to a close, John hears a voice, like the voice he had heard and loved long before, the voice of the one he had watched ascend into glory. The voice says, "I am coming soon!" And John responds as all God's people should respond, "Amen, come Lord Jesus!"