

May 29, 2022
Rev. Kerry Smith

The Absence of God
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Acts 1:1-11 (The Message)

Dear Theophilus, in the first volume of this book I wrote on everything that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he said good-bye to the apostles, the ones he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. After his death, he presented himself alive to them in many different settings over a period of forty days. In face-to-face meetings, he talked to them about things concerning the kingdom of God. As they met and ate meals together, he told them that they were on no account to leave Jerusalem but “must wait for what the Father promised: the promise you heard from me. John baptized in water; you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit. And soon.”

When they were together for the last time they asked, “Master, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?”

He told them, “You don’t get to know the time. Timing is the Father’s business. What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.”

These were his last words. As they watched, he was taken up and disappeared in a cloud. They stood there, staring into the empty sky. Suddenly two men appeared—in white robes! They said, “You Galileans!—why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—as he left.”

Last Sunday we had our district meeting in preparation for our yearly Annual Conference. That may be insider Methodist language for you, but there are 76 Methodist churches in our district in the Dallas metro area. Our District Superintendent, Rev. Edlen Cowley, shared a story about going to Boy Scout camp when he was younger. He grew up in inner city Houston and traveled to Boy Scout camp where he and his friends immediately were drawn to the small beach area where there was a lake and row boats with life jackets inside. He and his friends had never seen any of those things. So, they put on their life jackets because they knew then nothing bad would happen to them. They jumped in the boat and started to row. And it was easy. One of the boys was propped at the end of the boat like George Washington and the other two boys were rowing and rowing. They were going fast, but it was so easy. They realized the shore was far away, and somehow they managed to turn themselves around. Now, it was harder and harder to row. They were really working hard and they realized that before they had been going with the current and now they were going against the current.

That image of rowing against the current has stuck with me this week as we have had tragedy after tragedy, shooting after shooting, and it feels like the safety of the shore is very far away. We don’t even have time or space to grieve because there is another tragedy too quickly. Black people trying to buy groceries, Taiwanese Christians trying to worship, and elementary school kids trying to go to class, all in one week. And tomorrow is Memorial Day when we remember the lives of those who gave all in service to our nation. We are not yet living in a world filled with God’s peace and God’s righteousness because the innocent still suffer, teachers still risk their lives, families still grieve.¹

Today is the fortieth day after Easter, the day that we call Ascension Day, when we remember that Jesus ascended or went up to heaven to be with God. It is a day for us to think about Jesus’ presence with us, but also his absence because after Ascension Day Jesus is present in the world but in a new way, in a new form. We wait ten more days for Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, theoretically, these ten days from Ascension when Jesus goes to heaven and Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes are ten days when God is absent.

¹ Thanks to Kate Bowler for her blessing: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=561375412024983&set=pcb.561375482024976>

The absence of God is something that we can all relate to after the events of this week. I think about those followers of Jesus who watched as Jesus was taken up and disappeared in a cloud. They stood there, staring into the empty sky. Here we are, some two thousand years later, still standing still, with our necks craned back, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus in the sky. Jesus told us to go – even to the ends of the world - and we’re still standing still trying to see where he went.

One of my favorite John Wesley sayings is “When you don’t have faith, preach it until you do.” John Wesley, the first Methodist, had just returned from a missionary trip from England to Georgia in the U.S. The trip was a failure for him in both ministry and his personal life. He didn’t convert any native peoples to Christianity and the woman he loved married another man. John Wesley came back home to England completely discouraged, even doubting his belief in Christ. He was talking with his friend Peter Bohler who was a Moravian missionary. Moravians are a Protestant church from Germany. John Wesley had this question burning in his soul, “How can you preach to others if you don’t have faith yourself?” John asked Peter if he should stop preaching, and Peter said, “By no means.” Wesley asked him, “But what can I preach?” Peter answered, “Preach faith till you have it, and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”² The next day John Wesley shared about the love of Jesus to a man in prison on death row, and the man received Christ. Not long after that, Wesley had his Aldersgate experience where his heart was strangely warmed and he knew that he was loved by God. He experienced the grace of God in a profound way. Wesley said that he felt he did trust in Christ alone for his salvation.

How can I love when I don’t feel love? How can I forgive when I don’t feel forgiveness? Love until you feel love for the other person. Forgive until you feel forgiveness. Preach the love of Christ until you see the love of Christ in your life. Live a life of grace through faith until you see God’s grace working in your life. “Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.” In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote “Do not waste your time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”

A therapist friend of mine once said she counsels others to “act as if”. If you don’t feel loved, act as if you are. If you don’t love your spouse, act as if you do. Miraculously the process of “acting as if” leads us to actually getting back in touch with positive feelings. This week I have been trying to act as if I have hope that our society can change.

I always have to remember these words attributed to St. Teresa of Ávila who lived in 1515-1582. “Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which Christ looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good, yours are the hands, with which Christ blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are Christ’s body. Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which Christ looks compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

Our baptism calls us out into the world to work for justice, to be a voice for those whose voices are not heard, to advocate for those still on the margins and not seen, to leverage whatever power we have to help create a more just, a more merciful, a more hope-filled world. We do those things because we are followers of Jesus and we have been given the gift of the Spirit and that is what courageous faithfulness looks like. We as a church are to stand up and speak. We are

² <https://www.facebook.com/CornellMinistries/posts/619750291566835>

to breathe in God's courage and to offer hope into the brokenness and tragedy of the world. That is our calling.

When Mr. Rogers was a boy and he would see scary things in the news, his mom would say to him, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." People of faith, I invite you to see Jesus outside of this place. To every teacher, administrator, and staff member, may you hear that you are a gift, and that your ministry touches countless lives. Everyone of us here could name a teacher who transformed our lives. Mine was Mrs. Sokolosky in second grade. She made me feel smart and valued. She cared about me and I wanted to do the very best when I was in her class.

Your witness is going to be heard. May God help us know what to feel – rage, grief, sorrow – and what to do – advocate, protest, lament.³ We have to act. We have to write letters to our representatives because they represent us. We have to donate money. May God give us the courage to change our culture whose laws and complicity subsidize death. We have to row against the current, and it is hard work, and we may want to give up. But, we aren't alone in this work, because we are all rowing together to get to the shore filled with goodness, love, and grace.

³ Thanks to Kate Bowler for her blessing: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=561375412024983&set=pcb.561375482024976>