

“Blessing and Withdrawal” Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Rev. Michele Ward | Ascension Sunday | May 21, 2023

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church | Baltimore MD

GOSPEL READING Luke 24:44-53 (NRSVUE)

The second reading comes from the Gospel of Luke. Listen now for a Word from God.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

PRAYER

I grew up in an extended family that lived for the drawn out goodbye. My parents would start saying goodbye 15-20 minutes before we actually needed to leave an event. It would usually go like this. My parents, and all four of their children, would need to personally say goodbye to every person at the event before we could leave. It was like an entire goodbye ritual that mirrored the greeting

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process when we would arrive at a relative’s house for dinner or a party. Everyone receives a personal hug and a moment of intentional connection at the beginning and end of an event in my family. You see, that is just fine when the group is under 10 people. But family events tend to include at least 20, sometimes even 30 people, in my extended family. My siblings and I finally figured out a math equation for the goodbyes. My mom and dad would take about 1 minute per family member to say goodbye. So, multiply the time it would take to say goodbye per person, 1 minute, by the amount of people that we need to say goodbye to at the party, 20-30 people, and we would have an average amount of time for how long it would take to leave the party. If you’ve been listening to this drawn out math equation, then you’d know that it would take about 20-30 minutes to leave an event. This may seem like an exaggeration, but it is very true. My family takes their time with goodbyes. We love to linger. We are lingerers. Not because we have nowhere else to be, but because we’d rather be together, making memories, and cherishing the time we have.

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This morning we’re going to spend some time reflecting on how Jesus says goodbye and what it means for us today. Now, I think Jesus broke the record for the most prolonged goodbye. He took days to say goodbye to his friends, family, and followers. It has been roughly 50 days since Resurrection Sunday when Jesus appeared before the disciples. He is preparing to depart, not through a bloody execution, but on his own terms. He takes his time appearing to his community in the book of Luke. He has shown up on the road to Emmaus. He has broken bread with his disciples. He has shown up in Jerusalem. He ate broiled fish with them. He showed them the wounds on his hands and his feet. And then he led them away, out of the city of Jerusalem, and further out towards Bethany. And it was there that Jesus blessed them, left them, and was taken up to heaven.

Jesus isn’t the only person taken up into heaven like this. Two other people in the Old Testament - Enoch and Elijah - do not die, but go up to heaven. Enoch is one of the patriarchs in Genesis. His ascension is rather cryptic. Genesis says “Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away”

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(Genesis 5:24). Elijah is one of the prophets in the Old Testament.

Elijah’s ascension was much more exciting. A chariot of fire descended from heaven with horses of fire, and the chariot took Elijah away into the heavens in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1-9). The ascension of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke was a little more cryptic, like Enoch’s, but had a much bigger crowd. Jesus has really taken his time with this goodbye. It isn’t rushed like Enoch’s and it isn’t as dramatic as Elijah’s, but it is meaningful in its own way. Jesus takes his time saying goodbye. Jesus does not rush through it. He easily could have appeared to the two disciples leaving Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus and then peaced out. He didn’t need to stick around. He didn’t need to stay for almost two months, speaking, eating, and visiting with his community. But he did. He chose to do this in his resurrected form, fully aware of the risks he took as a “dead and now alive” person. But he did it anyway. He was more of a lingerer than my mom’s family could ever claim to be. What is it about this desire to say? What is it about the goodbye that is so hard? Why does Jesus put it off so many times?

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This is an interactive sermon, and I’m going to ask you to turn to your neighbor this morning and spend some time talking to one another. I want you to each share an answer to the following questions: How do you say goodbye? What do goodbyes mean to you?

(FIVE MINUTES)

Please wrap up your conversations and return to your seats, if you’ve done any moving around in the last five minutes. As we wrap up this morning, I would like to hear from a few people willing to share. How do you say goodbye? What do goodbyes mean to you?

AMEN