

WHY DO YOU STAND LOOKING UP?

Texts on Sunday, May 4, 2008

Luke 24: 44-53; Acts 1: 3-14

There are two Ascension stories, and Luke tells both of them. One in the last chapter of Luke, the other in the first chapter of Acts. How shall we account for that? Here is a possibility. After Luke published the first story, I think that Luke, seeing how badly the church was doing with its second-coming waiting game, rewrote the story to bear down much harder on the prophets' question, What is the people of God for, just to look up at God? Or to look out for humanity at the same time? Does the world really need a theory that Jesus, weighing 150 pounds or so, could be sucked up into heaven by the divine will? That's a strange sort of God, to stretch the rules just for his son, but never, never for a person in peril. Did the world of two thousand years ago need the miracle-religion theory? It seems not. Luke's angels tell the men of Galilee, "Why do you stand there looking up?" That's a rebuke to those miracle-minded men.

We've heard this before! It is the angels wondering at the women come to the empty tomb, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" These angels are annoyed, even angry. I think Luke is angry. People bone-tired of Roman oppression were going about claiming, "The end is near. Wait for Jesus, for lo, he will come, on a cloud descending." But deep in their hearts, the faithful knew that that was not Jesus' way. The faithful crafted this story to re-focus the eyes from the skies to God's earth. *Why do the religious hang around their holy places waiting for God to show up?* the story seems to say. *Don't they know God is everywhere? Why do they puzzle after him, looking up to the heavens? Don't they know where he is?*

Jesus was unambiguous about how to follow him and find. He didn't ask anybody to worship him. He's not up in heaven, because heaven isn't up. He told us how heaven is: *The first shall be last, and the last first . . . Take up your cross . . . Those who would save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.* And now, in this story, he tells us again. "Do not leave Jerusalem. Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." Don't you feel it? Jesus is saying, *Don't go all religious on me.* When Peter was hankering to start some religious business building shrines up on the transfiguration mountain top, what did Jesus do? He ignored him. He went down the mountain, back to the people, into the city, and to the strangest, most infectious powerful death the world has ever witnessed. You too! Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

Why "the city"? Well, next week, Pentecost will burst on the apostles there in the city, so they've got to get in place. But I'm not going to preach Pentecost now. That's for your pastor and you to do next week. But the city is more than a stage lit for God's next miracle. The city is Luke's concern— Luke the physician, the apostle to the sick and the sinner, the least and the lost. The city is the time and the place where word of God's goodwill toward all can spread far and go deep. Two thousand years of cultural change and development has only intensified the reality of the city for humanity. It is where the whole people of God can meet. Why do you stand looking up? Go stay in the city, until you are clothed with Holy Spirit power.

In this past week, I was attending the conference on multi-racial/ multi-cultural church in New York City. Through those days, we studied, we talked, we sang, we prayed, we were raised in the Spirit by gospel music and jazz and Handel's Hallelujah chorus and stirred by the Word, all together in "hope for what is not seen" with skins black and white and every shade between— all focused, not in the heavens, but on the city, on America, on the sin and sorrow of racism that wrestles with this nation like a devil determined to take its soul down. Why are you looking up, O church? Stay in the city!

At the conference, the teachers focused our thought on an error about racism which much of white America clings to, namely, that racism is just a personal wrong committed by individual bigots. But no, racism is a system of power and privilege, jerryrigged with struts of shame and ignorance and fear. Not every person is a racist, to be sure, but every person in America is affected, infected, by racism, the system. Almost every day now, the news bears witness, for those with eyes to see, how deep the damage of racism still is in America. Most of the speech of Rev. Jeremiah Wright that I have heard feels like a hand reaching down into the wound in the side of America, to bring out the offending blade. But his style of speech has become the uproar of the day. Voters turn in dismay from Obama because—why?—they hardly know why. Because for shame and guilt and fear of the consequence to privilege of true confession and insight into racism, so many of our people, dare not consider the eon of American injustice. The outcome of such inner repression is outward oppression. It is a psychological law.

Yet, as Bill Moyers commented to Rev. Wright in his interview last week, when Americans step into their churches, “it is as if they step into a fantasy world.” The tea service after worship suddenly matters enough to fight over, and people talk nice about Jesus and everyone pretends they are looking up to heaven. Why do you stand there looking up, O church? Stay in the city and wait for God’s power to come upon you.

You have watched this tragic saga of racism unfold in Buffalo, as it has in countless American cities. Money and power and hope flee to the suburban ring, leaving the city a crumbling core. Now here is something curious: the Protestant mainline church is also crumbling, in the very same time frame. These appear to be different matters, and maybe they are, but I feel it deep that they have the same cause. Both have to do with a failure to lead from our highest vision.

America’s high vision is plain for all to see—all people, created equal—but through spiritual decay, we are more and more become a nation of military power and economic force. The destruction of the cities and the racism that undermines the society are consequences of a vision so blurred by greed and fear, it should be no surprise that we choose incompetent, flawed, corrupt leaders, one after another.

The church’s high vision is also plain for all to see—thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven! All people, all things, made one. But 90% of American church-goers attend churches where 90% of the people look just like themselves. Only 4% of churches look like parables of thy kingdom come, where a significant multiracial reality sits down to the table together.

I am only a guest today, and I will not misuse my welcome. Yet as I attended that conference through the week, knowing I would be with you today, I felt that a word was laid on my heart for you.

With few exceptions, the Presbyterian churches have also lost their way in our Western New York area. There is no kingdom vision. The membership is shrinking all the time and nobody knows what to do about it. That is what I mean by “lost their way.” The people are nice and thoughtful and desirous of a different future but they don't know how to produce it. There is no reproductive organ—forgive me—in the churches to create a new generation. Now I'm not talking about men and women making babies. I'm talking about the mouth, the tongue, and the ears that are the reproductive organs of the church. So, the churches have lost their way—and the assembly is white, mostly. No one is in conversation about racism, though it has poisoned our nation and, as we say, it's on the news every day. At a Presbytery meeting, how often do you see another African-American face? The assembly is almost all white. It isn't a good thing. We're in trouble.

Now it would be wrong to suggest that this is a problem you can solve for the majority population. No, the other way around. A consciousness needs to come into the white church of how sick the whole society is in its racism, and then a call needs to come asking you to join in conversation with majority white churches about the damage done. I hope you may come to believe that your leadership in this

area can alter the course of Christian witness throughout the region, for you are the only African-American congregation in the Presbytery of Western New York, the only one which has the witness and the connection to the story which all need to hear. Your presence can light the healing way here, just as like work can do throughout this whole nation, where people of color and of all colors including mine can come together to begin to look like the realm of God. Don't you think the kingdom of God is all colors?

The church of Jesus Christ is here on earth to put on a parable for the world, representing the movement of God into the world—God's descent—in Jesus Christ, setting the table for all people to sit down together in God's realm.. I look forward to your leadership for our church in this unhappy nation. Amen.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps
Buffalo, New York

delivered at MacAlpine Presbyterian Church