

“What Are We Waiting for?”

Acts of the Apostles 1.1–11 (Ascension Sunday)

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 28 May 2006

It was a sad day five years ago when I was with the other followers of the messiah and we saw him vanish into the clouds. Every day I awaken, I keep hoping that this will be the day he returns, but I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever see Jesus again.

You see, it wasn't the first time I had seen him leave. During the Passover season five years ago, we gathered with him in that upper room and ate the Passover meal with him, he said the Motzi over the bread and the Kiddush over the wine, and he told us to remember his body in the breaking of bread and the new covenant in his blood in the pouring of wine into the cup. I remember that pain every year at Passover.

And that night, he was arrested (thanks to the betrayer, Judas Iscariot), and brought the Roman butcher Pilate. Like the other men, I fled because I knew they would nail me to a cross if they caught me, and someone had to keep the truth alive: that this man they executed was the true messiah.

And then it happened: three days later he appeared to us. If I had been alone, I would have thought I was dreaming or having a vision, but everyone else saw him, too. He spoke to us, *almost* as he had been before. And then he was gone. But then he was back with us for about six weeks. He was different though; he seemed somehow less human than he did before and more like a spirit, though he did still eat with us.

And then it happened again: he was gone! This time it wasn't crucifixion, it was disappearing into the clouds. All of us were standing around thinking, “now what?!” And then these two messengers show up and ask us why we're looking into the sky. Well, what in the name of the Almighty would you do if you saw someone disappear into the clouds... wouldn't you stare? And then they have the nerve to say that he'd come back in the same way he left. I've been here for five years waiting for Jesus to come back and lead us into a new day for the people of Israel, but perhaps this is already the new day.

One of the things that I still have trouble getting used to is all of this mixing with Gentiles. It might be okay if they converted first and then came to see Jesus as the messiah, but they want to just do their own thing, eating foul things, with no sign of the covenant for the men, and no sense of propriety for the women. How can you be a Gentile and follow the messiah? True, while Jesus was with us, he started including women and tax collectors and a few Gentiles... even a Roman centurion. But shouldn't they convert and be good Jews? We're still debating that among ourselves, even as the numbers of us who are following the Way are growing.

But back to Jesus. Sometimes we squabble about what we're supposed to do without him. We still gather in the synagogue, but there is gathering discontent among some who didn't see that Jesus was truly the messiah... the anointed one. They expected a general and king like David, but Jesus showed us a new way to live out the reign of God.

Some of us are talking about the end times... that when Jesus returns, there will be a huge battle, that God will send flames to engulf the world, as he send waters in the flood. There are so many things we are wondering about.

To be honest, most days I still look into the clouds hanging over Jerusalem wondering when he will come back... if today is the day. We've all been waiting and waiting, and sometimes it's hard to carry on. It's not easy for some to keep hanging on to those words we heard: “He will come again in the same way.” Many have lost hope and some have given up on the way Jesus showed us. And there are moments when I've been tempted to do the same. If we ever needed a messiah, it's now.

So, some of us are waiting, some of us have given up, and some of us are beginning to wonder if these are the last days for this world. For me, I have to remind myself each day of what Jesus taught. I remember seeing him preaching to a gathering of us on that hillside, and I still remember every word:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.”¹

That’s the only thing that keeps me going: remembering what the messiah taught us. Believe me, there are days I’ve spent hungering and weeping, and you know that some of our own families have rejected us because we know that Jesus was the messiah.

We can’t just sit on our hands all day. I keep telling the others, “What would Jesus be doing if he were here...not wringing his hands! He sent us out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal, so let’s keep doing it!”

That’s what keeps me going, is remembering Jesus’ words about the kingdom and telling others...spreading the word so that they might understand and follow the Way. I remember one day, a Pharisee was trying to set Jesus up, and he asked “when the kingdom of God was coming, and Jesus answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”²

¹ Luke 6.20–36

² Luke 17.20–21

And that's what I have to remember each day: that the kingdom is already here! It is our lot to carry on the work that the messiah left to us: to let others know about the kingdom of God, to heal, to bless the least of God's world, and to remember God's shalom...that peace with justice that all the prophets have proclaimed. Some of our followers also think that healing is not just healing the body, but *tikkun olam*...healing God's world. And that is what the kingdom of God is all about: healing God's world here and now.

There are times when I wonder if I will ever see him again, that Nazarene whom we call messiah. And I pray to *ha-shem* that I will live to see him again. But even if I am not there...just as Moses never made it from Mount Nebo here to Judea...I know that he will return. But in the meantime, I'll keep asking myself and the others, "What are we waiting for?!" We've got a clear sense of direction from the messiah himself, and since he is not here in body, we must be his hands and feet to do the work of the kingdom. We must be his eyes and ears, to see what the world needs now. We must open our hearts as he did...even to the Gentiles...and let them know the good news of the kingdom of God, which is already among us.

Well, thank you for listening me ramble on. I hope that you can still sense the presence of Jesus, as I can. Even if I never get to see him come back from the clouds, I know that he is still among us in the hearts of his followers. *Shalom!*