

“WHO IS JESUS?”

Acts 1:1-11

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“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” On this last day with Jesus, this is the question, the only question that the disciples ask Jesus. Their question reminds us that they still consider themselves Jews, that they continue to feel the pain associated with occupation, and that they continue to look to Jesus as the kind of messiah who will liberate them from Roman oppression and re-establish Israel as a nation. Despite the fact that Jesus’ teaching pointed away from restoring Israel’s former political status, we can forgive the disciples’ intense interest in this question. Over the last five hundred years, their country had been occupied and ruled by Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

We are perhaps more inclined to forgive them this fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus in light of our own desire for restoration, for a return to gathering in our sacred spaces for worship. With the president’s call for churches to gather again, we may perhaps feel that yearning all the more. I miss the sound of your voices joined together in praise. I miss the able leadership of our choir as it sings to Lord, while raising our spirits at the same time. I miss the attentive expressions on your faces while I preach, the conversation following worship, and the learning together in adult education. This is a difficult time for the church. We have lost some things during this period of sheltering at home.

Covid-19 is changing the way we do things in the church, including the way we look at scripture. I have always looked at this question asked by the disciples with disbelief, wondering how they could persist in misunderstanding the message of Jesus. But instead of seeing their ignorance, I should have been attending to their pain, to the yearning. I should have seen their desire for redemption in the real world, not just in the depths of their hearts. We are experiencing today a small portion of their grief.

But it is not just loss that we feel, we are also afraid. We are afraid perhaps because we do not know whether or how well the church will survive this period of separation. We fear for those who are alone and cut off for lack of the necessary technology or isolation in nursing homes. We’re afraid that the financial stability of the church will suffer. We’re afraid that some people will discover that they didn’t need the church. Unlike the disciples, the church has not been in need of restoration (or so it seemed).

We have been a flourishing institution for nearly two millennia, but we’re worried now. We were worried before Covid because of declining memberships, because church closings were more common than church plantings, because church growth was uncommon in most congregations. “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” I feel an empathy for this question that I hadn’t before.

The disciples loved their community of faith. They loved who they had become around the person of Jesus. And their love moved them to hope. And their hope moved them to ask ... the wrong question. And our love for gathering as the church moves us also to focus on the wrong question.

The president's call for churches to gather is a distraction from the mission of the church. Let me say emphatically that he has no business telling churches what they can and cannot do. We did not suspend worship because the governor asked us to and we will not return to worship because the president tells us to. We suspended worship because it was not safe for us to gather, because we valued the lives of our people more than the right to assemble. We were acting from Jesus' call to love our neighbor which supersedes insisting on our constitutional rights. By the way, as a colleague said to me the other day, it is also our constitutional right not to gather.

We will gather again when it is reasonably safe to do so. The session is monitoring the situation closely. We are listening to what denominational leaders, both at the presbytery and the general assembly level, are advising. We are sharing various articles from medical experts on the subject. The session itself has members from the medical community and the schools who have access to the specific circumstances in Kalamazoo. We share your yearning to be together, but because we value all your lives, we are choosing to err on the side of caution. Even losing one life because we opened too soon is too many.

Churches that are insisting on opening now are, in my mind, exhibiting a poor witness to the world. My greatest fear at this point is that the church will become responsible for a resurgence of this virus. Such a state of affairs would be the death of the church, even for those congregations that acted responsibly.

"Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" When will the church be able to gather again? These questions express the yearning of our hearts, but as I said, they are the wrong questions. Jesus doesn't answer either one. "It's not for you to know..." he says.

Matthew Skinner writes in his commentary on Acts, Jesus "equips his followers with promises, not schedules" (p. 6). He promises them power and the Holy Spirit. He promises to make them witnesses to Jesus throughout the world and across cultural boundaries. As the book of Acts continues, they will preach the good news of forgiveness. They become participants in the kingdom of God. "Big things lie ahead for these people," says Skinner.

"New Things stand at the threshold.... According to Jesus' promises... his departure does not conclude, but initiates the next chapter in a grand narrative about the salvation God makes possible" (p. 5). The right question encourages us to take stock in our future. What is God calling us to do and to be in these days?

Maybe we feel like Jesus has left the building, abandoned us in this time of great need. We catch a glimpse of the yearning held on to by the disciples, a yearning that is not within their power to fulfill. And as Jesus departs or ascends, we sense their confusion,

but a little nudge from some “men in white robes” send them back to Jerusalem to follow Jesus’ instructions: “Wait!”

They were not waiting for the right day to restart Jesus’ ministry. They were not waiting to return to normal. They were waiting for power, for the call of God’s Spirit. They were waiting for words of testimony that would speak into their world. Their ministry would not be a mere rehashing of Jesus’ ministry. It would be a new word for a new world. It would be a word that refused to stay within the borders of Judaism. “New things stand at the threshold,” wrote Skinner.

God didn’t send the coronavirus, but it can still be our wake-up call. Already we are telling the world **that its life** is more important than **our gathering**. We are being given the opportunity to demonstrate in concrete ways love for neighbor. We are being challenged to do things differently. We are reaching more people on Sunday mornings than we would under the old practice. The good news is coming with more clarity than I can ever recall. We are learning to be community in new ways, to love while apart. Shouldn’t we wait for the call of God before coming back together? This question is also very much on the minds of your session

Jesus left and the disciples waited. They waited for power, for the Spirit, for a new word of testimony. They waited until they learned to see Jesus differently. As the Spirit of God moved upon and within them, they had to see that what Jesus taught didn’t require his physical presence. They didn’t need Jesus to perform the healing. They didn’t need Jesus to feed the hungry. They didn’t need Jesus to offer God’s forgiveness or deliver good news. They moved from being observers to participants. The story of Acts is the story of Jesus lived out in his disciples. The apostles healed the sick, made the lame to walk, found a way to meet the needs of the whole community. Instead of seeing Jesus outside, they discovered the Jesus within.

The history of the church is a history of seeing Jesus differently. I would argue that the church has usually gotten into trouble when it tried to hang on to the previous generation’s view of Jesus. The church got into trouble when it presumed that Jesus condoned slavery, when it presumed that Jesus barred women from ministry, when it presumed that Jesus didn’t love gay and lesbian persons of faith.

We have to be careful not to get stuck in the worldviews presumed even within the scriptures, but to listen to the **living** and **active** word of the Spirit. The right question is: “What is Jesus telling us and calling us to in these days?” It seems clear to me that Jesus is calling the church to be something different than it was, to do things differently than we did, to pay attention to not just the facts on the ground, but to the call of the Spirit within.

Love your neighbor. Love God. Heal the sick. Feed the hungry. Preach the good news. These are not new aspects to the journey of faith, but how we carry them forward in this world in these days may require some changes. May God grant us wisdom that we may be salt and light now and in the days ahead. Amen.

Resources:

Skinner, Matthew. *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*.