

Northwestern Ohio Synod Assembly
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
May 13, 2010

Acts 1: 1-11
Epiphany 1: 15-27
Luke 24: 44-53

Grace to you and peace in Jesus' name. Amen.

How many of you left home with a bit of sadness this morning? Sadness not because of the Synod Assembly, but because of what you will be missing in your congregation today: the brass instruments, the full choir, banners, and a packed church gathered this day to celebrate Christ's ascension.

How many of you sent on Ascension Day a card to a special person in your life? It's a little hard to find an Ascension Day card at Walgreens. I suspect one of these days someone will create one of those musical cards that you open and hear "Up, Up and Away" or a refrain of "Oh, will he ever return? Will he ever return? And his fate is still unlearned."

Why do you think we struggle so with Ascension Day? Is it only because the culture hasn't created its secular myths and rituals to accompany it as with Christmas and Easter? No Santas and elves. No gift giving. No bunnies and baskets. No Easter egg hunts.

Or do we avoid Ascension Day because of what it reveals about us—our deference to a "scientific" worldview often closed off to God. Let's just admit it. The image from our readings of Jesus ascending on a cloud up into the heavens is, well, an offense to our worldview, isn't it? We live in the age of astrophysics, Hubbard telescopes, space shuttles, distant galaxies, and black holes. Some of us were in college or seminary when John Robinson's *Honest to God* was required reading. It was Robinson who said that no thinking 20th century person should be expected to accept the biblical story of Jesus' ascension. A three-tiered universe may have worked in pre-modernity, but it is simply an offense to us.

Yet I wonder if our avoidance, our discomfort with Jesus' ascension doesn't go deeper than that. For the story reveals Jesus' response to our longing for certainty, our anxious, searching questions about the time in which we live. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom of Israel?"¹ The question is completely understandable given all the disciples had been through with Jesus. Now they are standing in the presence of the risen Christ wondering, almost demanding, to know, "Lord, is this the time?"

Oh my, who in this gathered assembly has not been asking similar searching questions in recent months? Some of you asking if it is the time to remain in the ELCA; others trying to discern whether it is the time to be open to a new call, another congregation. We understandably want some assurance that there is a place for us in this part of the Body of Christ called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Our searching questions—fueled by our anxiety and our longing for certainty—are not just about the ELCA or our congregation and call. They are fed by the continuing volatility of

¹ NRSV Acts 1: 6

the economy. “When will I be certain it is the right time to retire? Will our children find employment, make their own mortgage or rent payments, and handle their school debts? Need I continue?”

Jesus was flat-out bold in rebutting his disciples’ desire for certainty. They asked, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?” Jesus responds, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”²

Many of us find it easy to be critical of fundamentalists. I begin with the conviction that we are one in Christ, in faith, in Spirit, and in Baptism. This is a conviction that I readily acknowledge is not held about us Lutherans by many fundamentalists. Acknowledging our sometimes Lutheran theological arrogance, I will quote a non-Lutheran, Douglas John Hall. In *Bound and Free: A Theologian’s Journey* he writes about what makes fundamentalism so attractive in our anxious, certainty-seeking time. Hall writes, “Fundamentalism, whatever the origins of the term, has come to mean a position of such exactness and certitude that those embracing it or more accurately, those embraced by it, feel themselves delivered from all the relativities, uncertainties, and transcendence of human existence. They are provided, they are fed with a firm foundation—a fundamentum—greater than their own finitude, greater than any observations of any of the sciences, greater than the collective word of the human race.”³

Hall goes on to remind us, “God who does not meet our needs for certainty only with a refusal and rebut. God offers an alternative to certitude. It is called trust—faith. God reveals God’s self as one who may be trusted. Certitude is denied, but confidence is made possible. Confidence—literally from the Latin, con (with) fide (faith).” Hall concludes, “Now faith is a living thing, It is a category of the present. It is not a once-for-all accomplishment. It is not a possession, like a Visa card, that some have and others don’t. It [faith] is an ongoing response to God’s grace in the world, to life.”⁴

From Ephesians we read, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”⁵

Oh sisters and brothers in Christ, may this assembly of the Northwestern Ohio Synod of the ELCA be marked not by anxiety-driven questions that demand certainty but by living faith, the living faith of which Jesus is both the subject and the object, the one who grants faith and in whom we trust. And may faith free us to give unceasing thanks and be constant in prayer.

There may be deeper reasons why we avoid Christ’s ascension, deeper than our deference to a scientific worldview and even greater than our anxiety-driven demand for certainty. For our desire to be spectators is also exposed. “While he [Jesus] was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?’” What are you looking at? What are you staring at? Haven’t you seen enough? But we don’t ever seem to see enough, do we?

If you want to read a troubling book, read *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* by Pulitzer-Prize winning author, Chris Hedges. Please

² NRSV Acts 1: 6-7

³ Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian’s Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 100.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵ NRSV Ephesians 1: 15-16

consider yourself warned: read it at your own risk. The chapter on pornography is graphic and offensive. Some will be troubled by his critique of American culture. Professional wrestling fans beware. Hedges argues that we live in a sensationalist culture filled with spectacles. We are a people looking at, staring at TVs, computer screens, huge arenas, media players, spectacles designed to hold our attention, capture our minds and hearts, make us into spectators, shape our behavior, bring us into service of some cause, and maybe just leave us captive to a consumer-life absent hope.

Listen to Hedges, “We are a culture that has been denied or has passively given up the linguistic and intellectual tools to cope with complexity, to separate illusion from reality. We have traded the printed word for the gleaming image.”⁶

He says, “The culture of illusion thrives by robbing us of the intellectual and linguistic tools to separate illusion from truth.”⁷ He goes on to say that “[t]he culture of illusion, one of happy thoughts, manipulated emotions, and trust in the beneficence of power means we sing along with the chorus or instantly disappear from view like losers on a reality show.”⁸

In our gospel reading from Luke, it is at the end of Easter evening. Jesus gave to those who had been with him a clear picture—more than a picture—to look at, for it was the narrative for their lives. He opened not their eyes to behold a spectacle but he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and to hear and read all of the scriptures evangelically; that is, the Gospel is what shows forth Christ crucified and risen. “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”⁹

Not a spectacle for you to behold, but a spectacular promise for you to believe, Jesus is the fulfillment of what God has been doing all along. The plan God has been working on from before the foundation of the world, the fulfillment of all that is written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, the psalms.

What are you looking at? You are not spectators! You are witnesses. So I am curious to know how many of you have been a witness in a courtroom. How many of you have been on trial? As a witness, what did you swear you would do? You swore that you would speak the truth of what you saw and what you know, recognizing that the guilt or innocence of another human being may depend upon your testimony.

What is your testimony as a witness of these things? You are called and sent to be a witness because you are an authority. Amen. Did you know that? Do you believe that? You are an authority on forgiveness, the forgiving mercy of Jesus. This is your testimony. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. There is repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name. He is alive in the world. Harvey Cox says, “The ascension in its simplest terms means Jesus is mobile.”¹⁰

⁶ Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹ NRSV Luke 24: 46-47

¹⁰ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Collier Books, 1990), 50.

Do you remember when there were compulsory figures for Olympic figure skaters? Before competitors could show off their creativity and their improvisational flairs, they needed to practice and practice and master the basic figures.

Well, your witness, your testimony, the truth you proclaim is an alternate way of figuring things out. As Edwin Searcy writes, “In this genre of preaching the preacher proclaims the truth of an alternative way of figuring things out. The cruciform pattern of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday provides the coherent narrative that is rehearsed in sermon, in liturgy and in all aspects of the congregation’s life together. This movement from aching loss (Friday) through forsaken absence (Saturday) to astonishing newness (Sunday) stands in stark contrast to the dominant figural narratives provided by a culture of satiation and self-reliant success. In other words, the church’s testimony is pre-figured. The figural preacher is like a figure skater whose sermons are practised movements through the patterned figure (or type) of the cross.”¹¹

Sisters and brothers in Christ, this is our identity and mission as the Evangelical Lutheran Church, forgiven sinners living by faith, bearing witness in Christ to the love and mercy of God: not spectators, but witnesses to Christ at home and to the ends of the earth. But not on your own. For this, you have and shall receive the power of the Holy Spirit. For the spirit’s anointing of this assembly, I will now pray, “Father in heaven for Jesus’ sake stir up in these men and women the gift of your Holy Spirit, confirm their faith, guide their lives, empower them in their searching and witness and give them patience in suffering.

¹¹ Edwin Searcy, “Seven Working Assumptions for Preaching in a Missional Church,” *The Gospel and Our Culture*, vol. 15, nos. 1 and 2 [March and June, 2003], p. 3.