

## A Commissioning Event

Isaiah 52:7; Matthew 28:16-20

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Today we heard read from the Gospel of Matthew the account of the ascension of Jesus into heaven. All of the Gospels either describe the event or refer to it. Throughout the Epistles we can read references to the ascension of Jesus.

Jesus made arrangements to meet the disciples in Bethany on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem. Let's go and join them.

The Mount of Olives, so called because it was the location of an olive grove, is a two mile long ridge or foot hill with three summits, located just east of Jerusalem. It stands between Jerusalem and the wilderness.

We've read about the Mount of Olives before.

- It is the mountain overlooking Jerusalem on which Jesus sat during the last week before his crucifixion and wept over the city because they would not believe that He was the promised Messiah.
- It was to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives that Jesus went to pray on the night that He was arrested.

Meeting the disciples there on the Mountain would have given them a last special moment of privacy with Him as Jesus said a final commissioning and blessing over their future ministries. Matthew records that as they gathered with Jesus they worshiped Him. It was a holy moment in time. Matthew also records that some doubted. Perhaps this is Matthew's way of being brutally honest about what emotions were happening in the lives of the disciples at that moment.

What they were being asked to do, what they had been doing, was now to be done without the physical presence of Jesus walking with them. Matthew is in no way saying that they were not committed to continue the work. It was just that the mission was so large. Could their faith rise to the occasion? Could their faith be enough to support the action that Jesus was commissioning them to do?

Jesus is, of course, aware of their emotions, but Jesus is also aware of their abilities. He has spent three years with them, getting them ready for this moment.

Jesus responds to their very human emotions by giving them

- a great assurance
- a great commission, and
- A great promise.

### A GREAT ASSURANCE

Jesus assures the disciples that He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He reminds them that "all authority in heaven and in earth has been given to Me."

As human beings, born into a three-dimensional world, it is impossible for us to comprehend those vast, eternal, dimensions of God that we cannot see or touch or physically hear.

Let me stop for a moment and say that when we read from the teachings and the actions of the New Testament, much of the times we find new understanding of their meaning when we also read from what we call the Old Testament. The Old and the New Testaments are parts of a whole. We are called to remember that Jesus taught that He had come to fulfill the teachings of the prophets.

Take your pew Bibles and turn to page \_\_\_\_\_. Our translations may not be the same, but follow along as I read from the Book of Daniel, Chapter 7, verses 13 and 14.

Daniel is in captivity in Babylon. He has been gifted by God with a gift of discernment and prophecy and the ability to see visions that God gives him. That's the background to what Daniel is describing in these verses.

Daniel says, "I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And He was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and people of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed."

Daniel is seeing the vision of the ascension of Jesus. Daniel is prophesying that Jesus has been given everlasting dominion, everlasting power, over all people and nations. His is a kingdom that is forever and ever.

Our faith in God needs the assurance that comes from Jesus *himself*. Our assurance, of course, depends upon the faith, the belief, that we place in what Jesus says, but more importantly, in *who* Jesus is.

Jesus was saying to those disciples, and to us, "this is the reason that the Word was made flesh and came to live among you, to be seen and heard and touched by you. It was so that you might believe and trust. It was so that you might have faith.

It is then that Jesus gives to them a great commission.

#### A GREAT COMMISSION

The Great Commission has deep and meaningful implications for our lives as well as it had for the lives of those original disciples.

Listen again to the commission of Jesus.

"Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."

We have given these verses of scripture the title of The Great Commission, but in reality, these verses are also a Personal Commission to all who are followers, all who through the ages, are disciples of Jesus.

Jesus set those disciples, and us, apart with a mission to the known world for all generations until He returns. The words of Jesus have eternal meaning and value.

No longer will the disciples only be witnesses in Israel; no longer will they focus on being witnesses only to the Jews. They are now to include everyone in the mission of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The first word in the Commission is “go.” Go and share. “Go” is not the same as putting worship information on the sign outside of the church building.

The sign is a message that is important because it invites, it says “come” but it is a passive invitation that puts the burden of decision on the community, not on us.

We invite others to all kinds of things that we think they might enjoy, but somehow we are hesitant to invite them to worship where we worship.

Believe it or not, there are people who study statistics about the Church. The statisticians who do this tell us that 89% of the people who come for the first time to a worship service of the church do so because they were invited by a relative or a friend. These same statisticians also tell us that on an average it takes nine invitations to something that is happening in the church before they attend worship for the first time.

The church needs to provide many opportunities, in addition to worship, to invite people from the community to develop relationships with the people of the church. A relational invitation is an effective invitation.

Go... and do what? *Make disciples.*

Making disciples has been a process described throughout biblical history. It is a process of one individual becoming like another. Of course, we are challenged to make disciples, not of ourselves, but of Jesus.

In the day in which Jesus lived, a rabbi would choose another young man or a group of men. They would study together, walk together, talk together, and teach together. The young rabbis would become so like their mentor that

- they would think alike,
- they could finish each other’s sentences, and
- they might even begin to resemble each other physically because of their speech patterns and their body movements.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus requires

- spending time with Jesus,
- studying the teachings of Jesus,
- living as Jesus taught us to live,
- loving as Jesus taught us to love.

If we are to “make disciples” we must first be a disciple ourselves.

Jesus then commissions his disciples to baptize those who would follow Him.

## BAPTISM

Prior to the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, John the Baptizer had baptized those who repented of their sins in the Jordan River. Jesus himself had baptized no one, but his disciples had.

Now, baptism would be a sign that the individual was committed to

- being a disciple of Jesus Christ,
- being a part of the Body of Christ, the Church, and

- continuing to grow in the knowledge and the faith of Jesus Christ, to be spiritually formed into the image of Christ.

Baptism is a visible statement of a faith commitment. It also includes a commitment to the ministry or ministries for which one has been gifted by the Holy Spirit. It is a commitment to use our abilities to strengthen the ministry of Christ in and through the Church and into the world.

This day we sit with the disciples around Jesus on that hillside and we receive his commission and his blessing. And as we receive his blessing, He is lifted up to the heavens and a cloud covers Him, and He disappears from sight. We rise up as though that will help us to see more of Him. We stand transfixed, looking up. We cannot take our eyes from the heavens.

Our moment is interrupted by messengers of God who come to stand beside us. They say to us, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:10-11)

It is then that we return to Jerusalem and gather in the upper room to wait, for exactly what we do not know, but wait as we were instructed to do by Jesus.

It is our faith put into action for the first time since the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

In one week we will have the answer to our questions.

Amen.