

## Passing the Baton

June 5, 2011

### Scripture: John 17:1-11, Acts 1:6-14 (below)

1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

1:7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

1:8 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."

1:9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

1:10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

1:11 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."

1:12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.

1:13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

1:14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

### Proclamation of the Word

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. And I know it to be true. I am usually the one who goes on trips leaving my family behind. Almost always, I am doing things that stretch my brain, bring me joy, and feed my soul when it is ministry related. Not that I don't miss my family back home, but I am distracted and busy with wonderful things. On the other hand, when I am the one left behind, and either Chuck or the kids are away: at work, at camp, at play, I really, really miss them. I feel like a toddler dropped off at daycare looking out the window and thinking "I wonder when they'll be home?"

Is it time yet?? Wonder what they are doing?

Absence does make the heart grow fonder.

But the absence of someone you love, can be tough especially if the one you love and miss is Jesus. In Scripture today, Jesus prays a beautiful prayer for those he is about to leave. And by the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus prays this prayer for us.

"And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Absence.... The first disciples knew that absence too. When Jesus was crucified, died and was buried in a tomb, they felt his absence and despair even though he promised to be with them even to the end of the age. Then when he was raised, they were glad to see him, but he could not stay forever here on earth. So ever since that first Ascension day, we have been waiting for him to return. Jesus led the disciples out to Mount Olivet and spoke his last words on earth to them as we read from the first chapter of Acts. We have been waiting for almost 2000 years. Now that is absence...

Many in our world today, experience the absence of God.

Some people in Joplin, MO are sitting in shelters enjoying the “bought air” (or Air Conditioning) or digging through the rubble that was their home, their sweat, their tears. Some of them are feeling the absence of God.

Some people are struggling with illness or depression. Some are caring for those who feel lost and depressed, but desperately cannot “fix it” for them.

Some are sitting in a bunker, a crack house, a hospital room. And they are waiting...waiting for things to get better. They feel absence.

Still others don't even feel that absence of God. Their lives are way too full to even notice God. They are sitting in bleachers, working in offices, or racing to and fro.

But today, we showed up. We showed up to worship. We long to know God's presence in our lives. Maybe you showed up because you have experienced God's absence and long to draw near to him. Maybe you showed up because it is habit, in the best sense.

Knowing that God is already present.

You have disciplined yourself to be present with God in worship.

Maybe you do not know why you are here in worship, but God has a purpose for your being here.

Worship is the least productive thing we could be doing. Writer Marva Dawn calls worship a “Royal Waste of Time”. We show up to confess what we believe, to offer prayers, songs, gifts, and to open ourselves up to God... to be in the presence of God. Not that we cannot meet God at the grocery store or sitting on our decks, but we gather and worship to seek after the heart of God.

God who seeks after us is already here. We are enjoying Sabbath. I know Sabbath is really Friday night – Saturday night, but we are Sabbath-ing together.

It is what we do. And we desperately need it. We direct our eyes, our hearts, our attention heavenward for a little while week after week, so that we can dwell in God's presence. We know oneness with God as the Father and Jesus know oneness, unity with each other. When we worship, we realize that everything, our time, our jobs, our loved ones, even our own tattered souls, everything is in God's hands. We remember some things. We re-learn how to trust. We gain perspective. We worship.

Worship might be unproductive, but it is exactly where you and I need to be.

On Ascension Sunday when we mark that Jesus ascends to heaven, leaving behind his earthly ministry. We remember Jesus' absence. We know how absence makes the heart grow fonder. It makes us hungry-hungry for God's presence, especially in those dark nights of the soul.

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When I go to work some days, I leave notes stuck to the back door for Avery. He comes home on the bus. He will lift up the garage door and walk right through the door. I will leave him notes placed at 12 year old boy eye level: fold the laundry in the dryer, empty the dishwasher, feed the dog, do your homework, Love you, Mom. He has things to do until Chuck and I get home from work. Every member of the family has work to do to help each other. While my children may not yet agree, shared work is noble. It is how we show love in action. We each contribute.

Before Jesus is lifted up to heaven to be seated on the right hand of God the Father, he leaves us instructions...things to do until he gets back. He gives us chores, yes, work to do. He scribbles it down on the minds of his disciples. He sticks it to the door of our hearts so they won't forget saying,

"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."

This promise is their inheritance, their parting gift. That is the promise we hold onto. It is why we keep coming back to the Mount where we last saw him. We band together, remembering his words, and waiting for his presence. It hurts to know that kind of loss, but we trust and believe in the promise knowing that joy and purpose will return.

The disciples are dumb-founded, necks craning up at the sight of Jesus being lifted into the heavens. The messengers stand by to say, Stop looking up. He'll be back. Look around. You have each other and are not alone in this. Get ready for the Spirit that will power your work, your lives, your ministry. The disciples knew first-hand the significance of Jesus in this world. He had been born to make known to us the very presence of God. He demonstrated the good news and declared grace and forgiveness upon their lives. Even though he was gone, they were hopeful for what was ahead. They came down off the mountaintop and devoted themselves to actively waiting for the Holy Spirit which would be Jesus' PRESENCE made real. While they waited expectantly for the power to do their mission, they prayed. They continued with life until the time was right, and the Spirit descends on them and many others at Pentecost. Jesus wasn't kidding about the Spirit.

At his ascension, Jesus passed the baton to them. Those eleven, turn into thousands. Those thousands took the baton and pass on the message and the love of God. To the ends of the earth they went, looking for the places where God's presence and good news was needed most. The Word spread to South Asia and South Carolina, even to the ends of the earth.

The angels said when you stop looking up and look around is when you are most likely to see him again. Look at the world, at ordinary people in their ordinary lives- his body will be made real when the risen Lord lives in you. He could no longer be present on earth, so that through people like you and me, he could be everywhere present. He has passed the baton on to us.

When the disciples stopped looking up and started looking around, they began to see Jesus around them in the face of friend and stranger. They began to act like him and speak his words to others.

When we gather with each other in an upper room, in the kitchen, or this stone sanctuary, to hear God's words, we are changed. We are offered the nourishment of pure Presence of God in Jesus Christ. We break bread and share a cup just like he told us to so that we might be re-membered, put back together again, and joined together in the Body of Christ with each other.

We keep coming back to this table because we have felt loss and need the presence of Christ in our lives. We open our hands and hearts to receive again the living Word who is Jesus. And we recall that he passed his mission and ministry on to us.

I am here today to remind you to stop looking up, but look around...look around you....God is everywhere present. So grab the baton and share that news wherever God leads us.

Laura Smith Conrad  
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**Invitation**

Our Lord invites all who trust in him to come and be filled, be filled with bread, cup and the abiding presence of God. His prayer was that we may be one as God is one. Come and be filled again with the very presence of Christ.

**Concluding Prayer**

Lord, as we receive you this day, we know that you have called us to be your hands, your feet, your heart in this world. May we be strengthened for the work ahead. If absence makes the heart grow fonder, your presence makes us all grow stronger. Thanks be to God who grants us such grace! Amen.