

**Sermon**

**“What Time Is It?”**

June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

Ascension of the Lord

Based on Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 and Acts 1:1-11

**SCRIPTURE:**

**Ecclesiastes 3:1-11**

<sup>1</sup> For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: <sup>2</sup> a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; <sup>3</sup> a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; <sup>4</sup> a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; <sup>5</sup> a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; <sup>6</sup> a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; <sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; <sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. <sup>9</sup> What gain have the workers from their toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. [NRSV]

**Acts 1:1-11**

<sup>1</sup> In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” <sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” <sup>7</sup> He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” <sup>9</sup> When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** Our Lord and our God, through the hearing and proclaiming of your Word, fill us with your Spirit this day. Soften our hearts that we may delight in your presence. Sharpen our minds that we may discern your truth. And, shape our wills that we may desire your ways. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord we pray, and let all God's people say ... Amen.

### **What's Been on My Mind**

For anyone who was present at the noontime Good Friday service back in mid-April, you heard begin my sermon that day by explaining how over the years when I've gone to various places to provide a devotion or deliver a sermon, especially to groups who I don't see on a regular basis (i.e.—each Sunday), as a way of getting into my devotion or sermon, I've tended to begin by explaining what's been on my mind lately—to provide a roadmap of where my mind was at, to some degree. And, in those instances, I've tried to connect the dots from one thought to another as things have shaped themselves into a coherent idea for that particular devotion or sermon message.

In many ways, today's sermon is no different—not that I don't see you regularly (each week), but that I want to begin by explaining what's been on my mind lately and how that relates to a somewhat coherent idea about the Ascension. And, lately my mind's been on how Christ-following people of faith here at FPC understand scripture and theology with an openly and proudly Presbyterian flavor and perspective. I think it's a result of all that the past month brought us, when each Sunday of worship in May included a wonderful expression of how we Presbyterian flavored Christians do things:

- 1) May 5<sup>th</sup>—Youth Sunday—when we embraced how people of faith at a young age are invited to lead worship and share their God-given gifts, as well as how the community of faith celebrates our young disciples through a variety of milestones, especially graduation;
- 2) May 12<sup>th</sup>—Baptism of Evelyn Pope—when we made promises to love and nurture a child of God who is claimed and named by a God she doesn't even know about yet, but we know that God created her and loves her infinitely; when her parents made a commitment on her behalf to follow Jesus Christ with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength;

- 3) May 19<sup>th</sup>—Communion—when we once again shared the sacrament together; when we accepted the invitation to the Table, knowing it's got nothing to do with how worthy we feel but instead with how much God loves us and is doing in our lives; when we recognize that elements as simple as bread and a cup are visible signs of God's invisible grace;
- 4) May 26<sup>th</sup>—New Members—when we welcomed with open arms and open hearts two more disciples and children of God who have been called to be part of Christ's ministry in this place and with this part of the body of Christ!

### **Doing Things in Christ's Name**

And, did you notice all the verbs I used just then ... to embrace, lead, celebrate, promise, love, nurture, follow, share, accept, and welcome? Because that's exactly where our worship practices take on a clear and unmistakable Presbyterian flavor—because Presbyterian flavored Christians tend to understand God's Word recorded in scripture, and made real to us in the person Jesus the Christ, as telling us in clear and unmistakable terms to “do” things—particularly to love God and love our neighbor, and to return thanks to God in all we say and do for the amazing gift of grace.

Of course, the idea of “doing” things in Christ's name is a common and recurring theme in sermon after sermon because ... well ... it's a common and recurring theme in the Bible. Here's just one example—all four gospels tell the story of God's work done through Jesus Christ, and they all conclude with Jesus' command to go, to move, to follow, to proclaim, or to witness. Jesus never says to take all that you've learned and talk about it amongst yourselves. Jesus never says to take all that you've seen and keep it to yourselves. No, Jesus very clearly says that believing in a living and loving and gracious God means that we are required to get up off the couch and get busy with being part of God's plan of redemption.

Indeed, the end of each gospel is the culmination of all the years of God's work being done through Jesus Christ—in the flesh, on the ground. And, then the book of Acts marks a new beginning—picking up where the gospels leave off

and telling the story of God’s work being done through the Holy Spirit. And, the Ascension story is the bridge—it’s the transition point.

### **The Story of Jesus’ Ascension**

Now, as a biblical and theological event, these days the Ascension doesn’t get the top billing like Christmas and Easter receive—no pageants to plan or cards to send or parties to attend. It seems to have been a much bigger deal for early Christians, who made sure to include it in the ancient creeds of our faith alongside Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection. In fact, our faith ancestors called the ascension “the crown of Christian festivals.”

However, things have changed over the past 2,000 years. For the most part, while practically all Christ-followers agree on the principle components of Christmas (Jesus’ birth) and Easter (Jesus’ death and resurrection), the Ascension is where some people get stuck. Think about an old-fashioned teeter-totter, or seesaw. When I grew up, they were in every city park and school playground you could find. And, it’s amazing how much fun you can have just by putting a long, narrow board across a single pivot point. Then two people of similar sizes sit on either end of the board and simply teeter-totter, or seesaw, back and forth, up and down. Somehow, the fun can go on and on and on.

Now, the image of a teeter-totter is helpful in understanding how various expressions of the Christian faith understand things. On one end of the teeter-totter are us Presbyterian-flavored Christians and many of our Reformed cousins (UCC, ELCA Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, Reformed churches, etc.), and on the other end are churches we identify as more fundamental, evangelical, non-denominational, and holiness or Pentecostal. Please understand, these are broad distinctions, based on labels I didn’t create, meant to illustrate the point rather than to criticize. And, the point is that we are all on the teeter-totter board somewhere between the two ends, as if on a spectrum, and the Ascension story is the pivot point in the middle.

Here’s what I mean ... it all comes down to a question of time and what we do with the time we are given. The disciples had their time with Jesus—they traveled with Jesus for three years. They had experienced his final, agonizing

hours. Then they had forty more days of Jesus appearing among them after Easter. They were most certainly ready for the roller coaster to end—they were ready for the kingdom to come. And, they apparently thought the time was juuuuust right. So they asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v.6) ... But, Jesus replies, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” (v.7)

### **It’s All About Time**

See, it’s all about time and how we spend our time. They are talking about the kingdom of Israel but Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God. And, in the kingdom of God, when we ask, “what time is it?” the answer is never “now”. And, in the kingdom of God, when we ask, “is it time yet?” the answer is never “yes”.

And, so instead of answering the question related to time, Jesus answers them with more commands. He tells them to move ... to get going ... that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (v.8) And, as the Ascension story goes, when he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And, while they were gazing up toward the sky, two men in white robes stood next to them and asked, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (v.11)

And, that’s the pivot point—that’s where too many people get stuck. Because the next thing those two men in white robes say is that Jesus will come again in the same way you saw him go. And, ever since—for two thousand-plus years—Christ-following people of faith have been divided between those who are stuck in *that* moment—stuck looking up—stuck waiting for Jesus’ return—and those who pay more attention to what Jesus said to do just a few verses prior *before* he ascended—those who make it their priority to do Christ’s work in the *meantime*.

### **Doing Christ’s Work in the Meantime**

Now, I’m not suggesting that our sisters and brothers in Christ on the other end of the theological spectrum from us don’t do good mission work. They certainly have done, are doing, and will continue to do those good things. But, theologically, the foundation of their faith is much more anchored in Christ’s

return rather than in Christ's commands to stay busy in the meantime. Because it's all about time and how we spend our time.

When the disciples basically asked, "What time is it? Is it time yet for Israel to be restored?" Jesus answered that it isn't for them to know God's times or periods. Likewise, when people of faith today ask, "What time is it? Is it time yet for Jesus' return?" Jesus' answer rings as true today as it was then ... "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." And, just like the disciples were talking about the kingdom of Israel instead of the kingdom of God, too many people today act as if the kingdom of God still has yet to come instead of taking their part in the work of the kingdom right here and now.

### **What Time Is It?**

And, in the kingdom of God, when we ask, "what time is it?" the answer is always that it's time to get moving and to get busy! Because there's no time to stand still! If we sit staring up into heaven looking for Jesus, then we cannot be God's witnesses "to the ends of the earth." So instead of worrying so much about the timing of everything, we must focus on what Jesus asks us to actually do! And, so, the two men in white robes are basically saying to Jesus' followers, "People wherever you are, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? It's time to get going and get moving."

This is why the book of Acts begins with the Ascension story. The book of Acts is foremost a record of people and God in motion. It shows us how God's people, based on all that Jesus did and taught, and all the Spirit empowers them to do, marked a new beginning of fulfilling of Jesus' commands to go, to move, to follow, to proclaim, and to witness. Because our lives of faith are all about what we are doing in the meantime—between the beginning of everything and the end of everything—*that* is our faith-filled purpose.

### **The Business That God Has Given to Us**

In closing, here's another way to think about it ... the writer of Ecclesiastes spent a lot of time meditating about the "meantime" between God's beginning and end of everything, and the writer recorded, "I have seen the business that God

has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

Once again, it’s all about time, but it’s not for us to know God’s times or periods. Instead, it’s simply enough for us to concern ourselves with the business God has given to us to be busy with—the business of being Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth—the business of going, moving, following, proclaiming, witnessing, and loving in the strong name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Friends, our term of service as Jesus’ witnesses has no exact timeline, at least from the human side of things. The command is simply given—“you will be my witnesses” ... everywhere, day in, and day out. And, so we must continue to do what God has called us to do until one day God finally says, “Stop.” And, God willing, that day and time is a long, long way from now.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—may it be so. Amen.