

Homily, St. Andrew's
Ascension Sunday, May 17, 2015
Acts 1:1-11 (Luke 24:44-53)

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Shakespeare once wrote: "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts..." The broad sweep of salvation history can be understood as a kind of play with the whole world as the stage. Beginning from creation, various scenes were played out differentiated by the series of covenants between God and God's people... until, that is, the curtain came down on the first act with the Babylonian exile. We might call the time of exile and the restoration that followed a long intermission... a fertile time during which the Israelite community transformed into the Jewish people. Then with the arrival of a baby saviour, the curtain rose on Act 2. Since our time of preparation back in Advent, we have been living through this second act as we have ritually and liturgically enacted the story of Jesus. Today, however, the curtain falls once more as the second act comes to an end with Jesus' Ascension into heaven. On the world's stage, one player - Jesus - makes his final exit and we enter another intermission, during which we wait for the curtain to rise again so that we can discover what Act 3 will bring.

The biblical way in which this important transition is most clearly marked is at the intersection of the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Written by the same author, the 2 book set of Luke-Acts covers two "acts" of salvation history. The introduction to the Book of the Acts of the Apostles summarizes the transition well: "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning..." This first phrase of the introduction sets the stage for the next Act of the play, with the writer announcing the intermission... the first book is done, we'll now take a 15 break so you can go to the bathroom and get another drink then the action will resume!

While we wait, we might consider one of the basic questions with which the Christian church has struggled over the years: What is the relationship between "right belief" (orthodoxy) and "right action" (orthopraxy)? Are good works enough? Is right belief enough? Does it matter what we believe? Does it matter what we do? Which matters more? Within the Protestant side of the Christian church, both "extremes" are lived out. On one side are the churches who preach primarily "orthodoxy"... that as long as you confess Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, that's all that really matters. How you live matters, kind of, but mostly in terms of obeying rules of individual morality. On the other side are churches who preach primarily "orthopraxy"... that as long as you participate in the social world as a force for good - fighting for justice, social activism, practically caring for people in poverty or homelessness - that's all that really matters. How or what you believe matters, kind of, but there is much wiggle-room and lack of clarity in just what those beliefs might be. With the very existence of his 2-book story, the author of Luke-Acts rejects both extremes. The Gospel - the Good News - proclamation - belief - matters for Acts, and the acts - practice - life in community - matters as a constituent part of the good news. As one commentator plainly explains: "The reader who attempts to follow the plot line of Acts

without benefit of ‘the first book’ will have missed much that is utterly essential for reading the second volume. The story of Jesus’ messianic career is the narrative subtext of Acts; the stories must be read together as a whole greater than the sum of its two integral parts.” (NIB, 37) Taken together, the 2-volume set of Luke-Acts speaks to the importance of holding proclamation with practice... of never losing sight of the connection between the practical life of our community and the story of Jesus.

The introduction to the Acts of the Apostles goes on: “I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning, until the day when he was taken up to heaven...” The ‘taking up’ itself is a fantastic story, told both at the very end of Luke’s Gospel and just after the introduction in Acts. After some final instructions, Jesus seemingly floats up to heaven and disappears in the clouds. Jesus goes up... and the disciples are left standing there, staring into space as it were, until two men in white robes... I like to think they’re angels... appear and ask: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” It has always struck me as a rather comedic moment, injected into a serious, final goodbye. Jesus is lifted up into heaven and the curtain falls on his life and his life’s work. The disciples must be wondering: What happens now? The journey had already be so full of strange, devastating and wonderful times... teaching and healing, betrayal and death, new life and hope...

Thankfully, the introduction of the next act... a story not yet begun, isn’t even complete: “I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning, until the day when he was taken up to heaven after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit...” Thankfully, Jesus has left the disciples, has left us, with some instructions, however brief and mysterious: “wait in Jerusalem until God’s next promise is fulfilled... you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...” The only part of the instructions those first disciples could have possibly understood is to wait. Most days, I’m still not convinced we know what baptism by the Holy Spirit really means... but waiting... waiting for God to come is something understandable. It is something possible, even if it is among the most annoying of instructions. The virtue of patience is not a virtue that I received when I was made and so I find the instruction to wait particularly frustrating. Why can’t we just get on with it... whatever “it” might be!?! But that is not God’s way. Waiting in hope... waiting with expectation... waiting with keen eyes and ears so that we don’t miss God’s arrival... This is God’s way. It all makes sense, it’s just frustrating. And yet our faith and our hope and our experience of God’s faithfulness in the past tells us that we must follow. We must remain in Jerusalem and wait, because the pause, the intermission in the action, won’t last forever.

“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts...” With Jesus’ Ascension into heaven today, his final exit, our parts in the world’s stage of salvation history change. Jesus’ Ascension into heaven inaugurates a new age by concluding the previous one and when the promised new age comes, there will be new parts for all the players, for all of us. We will no longer play supporting roles but rather starring ones as the curtain itself disappears and the whole world’s the stage in a new and glorious way. In the meantime, while we wait in this time of intermission, we can take our time in prayer and study and worship as we anticipate the new thing God is about to do in sending the Holy Spirit. We can consider how our individual and communal lives are connected to the story of Jesus that we have just re-enacted. We can reflect

on our proclamation and our practice, our belief and our action and ensure that it's all working together for the glory of God.