

The Ascension of Our Lord (10 days before Pentecost)

First Lesson: Acts 1: 1-11

Dr. Luke had been commissioned by a man named Theophilus to write a **history** of Jesus' walk on earth, which constitutes the **Gospel** of Luke. Now Theophilus would like Dr. Luke to write the history of the **acts** of the early church. St. Luke begins by noting that Jesus spent an additional **40 days** on earth after his resurrection, **appearing** to his apostles and speaking **further** about the Kingdom of Heaven. Then he gave them an interesting **command**. Although they now knew that he had risen from the dead and had a glorified body, and even though Jesus had given them further **insight** as to their mission after three years of **on-the-job training**, Jesus tells them **not** to attempt **any** missionary work, but rather to **stay** in Jerusalem, praying, until after they have been **baptized by the Holy Spirit**, in accordance with Jesus' characterization by John the Baptist (**Luke 3:16**).

And it is with good reason, because once, when they were gathered around Jesus, the disciples wanted to know whether Jesus was going to restore the **Jewish earthly kingdom** now. They **still** hadn't grasped what Jesus was all about! Jesus responded by telling them it was none of their business what God the Father was going to do. But he does tell them that the **Holy Spirit** will fall upon them, by which they will receive **power** to become **effective witnesses** for Jesus. Consequently, they will start going throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria (the **Northern Kingdom**), and then to the **whole world**, bringing the good news of forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation by believing in Jesus' sacrifice. And with that a **cloud** picks Jesus up and carries him into heaven.

And while the disciples are standing there, **gawking** up into the sky, suddenly two men in white robes appear and ask them why they are just standing there looking up. Then they note that, in the **same** way that Jesus ascended into heaven, so he will **descend** to the earth on **Judgment Day**.

Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 1: 15-23

It was at the beginning of St. Paul's **third** missionary journey that he preached Christ to the people of **Ephesus**, a prominent seaport on the west coast of what is now Turkey. In fact, he eventually spent three years there, teaching them the **way of Christ**. But now St. Paul is **in prison** in Rome, and despite his imprisonment he still wants to write a **letter of encouragement** to the Ephesian Christians whom he loves dearly. In today's reading, he **praises** them for their **faith** and for their **love** for all people.

But then he tells them that he never stops **thanking** God for them, and always remembers them in his **prayers**, especially that God would

- give them all a spirit of **wisdom and knowledge** of Christ Jesus,
- enlighten their eyes** to know well their **hope** in God,
the **riches** of their glorious **inheritance in Christ**, and
the immeasurable **greatness** of **God's power** working for believers.

Then St. Paul expands on the greatness of this power; it is the power that

- worked in Jesus to **raise him from the dead**,
- seated Jesus at God's right hand** in the heavenlies, and
- is far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion**, not only in
this age but also in the next.

Finally, St. Paul notes that God the Father has placed **all** things under **his (Jesus') authority**, and made him **head** over **all** things in the church, which is his body.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 24: 44-53

St. Luke records for us the event that took place behind locked doors on the evening of that **first** Easter. We find Jesus suddenly standing in their **midst**, bidding them **peace**, and showing them the marks in His hands and feet in order to convince them that it really **is** He, not a spirit. Then He asks for **food**, and **eats** it in their presence, as additional evidence that He really is the risen Messiah now with a glorified **body**.

Next He gives them a lecture on how He has fulfilled **all** of the prophecies about Him that were recorded in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. He notes in particular that the Messiah would have to **suffer, die, and rise** again on the third day. Under these circumstances, then, He notes that **repentance** and **forgiveness of sins** needs to be proclaimed in His name to **all** nations, beginning in Jerusalem, because they, the disciples, were witnesses of all of this. But then Jesus says something unexpected: **don't** be a witness of these things **yet**. Instead, **wait** until you have been endowed with the **power** of the **Holy Spirit, the promise of the Father** (which occurred for these disciples on the day of Pentecost).

Approximately 40 days later, Jesus leads them out to Bethany, blesses them, and is **carried up into heaven**. The disciples pause to worship the ascended Christ, then return to Jerusalem, and spend time continually in the temple, **blessing** God.

The Day of Pentecost

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 11: 1-9

The lessons for today present a series of **contrasts**. In our first lesson, we see contrasts in the answer to the question, “Where did **languages** come from?” If one subscribes to the evolutionary hypothesis, we would agree with Darwin, who said, “I cannot doubt that language owes its origin to the imitation and modification, aided by signs and gestures, of various natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man’s own instinctive cries.” In other words, language evolved from the gestures of nonhuman primates. Consequently, early language would be **simple**.

In contrast, in our first lesson, God states that it was **he** who created languages. And I think it would be fair to say that those languages would consist of more than grunts and gestures, in fact might be rather **complex**. So which is it? When we search the internet for the oldest languages in the world, we find that they are among the most **complex**. Apparently God is right. And this is in response to the idea that man proposes but God disposes. In this case, we find the **people** focused **pridefully** on themselves, wanting to do something because they wanted to make a **name** for **themselves**.

Epistle Lesson: Acts 2: 1-21

Our second reading finds us answering another question: How do we go about solving a **problem**, especially a **societal** one? If one has kept up with how society addresses this problem, we see the answer to this one: fund a **major study**, and then fund a broad-scale **educational** program. This, of course, will cost the **taxpayers** hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars. This approach was used to address perceived societal problems that resulted in educational programs in our schools. The question is, how effective **was** that approach? Can we, by our own reason or strength, solve all of society’s ills? Even some **churches** believe that the programs **they** develop will fulfill Christ’s great commission.

The second lesson for today offers us a **different** perspective. Recall that the disciples have been with Jesus virtually 24/7 for the last three years, where they learned by **word and example**. Surely that would mean that they are **prepared** to carry out the great commission! They can depend on their **own** reason or strength. But what do we find? We see them **hiding** behind locked doors. And we hear Jesus telling them (in **Acts 1**, just before his ascension) to **wait** in Jerusalem for the **baptism** in the **Holy Spirit**, so that they can receive **power** to be Jesus' witnesses. And that is exactly what we discover in our second lesson: The disciples are now **fearless** witnesses, proclaiming God's mighty works with such **power** that 3000 people believe!

A word of **caution**: many people **fixate** on a single aspect of this baptism in the Holy Spirit—**tongues**. In so doing, tongues becomes a **stumbling stone** to them, causing them to **fail** to recognize the real purpose behind this event: becoming a fearless and powerful **witness**.

Gospel Lesson: John 14: 23-31

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus draws a **distinction** between those who **love** him and those who do **not**: the former **keep** his words, the latter do not. But then he speaks of the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit, and tells his disciples that this is **important** for them, because the Holy Spirit will do two things for them:

- **teach** them all things
- bring to their **remembrance** all that Jesus has said to them.

This is in addition, and closely related, to their becoming **fearless and powerful witnesses**, as seen in our epistle lesson for today.

Holy Trinity Sunday

Old Testament Lesson: Proverbs 8: 1-4 and 22-31

We are all familiar with our own **solar system**, which consists of a star, our sun, around which circle several planets, including Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, and so on. But to expand our horizons a bit, recall that our solar system is part of the **Milky Way**, that milky-looking band of stars that we see overhead at night. Did you know that there are up to **400 billion** stars in our Milky Way? Each one apparently is the center of its own solar system. And each of these solar systems are revolving around each other. But the Milky Way galaxy is just one of as many as **500 billion** galaxies, all with a similar number of solar systems as our Milky Way Galaxy and all revolving around each other in a process that keeps them all apart but yet in this **perpetual motion** that could be likened to a fine **Swiss watch**. How do they **do** all this?

Our Old Testament Lesson for this day gives us the answer: **Wisdom**. Here wisdom is personified as a **woman** who calls out to humankind to listen to her. But then she states that she was there at the **creation** of the world; that is to say, when God carried out his work of creation, he made use of **wisdom** to control every aspect of it.

Second Lesson: Acts 2: 14a and 22-36

Our second reading finds us continuing the story that we began last Sunday: the events of the Day of Pentecost. Today's lesson reveals more of the **sermon** that Peter preached that day, under the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter accuses the men of **Israel** as the ones who crucified and killed their own **Messiah**, even though his works, signs and wonders attested to God's approval of him. This approval was further demonstrated by **God** raising Jesus from the dead, to which the **disciples** standing before the crowd were all **witnesses**. And finally, Peter points out that this pouring out of the Holy Spirit that the crowd is seeing and hearing is **further** evidence that **Jesus**, the one identified by John the Baptist as the **baptizer in the Holy Spirit** (Luke 3: 16), is both **Lord and Messiah**.

Gospel Lesson: John 8: 48-59

In our Gospel Lesson for today, we find Jesus in a heated discussion with the Jews about ***who*** he is. The Jews accuse Jesus of being possessed by a ***demon***, which Jesus denies and then states that he honors only his ***Father***. What isn't recorded here but in **Mark 3:28 - 30**, is that this statement of the Jews could qualify as the single ***unforgivable sin***. Here, however, Jesus further points out that, although the Jews ***claim*** Abraham as their father (and, by inference, the ***Father*** as their ***God***), they in fact do ***NOT*** know God the Father. Then Jesus makes a statement that causes the Jews to pick up stones to kill him because of alleged blasphemy: Jesus states that before Abraham was, "***I am***," thus identifying himself as the great "***I am***" who spoke to Moses from the burning bush (**Exodus 3: 1-14**).

Sunday on June 19 - 25 (Proper 7)

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 65: 1-9

When a young woman wants to get the attention of a young man, what **techniques** might she employ? She might place herself where he is. For example, if he is in the choir, she might join as well. If he teaches Sunday School, she could be a teacher, also. And if he is in the library, studying for an exam, she might find a chair across from him to do her studying there as well.

In today's **Old Testament** lesson, we find **Isaiah**, God's prophet to Judah, the Southern Kingdom, describing a similar situation. In this case, the "young woman" might be pictured as **God** trying to get the attention of the "young man" **Judah**. In fact, God is going out of his **way** to be seen by Judah, holding out his hands in welcome, calling out, "Hey, Judah, notice me!" But not only does Judah not pay any **attention**, it does all the things that are **repulsive** to the God who is trying to get Judah's attention. Judah's **rebellion** against God is characterized by the worshipping of **idols**, of breaking God's **laws**, and even of telling God to **butt out** because, in their opinion, **their** righteous deeds are better than the righteousness that **God** offers to them. They are going **their** way, doing **their** own thing. **They** know better!

Finally God says that he can no longer tolerate this rebellion, and he will **judge** them and **punish** them for their sin. But God is careful to sort out those who **do** follow him from those who do **not**. He will not destroy these latter, but rather they will **inherit** what is his, and they will dwell in **peace**.

Epistle Lesson: Galatians 3: 23 - 4:7

As we continue reading St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, we find him today making the need for the **Law** analogous to the need for young children to have effective **parents or guardians**. If we did **not** have the Law, or parents or guardians, we would have **free license**, with **no concept** of what is right or wrong, and without **self-control**. The purpose of the Law, then, is to help us learn what is **right** and what is **wrong**, leading eventually to our becoming

functioning, **mature** adults, which in this case is represented by our coming to **faith** in Christ and living **accordingly**. During the time that we are maturing under the Law, we—as **future** heirs of God—are not unlike **slaves**: we have to be **told** what to do and what not to do.

But then St. Paul slips in something extremely important that we cannot miss: if we have been **baptized** into Christ, we are **already** sons of God through **faith**. It makes no difference whether we are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. But then he says, if we are **Christ's**, we are **Abraham's offspring**. (And if we are Abraham's offspring, we are **Jew's**! As St. Paul says in **Romans 2**, a real Jew is not someone who satisfies the **physical** (or genetic) requirements, but someone who is one **spiritually**, one who like Abraham is approved by God through **faith**.)

Gospel Lesson: Luke 8: 26-39

In our **Gospel** lesson, we find Jesus sailing with his disciples across the Sea of Galilee to its eastern coast. In **retrospect**, it might seem that the specific intent of this mission is to encounter a man who lives in a **graveyard**, naked, and doing crazy things. Amazingly, his strength is superhuman, not surprising since we quickly find out that he has thousands of **demons** living inside him. These demons immediately **recognize** Jesus as the **Son of God**. But this does not benefit them, since Jesus **casts** them **out** of the man, so that the man can live as God intended him to do. In the few hours that it takes for this news to spread to the nearest towns, and the townsfolk to come out to see what has happened, the man has sat at Jesus' feet, absorbing **every word** that comes out of his mouth. But the power of Jesus is too much for the townsfolk, who demand that he **leave**. The man wants to go **with** Jesus, but Jesus tells him that he has to **stay** so that **he** can tell everyone in the area what God has done for him. And that, folks, is a **witness**. Notice how little it takes to be a witness for God: just a **recognition** of what he has **done** for you.

Sunday on June 26 - July 2 (Proper 8)

Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 19: 9b-21

Israel, also known as the **Northern** Kingdom, had as its idols for almost 200 years the **golden calves** made by **Jereboam**, Israel's first king—much to the disgust of God (**1 Kings 12: 20-33**). But, many years after Jereboam, King **Ahab**, the one who married **Jezebel** from Sidon, introduced (again) the two fertility gods Baal and Asherah, with whose worship **prostitution** was an integral part. As a consequence, God sent **Elijah** to knock heads with King Ahab, the first time resulting in Elijah pronouncing a **drought** on the Northern Kingdom—as we learned 3 weeks ago. Three-and-a-half years have passed, with **no** sign of repentance on the part of King Ahab—or, for that matter, the Northern Kingdom. So God has Elijah challenge the prophets of Baal and Asherah to a **face-off**, which takes place on the top of **Mt. Carmel**. The 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah plead all day to have their gods burn **their** sacrifice, without success. But at the time of the evening sacrifice, when Elijah prepared **his** sacrifice and had it drenched in **water**, God answered with a **fire** that consumed not only the sacrifice but also the water and the stones of the altar. For the moment, then, the people agreed that the Lord was God, and, following God's (**Deuteronomy 13: 12-18 and 17:2-7**) and Elijah's instructions, killed the 850 prophets. The problem was, these were *Jezebel's* **personal** prophets who ate at her table—courtesy of course of the **taxes** paid by the people. Jezebel, now **furious**, puts out a **contract** on Elijah, to have him killed within 24 hours. Elijah flees for Judah and arrives at its most southern major city, Beersheba, where he asks God to let him die. God's response is to send an **angel**, twice, who fed him with bread and water, whereupon he is strengthened to travel 40 days and 40 nights to **Mt. Sinai** in Arabia, the same mountain top where **Moses** met God face-to-face 600 years earlier. Here God **confronts** Elijah and gives him some assignments, And so our Old Testament lesson begins.

Epistle Lesson: Galatians 5: 1 and 13-25

In this continuation of last week's lesson, St. Paul now deals with an important concept: although we as Christians have been **freed** from the yoke of **slavery to sin and the devil**, this does not give us the **right** to exercise that freedom by sinning even **more**. The freedom given us through Christ's death and resurrection is not for us to **indulge** the desires of our **human** nature; rather, it is to be used to **serve** one another. And this is done by loving our **neighbor** as we love **ourselves**, a concept repeated to the **Romans** by St Paul (**Romans 13:8-10**), and a concept not only stated by Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**) but also understood by the Children of Israel at the time that God gave the Ten Commandments to them through Moses (**Ex. 20:1-17**). That is to say, **love** is the means by which we **fulfill** the **Law** (the Ten Commandments). Just so we fully understand what love **is** and what love is **not**, St. Paul provides a representative list of the works of the **flesh**, and contrasts that with a representative list of the fruits of the **Spirit** (*i.e.*, the works of **love**).

And just as a reminder: what **kind** of love is St. Paul talking about? It is **godly** love, meaning **sacrificial** love for the benefit of someone **else**.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 9: 51-62

In our **Gospel Lesson**, we find Jesus already preparing himself for the task of dying for the souls of all mankind: he sets out for **Jerusalem**. But we have to remember that travel is by **foot**, and so Jesus send some of his disciples ahead of him to make appropriate **travel arrangements**. But we quickly see here that, just as the **Jews** despised the Samaritans, so also the **Samaritans** would have **nothing** to do with Jews—or anyone **else** who is headed for **Jerusalem**. James and John consequently are smitten by **road rage**, and want to call down **fire from heaven** to get even. But Jesus quickly ends that thought with a **rebuke**.

As Jesus **continues** toward Jerusalem, he encounters people who claim to want to be **part** of his team. But Jesus cautions them to count the **cost**, and warns that **wanting** to be on his team but **procrastinating** for personal **wants or desires** does **not** meet the requirement of **commitment** to proclaiming the kingdom of God