**Acts 1:1-14** May 24, 2020

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*Acts 1:1In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

*6So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

*9After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. 10They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*

*12Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. 13When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Where Is the Kingdom We Are Waiting For?**

What did you expect today to be like? Back in March when this all started, I expected that our first day back in church would be a great celebration. This was my vision: “prisoners” freed, a full church, a potluck, lots of talking, threat of disease gone. —Not quite. We are allowed only 33% of occupancy. Many of our beloved members are not coming this morning but are worshiping online. They have chosen to stay home out of a prudent concern for their own health. God understands. But we miss them. After worship, instead of coffee and doughnuts and catching up, people are going to be shooed out to the parking lot. Restrictions are being “relaxed”, but by whose definitions, and to whose satisfaction? We run out of patience with these long-running problems.

This reminds me of a guest we had when we had been living in Africa a year or two. An American visitor just wanting to understand that very different place, asked, “Do you ever have tornadoes over here in Africa?” “No.” “Hurricanes?” “No.” “Earthquakes? Tsunamis?” “No. No.” “Wildfires.” “Not destructive ones.” “I guess you don’t have much for natural disasters.” “Not really. All we have plague, drought and famine.” “Ooooh!” In America we are used to disasters that strike hard and fast: tornadoes, hurricanes, floods. Then people climb out of the storm cellars, clean up, and rebuild. The American mindset is well-adapted to quick hitting disasters.

In Africa, disasters linger and waste. After a bad harvest you know you are going to be hungry for the next eleven months, and, frankly, there is just about nothing you can do about it. First you stop eating lunch. Then you go out to the forest to find edible leaves. You start punching extra holes in the belt. The carpenters buy more lumber for more caskets. The character of us Americans deals fairly well with sudden disasters; not so well with those in slow-motion—like ours now. When is this going to be over?

Impatience is a very natural human reaction. It’s not just Americans. You can hear it in our Bible reading. Jesus’ disciples had a question for Jesus: ***“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”***

They asked that question for a good reason: Jesus’ teaching was full of “The Kingdom”. When Jesus began his preaching ministry, his first message was, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”* And how about Jesus’ parables. Remember the parables about the weeds and the wheat, the sower, the persistent widow, the Good Samaritan—now’s there’s one everyone recognizes. Jesus said that all those parables were about the kingdom of God. When Jesus taught his disciples about prayer he said, “This is how you pray: *‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name, thy kingdom come…’*” right there in the Lord’s Prayer! Jesus’ last two recorded conversations—not his last two words but his last two conversations—before his death were about “The Kingdom”: when Pontius Pilate asked Jesus whether or not he was a king, and then again when a criminal on a cross next to Jesus pleaded, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* It’s everywhere: “The kingdom.”

Whatever you think about the disciples, don’t imagine that the disciples were on their own agenda when they asked about “The Kingdom.” They asked about the kingdom precisely because they had been listening to Jesus.

And now Jesus had died and risen and he had this glorified body that was somehow the same as his former body yet somehow different (we don’t know exactly how), and he still kept talking about the kingdom! Verse 3, ***“[Jesus] appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”*** Forty more days of the kingdom!

Then in verse 4 Jesus told them, ***“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*** Electricity was in the air. Lightning was about to strike!

***“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*** Only an idiot wouldn’t have been thinking what the disciples said out loud. At least they had the guts to say it!

“It’s time. It’s time, Jesus, to do something really great, to revolutionize our lives, the world. Isn’t this the time to bust out the kingdom?”

The kingdom these disciples were expecting was a mixture of heaven and earth. It was the here and now, together with glory of the not yet. The kingdom they imagined would vindicate them before the Pharisees and Sadducees, before the Romans and the Greeks. Forgiveness and all that is good, but glory really looks great!

Their question reflected a very common Jewish expectation of their time. After being dominated by foreign powers for 600 years, the Jewish people awaited a return to the glory days of kings David and Solomon. To borrow a line from a kids’ movie (*The Lion King*), they lived for a return to the days of “Hakuna Matata, No More Troubles.” The Scriptures themselves described King Solomon’s glorious 40-year rule in this picturesque language: *“During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel… lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree.”* For a generation it was like time had stopped. No worries, no needs, no violence, no problems, life in the shade. Wouldn’t you like a kingdom like that? The disciples sure did. ***“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”***

The disciples interest in “the kingdom” was commendable in some ways. At least they had been listening to Jesus. But they hadn’t been listening to all of it. Jesus had said, *“The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”* Jesus disciples were so locked onto flesh and blood, to the material world, that they really couldn’t understand what God’s kingdom is really about. They wanted the future glory of eternal life to bleed back into life in this world.

There are preachers out there who pander to this sort of thinking. They preach about the success that God wants to give if only you will push the right buttons. Pray the right way, be sincere enough, “send an offering to the number on your screen,” and God will fulfill your every financial goal. We rightly hold prosperity preachers in contempt for how they pervert the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But the people who follow them, don’t they resemble the disciples just a little bit? Not content with forgiveness of sins, with Spirit given faith, with the sure hope of heaven, by going to those prosperity preachers on TBN, they too are saying, “What you have given us here surely can’t be all there is to it! ***Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to [us]?”***

Two or three times a month I get a phone call here at church. The voice on the other end says, “So what does your church do to help people in need?” Sometimes you get the backstory, sometimes it’s just an unvarnished request for cold hard cash. I reply, “Well, we have a food pantry to help you. And we welcome you to come and worship with us on Sundays to hear God’s Word.” More than 90% of the time that’s the end of the conversation. “That’s not the kingdom I’m looking for.” Click.

What about us? Most of us, myself included, have had a bit more time on our hands over the last two months. With all this extra time, does our, does my, life exhibit a stronger relationship with my Savior, a rededication to the kingdom? More time in prayer, in devotion? Or is this extra time used for my own personal fiefdom?

This is our problem with God’s kingdom. The part of it that has already been realized in us, we dismiss as impractical and of little value. The glorious part of God’s kingdom that is in the future, we don’t want it to be in the future. So, like spoiled children we have said about God’s here and now gifts, the same gifts the disciples had, “These aren’t the gifts I wanted” and about his future gifts, “Those I want now!” What wretched children of God we have been! God forgive us.

Yet here Jesus isagain this Sunday morning, announcing the forgiveness of our sins. He has forgiven the many many times that we have pursued a kingdom other than his. The times when our prosperity has been our goal rather than our tool as Christians. The times we have given in to temptation and the times we have let our temper fly; the times of our discontent with God’s blessings, and our complaints at the challenges he allows into our lives; our insubordination towards those in authority and our neglect of those in our care. Jesus announced his forgiveness already this morning, he does so again in this Word of God, and he will again in his body and blood given in this sacrament.

This is the kingdom God had declared for Jesus’ disciples. It is the same one he has declared for us, through faith in him. And while there will come a day when the kingdom of God will enter a new phase, a phase where sin’s results will no longer stain our lives—no sorrow, no pain, no tear—it is just another phase of the same kingdom that God has already given us.

Jesus told us in the Gospel of John that his believers *“have [already] crossed over from death to life.”* (John 5:24). The Apostle Paul rejoiced with his fellow believers, *“Our citizenship is in heaven”* (Php 3:20). Not “will be”, “is.”

The fundamental problem with the disciples’ question, ***“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom?”*** is that they didn’t see the kingdom Christ Jesus had already given them. “Lord, open our eyes to what we have in Christ our Savior!”

In truth, the disciples weren’t all that lost in our reading. While they may not have always gotten things right, God had given them listening ears. So, after Jesus had gone into heaven and disappeared behind the clouds and the disciples just stood there looking into the cloud thinking, “Wow! Didn’t expect that!” God still sent them two angels to explain. ***“Then they returned to Jerusalem… When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying... They all joined together constantly in prayer.”***

I don’t think they still got it completely. I don’t think any of us have either. But they did listen.

Through all of the things that make us impatient in these days, whether you are on the side of caution or want to throw caution to the wind, whether you approve of the public office holders or want to vote them out, let us remember that the kingdom of Christ is not of this world, and yet it is here among us. It is an “Already…not yet” kingdom. That kingdom is in every heart that hears and trusts the message of the Savior. It persists through the terrors of disease, the fatigue of suffering long, the trauma of being victimized, the hardships of poverty, the isolation of friendlessness, and even through the weaknesses of our own sins.

Thank you, God, for your establishing your kingdom in the hearts of all who have faith in Jesus their Savior. Thank you, God, for bringing us to your house today. Amen.