

Sermon: “Right Here, Right Now”

5/23/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last year, church membership among adults in the United States dropped below 50 percent for the first time in the history of the Gallup poll. Often, when we as Christians try to understand this downward trend we point to three things: suffering, science, and other faiths. We think of people who no longer attend church because of suffering that they and those around them have endured; people who question how a loving God could allow such suffering in this world. We think of people who no longer attend church, let alone feel the need to believe in God, because they are convinced that science can explain everything, or at least will one day. And we think of people of other faiths, people who don't attend church because they're members of the synagogue or the mosque down the street. Surely, all of these things have contributed to the decline in church membership in recent years. And yet, while reading and discussing the book *Jesus and the Land* during Bible study the last few weeks, I couldn't help but wonder if the real obstacle that we as Christians and the church are facing is not one of the head—of what we believe—but one of the heart.

Every Sunday, we read from the Gospels because we recognize that following Jesus places a call on our lives. We have been called to learn more about who he is, how he lived, why he died, and why he was raised. We have been called to get to know him so that through getting to know him we might grow closer to him. But herein lays the challenge with that call, or at least one of the big ones with it: how can we continue growing closer to Jesus when he sometimes just seems so far away and so different? I mean, Jesus lived some 2,000 years ago. Compared to when the dinosaurs roamed the earth, 2,000 years is but a blink of an eye. But for us, 2,000 years

feels like an eternity. Our lives have been inextricably shaped by the internet and air conditioning, by supermarkets and automobiles, and by bank accounts and biotechnology. How can we grow closer to Jesus when first-century Palestine feels like another world, filled with demons, sandals, and donkeys, as well as a desperate lack of dentists and deodorant?

One of the ways that we sought to bridge this divide in bible study, to help bring us closer to Jesus and the world in which he lived, was by looking at pictures and hearing stories of the Promised Land. We were fortunate that Dick and Sandy Storment, not to mention Marilyn Allen, have been there and could tell us what it was like to walk where Jesus walked, quite literally. One day I hope to go there myself and bring Jesus and his world that much closer. And yet, I must acknowledge, we must acknowledge, that Jesus sometimes feeling so far away isn't just about geography. It's also about cosmology. Jesus is in heaven. He's been there since his ascension nearly 2,000 years ago, an event we celebrated last Sunday. Of the many things that we as Christians believe we know about heaven, its distance from here is not among them. We can measure and plan trips to Seattle, Spain, and even the moon. But you can't do that for heaven. So long as we are here on earth, heaven will always remain beyond our reach, making Jesus all-too-often feel the much same way.

And lastly, it is important to note that even in those moments when Jesus feels closest, we must acknowledge that he sometimes just feels so different from us. In *Jesus and the Land*, we were reminded time and time again of these differences, and for good reason. After all, Jesus was a middle-eastern, working-class, Jewish man. Acknowledging this reality impacts how we read and understand many of his teachings, as well as the picture so many of us have of him in our minds. And that is before we even get to the fact that he is the Son of God. How can we be expected to relate to someone who healed the sick, who preached with divine authority, and

whose life, death, and resurrection show us what it means love God with our entire heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves? No matter how much I try, each day is a reminder that I am not perfect, that I am not Jesus no matter how much I try to live like him. Sometimes Jesus just feels so different from us.

But this is the Jesus who we have been called to follow, the one who we read of in the Gospels. And if not for today, my guess is that Jesus would only feel further away and more different from us with each passing day. But today is Pentecost, the day on which we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. And it is through the Spirit that Jesus is here with us right now.

Right now, Jesus is here with us. It is because of the Spirit that Jesus provides us with words to pray when we don't know what to say. It is because of the Spirit that Jesus places in our lives people who bring us strength, comfort, and joy both in good times and the bad. It is because the Spirit that Jesus is present in a real yet miraculous way each time we share Communion, Christ's body and blood. And it is because of the Spirit that Jesus welcomes us into the body of Christ when we are baptized. Because of the Holy Spirit, the Jesus that we read about in the Gospels is not just someone who lived so long ago, he someone living in our hearts right now.

Just as Jesus is here right now, so too is Jesus here. Imagine with me for a moment that Jesus was standing right here in our midst. How many of us would immediately rush to see him, like Peter did when he saw his risen Lord on the seashore and immediately jumped from his boat and began swimming? I'd like to think that I would. Then again, there is something comforting about Jesus not always feeling so close. One of the benefits of Jesus not standing right here is that he can remain a wise teacher, a social activist, or an intellectual pursuit. He can be whatever we want him to be, including for some people no more than a mere man. What makes the thought of Jesus standing in our midst so scary is that following him requires so much more than

simply doing our best or doing our part. It requires that we dedicate all we are and have to following him. And yet, Jesus is here. Through the Spirit, the same Jesus who lived in Palestine and ascended to heaven resides within each one of us.

Yes, there will always be differences that separate us from Jesus. There is no way that we can fully understand or experience what it was like to be alive in the first century, to be middle-eastern, or to be a Jewish man. Some of us can understand some of them, none of us can understand all of them, let alone understand what it was and is like to be the Son of God. But that is not why the Spirit was sent, to suddenly make all of our differences disappear. Rather, the Spirit was sent so that each one of us might be like him. So that each one of us might experience that moment when the Spirit takes root in our heart, like the Spirit on the day of Jesus' baptism and on the day of Pentecost. I've had moments in my life where I've felt particularly close to God. No, during these moments there may not have been a sound like the rush of a violent wind or a tongue of fire, but there was an indescribable feeling of the Spirit's presence nonetheless.

And being like Jesus also means living like him. In Jesus, we see someone who truly loved God and his neighbor. We see how love led him to care for the widowed and the orphaned, to share food and drink with sinners and strangers, to teach his disciples and the crowds, and to worship and seek guidance from God. Through the power and presence of the Spirit in our lives, we too can live like Jesus. Out of love, we can go out and care for those less fortunate, help break down the barriers that divide us, reveal the good news through our words and our actions, and turn to God in the good times and the bad. Who knows, we may even one day go out and do something miraculous. Before Pentecost, my guess is that the disciples never could have imagined speaking in other languages. But in that moment the Spirit gave them the ability, helping them to do something so amazing that the best explanation the crowd could think of was

that they were “filled with new wine.” Jesus gave sight to the blind, fed the five thousand, and was raised from the dead. What miraculous things do you think the Spirit might give us the ability to do?

On May 24, 1738, John Wesley reluctantly attended a society meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. As he sat there listening to Luther’s preface to the book of Romans, he later wrote, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” That day, nearly 283 years ago, the Spirit took root in John Wesley’s heart and on account of that everything changed. From that day forward, he went out with renewed vigor and conviction. Like Jesus, he constantly traveled and preached the good news, he gave away all that he could to those less fortunate, and he gathered a group of followers; followers who could see and feel the power and presence of the Spirit in the message that he was preaching and in the way of life to which he was calling on them to live. Followers who would soon become known as Methodists and would go on to take that same Spirit with them as Methodism spread throughout the world.

Jesus is here with us, right here, right now, like he was for John Wesley and the disciples before him, because the Spirit is present in our midst. Right now in this very place, wherever this place may be, the Spirit is seeking to help us better understand who Jesus is in our heads and embrace him in our hearts. Can you hear Jesus’ words amidst a rushing wind? Or maybe you might feel the warmth of his embrace in a fiery tongue. However you may feel the Spirit, my hope and prayer is that you might continue to do so in some small or large way. And that in those moments when you don’t, when we don’t, when Jesus might just feel so far away and so different that we can no longer feel him, that we might turn to God. Turn to God and pray:

“Come, Holy Spirit, come. Come and reveal Jesus to us, right here, right now, so that we might come to more faithfully follow him, this and every of our lives. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.”