



The Ascension and Human Fragility

Acts 17:1-9

Rev. Thomas G. James
Washington Street UMC
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In this season of Easter, which officially comes to a conclusion next Sunday as we celebrate Pentecost Sunday, we've been challenged by the witness of the early church to *get our act together*. We've looked at how the book of Acts offers us a faithful reminder of the work of the church in the world, and in doing so, we've named how we – the Christian Church today – have so often fallen short of living into God's design for us as the Spirit-gifted witness of Christ in the world.

In the book of Acts, there is a major change in the story beginning in chapter 13. Luke's focus shifts from Peter and his ministry in the early church to focus on Saul, who is also known as Paul. The rest of the book of Acts, all the way through chapter 28, will tell of Paul's travels from a storyteller's perspective. Unlike Paul's letters, which are heavily focused on how to understand the gospel – what it means that Christ Lord – here in Acts, what we find is the narrative of Paul's travels.

If you skim through the rest of Acts, what you'll find is a repetitive pattern in Paul's travels. Our reading for today, coming in chapter 17, offers a good example. Let's look at this text briefly.

Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica, and they immediately went to the Jewish synagogue. While there, Paul preached about Jesus as the fulfillment of the suffering servant – the one who is the Messiah. The text says that Paul argued with the Jews at the synagogue about the scriptures.

This pattern is reoccurring – both in Thessalonica and in the other cities where Paul travels. At Thessalonica, Paul returned to the synagogue three times to repeat this evangelistic argument in the presence of the Jews.

In response to his teaching, preaching, and arguing, a number of people are persuaded and come to have faith in Christ as Lord. This happens both among the Jews at the synagogue, as well as among the philosophers and the greater Greek community in the cities where Paul travelled. Here in Acts 17, we're told a number of devout Greeks and a few of the leading women all came to have faith and joined Paul and Silas.

But, again a reoccurring theme, not everyone was so convinced by Paul's teaching and arguing. Time and time again Paul is sought out and opposed, attacked, and plotted against as people tried to kill him. Read through the last 12 chapters of Acts and notice how many times Paul faced opposition.

Here in chapter 17, the Jews of Thessalonica stirred up and incited the crowd to the extent that the Christian community sent Paul away in order to protect him. In chapter 18, a united attack was brought against Paul and they took him before the tribunal, saying he was persuading people to worship God in

a way that was contrary to the law. In chapter 20, the Jews plotted against him to the extent that he had to alter his travel arrangements. There were plans to kill him in chapter 21 before he was arrested. And in the rest of Acts, from 22-28, Paul is under imprisonment, going from one trial to another, offering appeal after appeal, as he sought to regain his freedom – all while professing and proclaiming Christ as Lord.

Everywhere Paul went, he found that some would embrace the proclamation and teaching of Christ as the fulfillment as God's Messiah, and he found that others were ... well, they were less willing to accept such a teaching. They were, in fact, so less willing that instead of just asking Paul to leave, instead of refusing to allow Paul to enter the synagogues and teach, they sought to have his voice quieted, indeed to have him killed.

And it wasn't just Paul that faced such a challenge. Look back to our reading today in chapter 17.

It was believed that in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas were staying at the house of a man named Jason. We know very little about Jason, other than his being an early Christian convert who had entertained Paul and Silas as guests at his house. The Jews of Thessalonica formed a mob from the ruffians at the market place, a mob which was sent to Jason's house to find Paul and Silas. The two men were not there, so the mob dragged *Jason* to the city authorities, claiming he was supportive of the work of Paul and Silas in acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor by stating that Jesus (not Caesar) was King.

Jason, who we might call a known associate of Paul, is one example of those who were targeted because of their being sympathetic to the faith. In chapter 18, we find a man named Sosthenes was beaten simply because the tribunal wouldn't judge Paul. Sosthenes was the official at the local synagogue, to our knowledge he was not a Christian, but he became the scape goat for the crowd's anger against Paul. Later, Gaius and Aristarchus were dragged to the theater at the center of town because of their association with Paul. It was not just Paul and his preaching that invited repercussions – it was any who supported his preaching and claim of Jesus as Lord and King.

“The good news of God is a troubling word. This is the irony that greets those who become disciples. They now carry a life-giving word that brings hostile opposition.”ⁱ This opposition is experienced both in the life of the church and in the greater political empire.

In the context of the first century, the empire equates Caesar as Lord. In the face of any contradiction, the empire gets a bit testy. “As [Professor] C. Kevin Rowe notes, Caesar now emerges as a counterfeit, ‘a rival to the Lordship of God in the person of Jesus Christ.’”ⁱⁱ That won't stand from a political perspective – all rivals to Caesar shall be dealt with severely.

But the challenge is just as much religious. As Willie James Jennings offers, “The house of God is a place of struggle fully immersed in the cultic anxiety of identity loss and the theological fear of being unfaithful to God.”ⁱⁱⁱ The teaching of Jesus as the Messiah invites a cosmic shift within the historic faith of the Hebrews, and unless the Jerusalem Temple were to affirm Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, there would be no universal acceptance among the Jews.

Anytime we're told we have it wrong, whether political or religious, there is often an uncomfortable knee-jerk reaction that follows. We see this fight or flight reaction in the response of the Jews in Acts just as much as we see it in the reaction of professing Christians today.

For example, just this past week, Saddleback Church, where Rick Warren is the lead pastor in California, ordained three women as pastors. It's the first time in the church's 41 year-history they've ordained any women, marking a huge break from the traditions of the Southern Baptist Convention, of which they are one of the largest affiliated churches. The vitriolic response of (predominantly) white self-proclaimed Christian men on social media this past week has been ... loud. It's been *very loud*. The fragility of those voicing their opposition to the ordination of women is not unlike the Jews hunting out Paul and Silas for teaching a gospel message with which they disagreed. It's one thing to have a difference of opinion, it's a whole other story to seek to dispel, quiet, and yes, to threaten those with whom you disagree.

I won't go far into the political equivalencies, as they seem rather easy to identify, regardless of your personal political affiliation, but, as one example, setting up hanging gallows on the front lawn of the US Capital building because you want to kill those who would vote against your desire for a presidential election – yeah ... snowflake, your fragility is showing.

So let's talk about this fragility – whether political, religious, racial, cultural, or even individual – let's talk about fragility. I believe, at least within our framework of the Christian church in America, that our fragility stems from a terrible misunderstanding of our identity as the Church. Our fragility – our inability to accept change, to embrace truth, to understand our call as God's Spirit-gifted witness in the world – our fragility stems from our lack of understanding of today's celebration regarding the Ascension of Christ.

Backing up to the start of Acts, in chapter 1, beginning in verse 6, we read, "When they had come together, [the disciples] asked [Jesus], 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'"

The first thing we should note is that even after Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples haven't grasped what it means that *Jesus is Lord*. Even after all Christ has said, done, and taught them, "They still anticipated a literal Messianic kingdom patterned after the kingships of the Old Testament."^{iv} Their focus in this question is still on a nationalistic lifting up of Israel over the rest of humanity. With this focus, the framework of Acts makes sense. The first few chapters are all about converting Jews in Judea. It took some time, even after the gifting of the Spirit, for them to realize the call of Christ is beyond Judea. It took more time for them to leave Judea and Samaria – for us to get to the chapters about Paul's travels to Greece and Rome. The focus of the disciples was on a their tribe, their people, their cultural norms ... and so they ask Christ, is now when you restore the kingdom to Israel?

Picking up in verse 7, "[Jesus] replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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.'" When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

The disciples were focused on power – on Israel being reclaimed as God’s chosen kingdom. This is a common problem with humanity in every generation. It continues to be a problem for humanity in our generation. We have this sinful desire to control, to be in charge, to have authority, to be among the few and select of God’s chosen, as if God has only chosen a few.

Christ not only says this is not the way of God, Christ not only instructs that the power of the Spirit will lead them beyond Jerusalem, beyond Judea and Samaria, truly to the ends of the earth, but Christ also makes one final statement of proclamation in the ascension. The ascension *itself* is a statement about the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus ascends so as not to hold on to an empirical role of power as the kings of earth seek to hold.

If the resurrection is just about power, all it does is “turn Jesus into the greatest victor in an eternal competition and produces disciples who follow Jesus only because they worship power.”^v The promise of God in Jesus Christ, the gift of the resurrection, is not about power, it’s about new life. It’s about righting wrongs, restoring wholeness, giving freedom to the oppressed, comforting the broken, offering life amidst death.

And here, here we find the root of our fragility in the Church.

The Church has this historical problem of thinking that our knowledge of Christ gives us power over the rest of humanity, because we think we lay hold of Jesus for ourselves. Every subset, every denomination, every independent church ... we think, if we are the gate keepers, no one gets in but those we deem worthy. No one gets new life, but those we grant access. No one finds comfort save those we grant comfort. And because we lay claim to Jesus, because we define Jesus as “ours,” no one can challenge our belief or our knowledge without us getting upset, causing an uproar, and spewing vitriolic hatred at the other.

But look, Acts makes it clear, Jesus doesn’t embed *himself* in us. Jesus doesn’t even stick around so that we might chain him up in our limited ways of understanding. No, Jesus *ascends*. Jesus goes forth to reign over the whole of the cosmos, and to call all of God’s humanity into this great cloud of witnesses that the body of Christ might be rebuilt on earth through the continual expansion of the church.

But how do we expand the church without Christ in our midst? The disciples wondered the same thing, as dumbfounded, they gazed into the sky where Jesus had vanished. In their presence appeared two men, dressed in white robes, just as appeared to Mary at the empty tomb. “These men said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?’”

Why do you look upward? Why do you gaze into the vast unknown? Why are you still standing here?

The ascension tells us so much about who we are to be as God’s people. The book of Acts gifts us this opportunity to look back to a time even before the Church was breathed into existence to ask, how did God decide to gift new life to humanity? Friends, I hope you’ve been able see this over the past few

week ... it is not the Church. We are not God's gift for the world. God's gift for the world, God's love for the world, it is made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is our Savior. Jesus is the Lord. Jesus is the suffering servant ... the Messiah.

Our call, the call of the Church, as we will focus on next week at Pentecost Sunday, our call is be witnesses to the divine love of God in Jesus Christ. Our call is not to be gatekeepers, but story tellers who profess and proclaim the promise of new life made possible in Jesus Christ, that all – those in Jerusalem, those in Judea and Samaria, and yes, even those to the ends of the earth, might know the mighty life-giving love of God in Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Willie James Jennings. *Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary On The Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Jennings.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jennings.

^{iv} Gina M. Stewart. "Lection – Acts 1:4-8." August 3, 2008. Theafricanamericanlectionary.org.

^v Jennings.