

Sunday December 29, 2019  
Lesson 5: Hope for Spirit-Filled Living  
Scripture: Acts 1: 1-9

**Context:**

The final section on hope moves to the book of Acts. While last week the Gospel of Matthew took account of Jesus' birth, this week focuses on the end of Jesus' ministry. Jesus has risen from the dead and now ascends in front of the disciples. The hope is now for the disciples to live with the Spirit guiding and moving through them.

The book of Acts is known as the first history book for the Christian church. While the Gospels provided the teachings and account of Jesus' life, the book of Acts narrates the actions of the apostles and the growth of the Christian church across Asia Minor. The author addresses Theophilus as the recipient and references the previous writing for the stories about Jesus' actions.

Most scholars assert that the Gospel writer Luke is the same author of the book of Acts. However, some people question why the first chapter of Acts records some of the same details found in the closing chapters of Luke. In particular, the first chapter of Acts focuses on the ascension of Christ, which is described vividly in chapter twenty-four of Luke.

The gospel writer is not being careless or forgetful. Instead, we might look to the different points and groups to which the author wants to address. For the Gospel of Luke, the ascension is a conclusion, the dramatic finale to Jesus' earthly ministry.<sup>1</sup> However, the book of Acts seeks to fulfill a different purpose. Acts one has the ascension as the beginning presupposition on which the church is based; the end becomes the beginning as the story continues.<sup>2</sup> Luke is giving two different functions of the ascension to help the different communities reading to understand the significance.

For this account of the ascension, there is a short description of Jesus' ministry and his resurrection appearances. The author builds up the importance of the disciples spending time with Jesus just as they did before his crucifixion and death. They are given instructions not to leave Jerusalem and with the encouragement that the Holy Spirit will come upon them.

Once again, the disciples want to know the plan. They ask when Jesus will restore the kingdom. Jesus tells them instead to await the Holy Spirit and become witnesses across the world going from Jerusalem to all Judea, Samaria, and all the ends of the earth. They are not to know about times or dates of Jesus returning. Instead, they are to lead lives full of the Spirit testifying to the power of our God. When Jesus says these final words, he ascends to the heavens and the disciples are fully on their own for the first time. Yet they are not fully alone as the Holy Spirit will lead them to go and proclaim good news.

<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

## **Application**

Whenever I ask youth what they want to discuss or have a study on, usually one or several of the answers focuses on “the Rapture.” Perhaps because we are in the Deep South or because they hear their friends’ pastors preaching about it, it is the lightning rod topic to discuss. And so I pull out the Book of Revelation and ask them to point to where they see the word “Rapture.” There are crickets and then the discovery that the Rapture is not part of the book of Revelation or our theology as United Methodists. And then one can hear the collected sigh of relief come through the room.

When I hear about people obsessed with the Rapture, I wonder how they’re doing with the Holy Spirit. As we read this chapter in Acts, Jesus makes it clear to the disciples that they are not to waste their time trying to figure out when Jesus will return or when Jesus will come back and defeat all the bad guys. Instead, Jesus tells them they are to be busy being witnesses to the ends of the earth, discerning and listening to the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Jesus gives us this counsel today as well. Instead of trying to figure out when Jesus will return, we are instead to be listening to how the Holy Spirit is nudging us to be Christ’s witnesses in this world. It does not mean we will not sin or make mistakes. It is assurance though that God will be with us as we strive to glorify our God each and every day of our lives.

Living a Spirit filled life is taking those opportunities to dive deep into the means of grace God gives for us to receive. We are encouraged to study the holy scriptures and reflect on what they mean in our lives. On Sundays, we are given the opportunity to hear the Word proclaimed and to take the time to glorify God with our brothers and sisters in Christ. There are times we receive the means of grace through Holy Communion, where we hear the words that the Spirit makes us one with Christ, one with each other, and one with the world. We are given the opportunity to testify to God through deeds of mercy and compassion wherever we may live or wherever we may go.

Jesus’ last words to his disciples did not tell them that they had to save the world. They were not given the burden of solving every little problem or taking down national empires. Instead, they were told to lead lives in which the Holy Spirit would fill them and use them to bring glory to Jesus. That was to be their focus. They were not to waste their time waiting for Jesus to return or trying to figure out who was eternally damned or who was saved. They were encouraged to simply be.

One of the reasons that the United Methodist theology does not encourage members to become obsessed with the Rapture or end times is that it dismisses the call that God has given us for here and today. As we live a Spirit filled life we don’t focus on the things we cannot control or the things that are above our pay grade. Instead, we look around at the places we already live and see the amazing things God is doing. And then we lean in as we hear the Spirit whispering to us that we are invited to join in and to testify to the goodness and greatness of our God.

Living a Spirit filled life is a gift from God and it is something that every person is given an opportunity to do, whether you’re new to the faith or you’ve been a Christian for years. The ascension story reminds us that we may not know when Christ returns, but in the meantime, he has given us a role to play. Better yet, we are not alone as the Holy Spirit fills us and uses us to tell the story of our Lord with our lives.

What is your favorite part of the ascension story? How do you discern when the

Holy Spirit is calling you to do something? What are the means of grace where you feel that the Holy Spirit has given you strength or encouragement? Where is the Holy Spirit nudging you to go this week? Is it to spend some time in scripture or to do a deed of mercy and kindness?

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