

Blogging toward Sunday (Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53)

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In this series, authors offer reflections on the Sunday lectionary texts.

On this special day the gospel reading departs from the sequence of Fourth Gospel texts in order to make the connection between Jesus' Lucan appearance to the disciples (34:44-53) and the narrative that begins the Book of Acts (1:1-11). The two texts together present the drama of Jesus, who departs, mandates the disciples, and promises to return.

The frame of the Acts narrative concerns Jesus' departure and promised return. Acts 1:11 summarizes the drama concerning Jesus' "going" ("taken up") and Jesus' "coming again." This drama makes him the decisive connection between God's habitat in heaven and the church's zone of the earth, for he is—in heaven and on earth—the one with power and authority whom the church worships and serves. This "geographic" portrayal is an alternative rendering of what became, in the church, "two natures in one person." The authority of Jesus in his majesty moves readily between heavenly and earthly zones, with nothing outside his governance.

Inside that frame, the middle section of the narrative is Jesus' promise and instruction to the church. In my sermon, I would work to articulate the dramatic frame, and then focus on this promissory instruction. In both Luke 24:48-49 and in Acts 1:4 and 8, I notice three moves that pertain to the church in every time and place.

First, the church is instructed to wait (Acts 1:4). In Luke 24:40, the command is to "stay here." In both uses, the church is to pause and to linger, in order to be led by the promise of the Father. The church is not "to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). The church is not to take its own initiative or to imagine it is on its own. The present and the future for the church are laden with fatherly promise, and the church is to be responsive to that fatherly

initiative.

Second, the purpose of the wait is in order to receive the gift of power. In Luke: “clothed with power from on high” (24:49). In Acts: “you will receive power” (1:8). In both cases the propulsion of the church is not under its own steam. . . it is a gift!

Third, the purpose of divine empowerment that is given in a season of waiting is in order to be witnesses. The Acts narrative outlines the scope of the field for testimony: “in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The narrative in Luke provides the substance of the testimony; it concerns crucifixion and resurrection, repentance and forgiveness. (24:46-47). The testimony concerns the wonder wrought by God in Jesus (crucifixion and resurrection) and the effect of that wonder on the world (forgiveness).

It is clear in these twinned passages that Luke has in purview the following church narrative in the Book of Acts. After the wait, with the power of the Father, the church is unleashed into the world with incredible energy and authority. It is unrestrained by the authorities it encounters; it is unimpeded even by imprisonment. Its impact is “to turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). I do not know about you; this prospect and possibility seem remote from the church as I know it . . . except, it is the work of the Spirit! When the church waits and receives, it is emboldened in way that transforms. Imagine, “news” turned loose in the world: the truth of repentance, the reconciliation of forgiveness. The church mounts, in effect, an abiding truth and reconciliation commission. In the Book of Acts and long after, when the church is empowered by the Spirit, the world finds it irresistible!

Karl Barth had attested to this empowerment by the Spirit through baptism when he writes of:

the suprahuman coming of a very different humanity, of the miraculous investiture of man with a new nature, of a miraculous inner change, of a wonderful new birth, of the last thing, dying, being in some wonderful way that which is truly the first. . . .In the work of the Holy Spirit the history manifested to all men in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is manifest and present to a specific man as his own salvation history. (*Church Dogmatics IV, Part 4, pp. 11, 27*)

The whole of Barth’s discussion is to the point, a witness to a radical new beginning wrought by the freedom of God.