

## Waiting for the Spirit

Message for May 16, 2010

I have to preface what I'm about to say with a disclaimer: please know I'm not trying to be disrespectful.

Whenever I hear this reading from Luke's Acts of the Apostles about the Ascension of Jesus, I can't help but visualize an almost cartoon-like image of him standing on a fluffy white cloud, waving goodbye to the apostles as he's lifted off the ground and floats away. It reminds me of Glenda the Good Witch in the movie, The Wizard of Oz, after she told Dorothy what had happened to her evil sister, and then she waved that crystal wand of hers and disappeared into a large bubble that drifted over the horizon.

The Apostles had to wonder what was going on – more drama - again!

They had already been through quite a bit: Jesus, their friend and rabbi, was crucified, had died, and was entombed – and then he found some way out, appeared to them in various forms for various reasons, and during the past 40 days, had given them some intense training about how to begin a new church based on his teachings and God's Way.

The Apostles probably felt that things were just getting into a nice, comfortable routine of sorts, when all of a sudden, the sky opened up and down came an amazing cloud that carted the Master away...and the parting words thrown over his shoulder described something about being baptized with the Holy Spirit...whatever that meant.

Poor guys – even with a new identity, and a promotion, (for now they were messengers instead of followers of Jesus), they still didn't get it.

Before he left them, they had asked Jesus if the time had finally come when he would bring Israel to its former glory, like a true leader. They were still thinking of the kingdom on earth – NOT the kingdom of God – and they were hoping that once and for all, the Pharisees and Romans would get what was coming to them – after all, the Rabbi had more than a few tricks up his sleeve – he could do anything he wanted to get even with that crowd.

They figured God's glory through Jesus' amazing story could finally save the Children of Israel.

But Jesus redirected this notion, and he mysteriously hinted that they would know what they needed to know when it was time – the Holy Spirit would give them the words, the understanding, and the means to speak for him.

All they had to sit and wait in Jerusalem, until the Spirit came to help them out.

In other words, "You guys stay here, behave yourselves for a few more days and don't blow it."

They had to wait – wait for a Spirit who would baptize them in something so powerful it would help them speak with the power and authority of Jesus.

They had to watch - watch for a Spirit that would give them confidence to witness to anyone about God's Love and Forgiveness all over the known world.

They had to trust – trust that God would truly provide them with what they needed to do something so amazing, it would impact people's lives thousands of years after they too died.

This had to be a tough concept for a bunch of guys to wrap their heads around, these regular, working men who had taken some time off from their lives to travel with Jesus.

In their roles as disciples, most of their work involved crowd control and gathering supplies and food to feed the many people who came to see, hear and be healed by their friend. They were the roadies, the crew of a celebrity in the ancient world.

They hadn't been called to teach or prophesy – they were worker bees, seeing to the overall organization of the movement Jesus created in his short ministry.

And as we've discussed before, ever since Jesus was tried and crucified, they largely stayed out of the limelight – partly out of fear and partly because they weren't sure what to do about the whole thing.

So when Jesus returned, they crammed for the real test of their faith in God: from now on, the Apostles would have to be very clear about what God intended and how Jesus carried out that intent during his life and ministry. It was time to begin the New Church, and they would be its leaders and deliverers of the Message of Jesus and the Love of God.

I'm sure this devoted group of men felt a certain pressure to perform – after all, Jesus was some act to follow! I'm sure they wondered how they were going to pull this off, and they probably felt overwhelmed by the whole notion of beginning a new (and unpopular) church based on Jesus' teachings. I bet they worried about how they might interpret God's Way...which was NOT the traditional Jewish Way...as they prepared to spread the Word.

This was huge – this was real – the future of the New Church was at stake, and they had to feel ill-prepared, in spite of the instruction Jesus must have given them.

I feel sorry for the poor Apostles – so willing, so hopeful, and now he was leaving again.

But here's where Jesus (with wisdom and belief in the integrity of his friends), provides the support they need – he offers them the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, who will soon join them in their work.

Then he takes his leave on a fluffy white cloud.

Whenever I hear the stories of the disciples and apostles, I feel such a connection to them...they aren't professional theologians with numerous degrees and lots of influence for, and support from politicians and other leaders of the community.

They are like us – ordinary people who believe in God and God's Way, expressed to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – who are willing to step up and be God for others. We have a lot in common!

Like the Apostles, we face events and actions that bring us out of hiding - and we wait for the Spirit and its influence to force us to take a stand or to provide an example to the world of how and what we believe is true if we are Children of God.

Like the Apostles, we aren't really prepared to do this on our own – so we wait for the Spirit, and its mystical presence to help us find the words and actions that bring people to us and to God – so we might gather with others, in God's name.

Like the Apostles, we aren't quite sure we really know how to live God's Way - so we wait for the Spirit to fill us up with confidence and faith to enable us to open our lives to whatever God gives us, and to hold fast to our belief in God, even in times of pain and strife.

And the reward for allowing the Spirit to help us keep our faith during and after these challenging times is a new level of acceptance and understanding of God's Love, which fills us with even more confidence to live and show how we feel – which brings even more people to God.

It is a cycle of faith-life that never ends – and I'm convinced it is why Jesus chose ordinary people like us to keep the faith alive in his absence.

Like the Apostles, we hope, we believe, we wait for a Holy Spirit to burrow deep into our beings – to prepare us to witness and serve our God.

Waiting for anything, much less a mystical Spirit, isn't easy – but if we trust Jesus, we know whatever comes will be worth the wait.

Amen.