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The Ascension of Our Lord

Acts 1:6-11

NOT WHEN, BUT HOW WILL CHRIST'S KINGDOM COME?

When will I get some relief? Isn't that usually our question? You know better than anyone else what ties your stomach in knots, or what weighs heavily on you. Add to that what all believers experience together: the need for relief from guilt, despair and the fires of temptation. Throw into the mix an invasive media, increasing persecution, worry for loved ones who are not saved. And when will us good guys finally win a few on issues like abortion, the lottery, or physician assisted suicide? Why do we always seem to be the underdogs?

Jesus' disciples were looking for the relief of the Jewish people demoralized under Roman rule. The disciples knew that Christ had come to set up His long-promised Kingdom. That was good. Kingdom means victory. Kingdom means Jesus rules. Kingdom means enemies lose. Kingdom means relief, peace, joy, security, glory—everything a good politician promises and more. But they were only beginning to understand that the real enemies were sin, guilt, death, the devil and eternal damnation. They were only beginning to understand that the revolutionary war for Christ's Kingdom was Christ's suffering and death. His Resurrection was the declaration of independence. The bill of rights is His ascension to God's right hand. Thus when Jesus assembled them 40 days after His resurrection, their question came quite naturally: "*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*"

Now realize, Jesus couldn't refuse their plea for the Kingdom. After all, it was Jesus who taught them to pray, "Thy Kingdom come!" Only He answered when with how. We read, "*He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has*

set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.'"

Power they wanted. Power they were going to get. But not the power of politics. Rather the power that changes hearts and lives. Christ ascended on high to pour out on us His Holy Spirit. Christ's Kingdom is born out of God the Holy Spirit. Luther's Small Catechism says, "*God's Kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word.*"

When the Holy Spirit convinces us that Jesus has saved our lives, then we no longer want to do wrong by Him. We gladly submit to His will. Having God's forgiveness in Jesus means we have peace with God, relief from a bad conscience and therefore true joy, security, eternal glory—everything the disciples wanted by having an earthly kingdom, everything that you and I need but can't find any satisfaction for here on earth.

Jesus did not tell the disciples when the Holy Spirit would come. He didn't mention that it would be at Pentecost. He doesn't tell us when a friend will be brought to faith in Christ, or when our struggle with doubts or temptations will end, or when financial or health problems will go away. He only tells us how His Kingdom comes so that these things do not overwhelm us and we can be saved. It comes by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes I've heard the well-intentioned comment, "I hope the seminary has counseling courses for the future pastors it trains." But what greater Counselor is there than God the Holy Spirit? What better therapy is there than to hear the still small voice of forgiveness from the Great Comforter? What more enlightened technique could there be than to receive a new life from Him who gave us our second birth? What better problem resolution is there than to cling to His promises?

But we need to know how the Holy Spirit comes to us. Jesus said: "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses.*"

The Holy Spirit does not merely fling Bibles at us. He has chosen to come through witnesses: people who tell us what they've seen and heard. The apostles did not create a religion or a philosophy. They reported what they saw Jesus do and heard Him say. Everything they wrote in the Bible was authored by Jesus through His Holy Spirit, and the apostles were merely His witnesses.

The Holy Spirit has chosen to work through witnesses, people telling other people. When we hear the pastor's voice do we remember, "That's God talking to me," –even if we don't like to hear what he's saying? Or if our parents address us do we understand that God Himself is speaking? --provided only that what the pastor or parents say is consistent with what the Bible says? They are Christ's appointed witnesses to speak for Christ.

And what a comfort to us that God would give His Word a living voice among us, cloaked in flesh and blood as we are so that you can receive personal, concrete assurance that His forgiveness and promises are intended for you, yes even you. Christ's Kingdom comes to us through His witnesses.

Jesus gave the apostles a strategy too. First to preach in Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, then to the ends of the earth. What's our most natural strategy –the one we know God has already given us? Begin with your marriage. Then your family. Do you sit down and read a psalm with your wife or husband before bed? We timed it once at Peace in Sun Prairie. Takes @ two minutes. Do you recite the Apostles Creed 3 or 4 times a week with your kids –maybe at the door in the morning before you all go your separate ways? If your kids are a little older, do you read a chapter of the Bible at the supper table and then have everybody say out loud together the Lord's Prayer? Why is God's Word or your faith a mute subject in your home? How can you expect the Holy Spirit to come and heal, restore and resolve matters under your roof if you won't let Him in by using His Word? How can you expect His Kingdom to come? Concentrate on being Christ's witness at home first in your marriage and with your family, and all other matters of witnessing –to friends, with congregation, to the world –will fall into place.

Concentrate on the how, rather than the when. Whenever we are hearing, learning, and using His Word and Sacraments, that's *when* His Kingdom comes to us. But more importantly that's also how. If we do not focus on the how by putting our faith in His Word and His Gospel-witness to us, then *when* His Kingdom comes will only be a terrifying thought to us –a time of judgment. For we will lack faith in Him for salvation.

In all this we are not looking for temporary solutions to earthly problems. We are looking to the ultimate solution to every problem: everlasting life. This is what the disciples, you, I and all believers are really longing for. Christ ascended into heaven visibly to reassure us that His Kingdom will come visibly one day, and that we will not miss it. It encourages us greatly, and lifts our spirits to think of that ultimate relief that will be ours on that day. For now, the relief is ours by the power of the Holy Spirit working through His witnesses. That's how His Kingdom comes.