

The UMC of Berea
Psalm 68.1-10; Acts 1.1-11
Ascension of the Lord Sunday

“Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?” the disciples ask Jesus, just before his ascension, when his physical presence is carried away. “Are we there yet?” they wonder impatiently, like so many of us these days: waiting for the world to “re-open,” to get back to “normal,” whatever that new normal will be. The disciples are getting restless, and who can blame them? We have been loving our neighbors by staying home for two months now. The disciples have been on their journey—eagerly anticipating this “restoration”—for years.

From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, God’s kingdom has been the core of his life and message. After being tempted in the wilderness—following his baptism in the Jordan River—Jesus’ first words in the Gospel of Mark are this hopeful proclamation: “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom!” And even that—three years before today’s story—tapped into a much older tradition, stretching back centuries to the prophets’ longing for a new, more loving, more lasting sort of community.

And so, it makes sense that now—centuries after those promises began, three years after Jesus’ ministry started, forty days after Jesus’ resurrection—it makes sense that Jesus’ followers might be a little antsy. “Here comes God’s kingdom!” Jesus had said. “Well, where is it?” they want to know.

But in fact, the problem is not that we are waiting. The problem is that Jesus’ followers—then and now—get confused about what and where God’s “kingdom” is. We confuse two vastly different sorts of “kingdoms.” Jesus talks about the inbreaking of a beloved community—the fulfillment of God’s dream: a neighborhood of shalom, mutual care, celebrating the inherent goodness of every bit of creation. The disciples ask about the restoration of the “kingdom to Israel”: a nation-state, ordered around economics and military might. Two very different things, indeed.

The disciples ask about a return to the way things were—or, really, to an imagined, idealized version of the past. Jesus talks about moving into something new: a new community that calls forth in each of us a new way of life.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus says that this beloved community is not the sort of thing we can say is “here” or “there,” confined to any physical location. Instead, Jesus insists, it is “already among us” (Luke 17.21). It is already in our relationships, the ways we stay connected while we’re apart, the way we order our life together as a neighborhood, a society, a world.

God’s dream for how this world can be—should be, must be—already is among us. It is here and now, which is why the “two men in white robes” question the disciples after Jesus’ ascension: “Why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? Why are you standing around, staring into the sky? Our goal—our purpose, what we are living for—isn’t up there somewhere. It is not off in some distant future or after we die. It is here, breaking in on us and among us, everywhere and all the time.”

Today’s celebration in our life together as church—this final Sunday of Easter, one week before Pentecost, “Ascension of the Lord Sunday”—today’s celebration re-directs our focus: around us and among us, in the direction of God’s new creation and the distinctive changes that are called out in us as we are changed in the direction of God’s dream.

Psalm 68—our first reading today—gives us a glimpse of what this new world—God’s dream—looks like: the direction toward which our lives must be changed as the beloved community becomes more real among us day by day. Not surprisingly, it is based in God’s character.

As the psalm opens, its focus is on divine power—God the “almighty”:

Sing to God! Sing praises to God’s name!

Exalt the one who rides the clouds!

And then, we are given this other aspect of God’s character, inseparable from the first. Psalm 68 begins in celebration, affirming God’s authority, but then turns in verses 5 and 6 to show us the purpose of God’s power:

Parent of orphans and defender of widows

is God in God’s holy habitation.

God settles the lonely in their homes,

sets prisoners free with happiness,

but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

This great song of praise now opens to us this other piece of God’s character: God’s new creation is not about God’s power. Christ’s ascension in glory is not about being in control. It is about a relationship of compassion and care—faithfulness and steadfast lovingkindness—wherein God chooses solidarity with the most vulnerable—the most at-risk—in our communities.

For Psalm 68, this includes orphans and widows, two groups without protection. God becomes parent of those without a parent, protector of those without protection. And this includes prisoners, too: folks who, then as now, often come from the poorest, most systemically-excluded segments of society—those without enough resources to secure slick attorneys, who are subject to “mandatory sentences,” who fall victim to brutal extra-judicial acts.

God is an ally—according to Psalm 68—specifically of those whom society holds in bondage, whom we disregard, overlook, set aside, or label as “threats.” God sets free those whom we box in. The One who ascends in power is not remote or indifferent. In Christ, God is deeply aligned with the reality of this world—our neighborhoods and nations, in which money and power, social leverage and hierarchies based in ethnicity, gender, and economic standing leave some folks insulated and others dangerously exposed. The One whom we worship “rides the clouds”—not for some “joy ride” but in order to notice, to know, and to care: to feed and heal, to forgive and intervene—to reconcile and make all things new.

Which should strike us as a rather peculiar use of power: a very different way of exercising power and privilege than what we tend to observe and practice. Power and privilege are not for the sake of celebrity, to prove to ourselves or others what we are worth, for the sake of boasting or puffing up our chests. Any power or privilege we hold—however much, however little—is rightly exercised to embody and make real God’s justice and generosity in the world.

That calls for a real change in the way we conduct ourselves. It does for me. I know I have named all this among us before, but it seems to bear repeating, so long as we continue to order our life together so unjustly. The truth is, I am handed a lot of privilege and power by the way we have structured our society. My skin color and gender, citizenship, marital status, and age—that I was born into a middle-class family and able to afford more than enough education—because of the way we’ve organized ourselves, I am automatically given all sorts of privileges

and find myself on the generous side of assumptions—even as basic as being able to jog through my neighborhood without my skin color signaling that I might be a threat.

As we know, it does not work that way for everyone. And now, during this pandemic, our inequities have been laid bare for us yet again as our neighbors of color bear a disproportionate burden of illness and death due to COVID-19. Such inequities—such injustice, such sin—is not the way of the beloved community according to God’s dream.

And so, given those realities, Psalm 68 challenges me in very tangible terms: *What will I do with the privileges I have been given? How will I use my institutional power?*

Privilege and power aren’t mine to wield as I choose—to push me further up the ladder. They are resources to be used by God’s grace—as God does: to make a positive difference in others’ lives, to choose solidarity with the most at-risk, to step back so that others—too often silenced—have space to step up—to advocate, to share my financial resources, to live more simply, and fundamentally, to be changed.

...because Christ is ascended, and that means the whole world is fundamentally and forever changed in the direction of God’s dream. And by God’s grace, I can be changed in that direction, too. And following Christ’s example, I can participate in building the beloved community God intends.

“You will receive power,” Jesus says to us, and, “you will be my witnesses”: proclaiming through the shape and direction of our lives that all our tired, old patterns—greed and indifference, exclusion and self-centeredness—no longer will do. They are out of step with the new world—out of sync with God’s loving dream.

A new way—a beloved community—is not just possible. It is already “among us.” Which means we are not waiting for it; it is waiting for us—waiting for us to be Christ’s hands and feet, to be the living, breathing, loving body of Christ, entrusted to carry on in God’s different way.

For Christ is risen. And Christ is ascended. So, may we never just stand around, staring into the sky—or sit around, remembering how “good” things used to be. By grace, may we embrace the holy work God has entrusted to us: Jesus’ mission, building a beloved community—the work that holds us together no matter how long we’re apart. Thanks be to God. Amen.