

EXTENDING EASTER: RETURNING WITH JOY AND BLESSING

Luke 24:44-53

Along with 3 and 7 and 12, 40 is a number that figures significantly in the theology of the Bible. We remember that it rained forty days and nights while all aboard the ark floated along in safety. We may recall that the Hebrews wandered forty years in the wilderness before approaching the Jordan River intent upon entering the promised land. Jesus entered another wilderness for forty days as he wrestled with the evil one. These three instances alone, because each is significant to growing faith, would suggest that the number carries some significance. The forty days of ark floating gives way to dry land, and more importantly a rainbow of promise. The forty years of wandering includes Moses trekking up Mount Sinai to receive the law, tablets of stone carried later across the Jordan and into the new land. The forty days of temptation yield a Jesus who is ready to teach and act out his sacrificial love. In some sense, the good results encountered at the conclusion of each period of time gave greater significance to the days and years as God's grace and power unfolded in the lives of those who would be God's people.

The church has taken up the number 40 as well. We set aside forty days for Lent which requires that this season of preparation begin midweek with Ash Wednesday. Following the first chapter of the Book of Acts, it also suggests that the ascension of Christ is to be celebrated 40 days after Easter with another midweek service on a Thursday. Although Ash Wednesday has been recovered by much of the Protestant tradition, Ascension has not developed a similar following. Some of our reluctance to gather on a Thursday long after Easter may be a result of confusion in the Gospel according to Luke wherein Luke first records that Jesus ascends into heaven at the end of the day we call Easter.

Having already passed the holy forty for this year, we may wonder why we should bother to mark the event of ascension at all. Those who walk with people through grief, including pastors, may realize that forty days is about the time that the first stage of grief may require. The disorientation that occurs from grievous incidents, especially the death of a member, rocks life, often severely, for about forty days. Should such action continue beyond six weeks, one can begin to suspect that grief has taken deep root in life so much so that intervention may be needed. If one spouse continues to set the table as though the other would be home for supper at

any moment, assistance in moving forward may be needed. If the grieving one cannot begin to manage life again, healing attention may need to be paid by family, friends, and the church.

Forty days may signal the time when one moves from preoccupation with the past---particularly the event that prompted grief---to turning to a future that will be different because the grievous event has occurred. Much grief lasts a lifetime but it should not ordinarily cripple people from moving forward, at least after about 40 days.

The gospel reading from Luke draws together many strands of the story of Jesus. Though he has been present as the Risen Christ to many, this will come to an end, at least in its vibrant, community-oriented expression. The appearances of the Risen Christ in upper room, along the road to Emmaus, and along the seaside now come to end. To prepare disciples for his departure, Jesus reminds them that they have sufficient knowledge of God in the witnesses of the Torah, the prophets, and the psalms that a firm foundation of faith can be assured. Scriptural fulfillment is more a hallmark of Matthew but Luke is also convinced that God's promises can be counted upon to come to pass. Then the Risen Christ recalls the two important dynamics of God's grace: repentance and forgiveness before he blesses his disciples and is carried up into heaven.

What occurs next signifies that the disciples now turn their attention to the next evidences of the work of God, which will come according to Luke and the calendar of the church in just a week as the Spirit moves among those in an upper room. They wait for the Spirit, wait with joy, confident that though Christ has gone, God remains. And they continue to bless God in the Temple, perhaps taking up previous behavior that provided good fruit for faith. Joy and blessing, along with many events of struggle and suffering, now become the lives of the disciples as they bear the gospel into the world, however large they might conceive the world to be. All taken together are to be discovered as the Eleven is restored to Twelve and the Spirit leads the apostles out into the world. This flurry of activity begins to transform the disciples even as it forms the foundation for their work in the ages to come. No longer are they only followers of one who has suffered and been crucified, they are now apostles of resurrection.

Extending Easter may seem to be an artificial and even hopeless venture. The lilies have lost their bloom although hidden deep in the bulb, the plant is beginning to prepare for next year. It is obvious that we cannot sustain the excitement of resurrection for a significant number of Easter worshippers did not show up even the week following. But as followers of

Christ, we cannot abandon the hope that is brought forth in resurrection. Extending Easter may mean that it is time to anticipate the next era of life with which we are blessed, to ready ourselves for all that is yet to be in the creating Kingdom of God.

Ascension declares that an era of the eternal life of Christ and of his disciples has come to an end. It is time to reorient to the next call of God, a call that draws us beyond dead, however it might be experienced, to the new life that God has in mind for all. In the waning days of the season of Easter, we watch and wait...again. It is the gift of God that we be moved forward into the kingdom that is being created by God, that we ready ourselves for the power that will come from on high. Again, disciples prepare themselves for all that is yet to be. And they do so, joyfully, by blessing God who blesses them with every breath they take. As they return to previous behaviors, perhaps with a greater insight and intensity, the disciples continue to rejoice in all that God has done and all that God will yet do. They live within the grasp of the dynamic God who is ever redeeming and reconciling, the one who makes new and eternal.

The promise of God's continuing work in us and in the world allows us to both grieve all that is lost and ready our receive all that will be provided. Death is never the end, whether it be the death of a person or a dream, a relationship or an effort. Until the kingdom comes in its fullness, there is yet much to do.

This Sunday, we celebrate the faithful responses of mothers who often endure disappointment and grief and transform these losses into new life, for themselves and their children. A woman writes of her experience of death, of resurrection, and of new life. She takes responsibility for marrying a mean and abusive man who "criticized the way I walked. He was alternately annoyed and irate at the way I parented. He demanded the children's playful attention when he was in a good mood and their absolute silence when he was in a foul mood. He required my willingness to cook a full meal at any hour, and when, after several years, I refused, I guaranteed myself an argument or the silent treatment."

Throughout these years, her faith remained even as she persisted as part of a church, although most of the congregation did not know of her anguish and grief. Her life fell completely apart when criminal charges were filed against husband and arrest took place, an event proclaimed in the local newspaper. After the trial, he skipped town and her new life began. A year later, the mother moved on to seminary, and after years of preparation that began will before her studies, she now serves a pastor of a Pennsylvania

congregation. There are remnants of her past for the safety of her children remains an issue. Thus, she visits the school each year to rehearse necessary safeguards with the teacher and staff. The church which she now serves is well aware of her sorrow and grief, though she does not allow it to become the core of her identity as a mother.

This past week, our childcare center celebrated mother's day with a gathering of parents, grandparents, children and teachers. Gifts were created by the children, opportunities to become acquainted with other parents were offered, and one of the staff of the church---a mother---was invited to speak to the crowd. Essentially, she offered thanks for all the nurturing that takes place in a family and reminded---or perhaps announced---that parenting was not an opportunity to create perfection in either the child or the mother. Much happens along the way that defies the planning and preparation of the parent to deny such perfection. Her words of assurance were simply: "It will all work out."

Perhaps this was the truth that encouraged the disciples to joyfully return to the Temple to bless God for God can be counted upon to work it all out, inviting us to do the work required of us even as God carries out the plan of Kingdom. In the midst of the years of the Black Plague in Europe and an unsettled church in many societies, Julian of Norwich, a mother of the church reflected her faith in a present and redeeming God with words characteristic of her witness, words that have become her legacy of hope: All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Thanks be to God. Amen.