**Acts 1:1-11**

 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning

 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me;

 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

**Psalm 47**

Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.

 2 For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.

 3 He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

 4 He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. Selah

 5 God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.

 6 Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.

 7 For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.

 8 God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.

 9 The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted.

**John 17:6-19**

6 "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;

 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

 9 I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.

 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

 11 And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

 12 While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

 13 But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

 15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

 16 They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

**Sermon** – What to do now?

Fun fact… Thursday was the day of Ascension. One of those well-kept secrets from the rest of the world. Just like Pentecost, the world has not gotten hold of them yet… no cards; no balloons with a message like “float to the sky with Jesus”, or “celebrate with tongues of fire!”. So, forty days after Easter, comes the Ascension of Jesus… always on a Thursday, ad then 10 days after that – Pentecost. But even though the world did not get its claws into it yet, does not mean it is not important. It is easy for us to skip over it – it being on a Thursday and not commercialized at all. But the ascension of Jesus brings a new era into being; an era where he returns to the Father, and sends us the Holy Spirit.

For twelve chosen ones and friends, Jesus was their everything.  He was the one who was going to liberate Israel.  He was going to be the one to take them right out from under the fist of Rome, at last!  They saw the miracles he did, the way he treated people; how he spend time with the oppressed and outcast; the hungry and homeless; the sick, the helpless, the unholy. But then they lost him, when he died on a cross… for three days they were orphans.  For three days they didn’t know what to do with themselves.  But then, on the third day, he rose again.  He rose right up from the dead and for forty days he lived with them.  For forty days he ate dinner with them and laughed with them.  For forty days he poured out love on them.  They had him back for forty days.

They had him back for forty days and on the fortieth day, he took them out as far as Bethany and, as Jesus reminds the disciples of who they are and of their journey and next steps, Jesus begins ascending. Clouds carry him to the right hand of God. The disciples are in awe of what they are experiencing. I am sure that it is a beautiful sight. A sight that you and I would be hypnotized by, like a balloon that gets away, or a plane taking off with a loved one, we cannot do anything but stare and wait until the last possible glance is gone.

The disciples did not have that luxury. As Jesus was being lifted up "two men in white robes stood by them," like fellow onlookers, like Jesus on the Emmaus road asking: Why are you looking up? What are you looking at? Don't you see that Jesus will be back? Go on and get back to work! Don't be distracted. Move on and stop staring, there's nothing to see here... They lost him again, and what were they supposed to do now?  Now that Jesus has withdrawn, has let himself be carried up into heaven? What to do with these new instructions. Waiting…. Witnessing….

Today the Church gathers around the world in that space: the space between the day since Jesus ascended, on the threshold of something new; something not quite here yet – the Spirit that will come; the Spirit for which they should go and wait; the Spirit that will aid them in their witness; the task that Jesus set them up for as he was leaving. And we find ourselves, like the disciples, in a period of waiting once more.

But just like the disciples must get on with the business of following Christ now that the earthly, resurrected Jesus has returned to his Father, we too must live into a new, uncharted normal of being faithful to the One who calls and sends, promises the Holy Spirit and grants us peace, even when we are not so sure of all of those things. We cannot stay in a place of staring up to the heavens, looking towards the sky in awe. The final kingdom of God will only come with us turning our gaze back down and getting to work, doing what Jesus told us to do.

The season of testimony begins - for the disciples and for us. The time to testify to what we have seen and know has come. Are we ready to tell the truth, the whole truth, no matter the cost, circumstance or reception?

That is what is at stake for disciples of Jesus Christ and that is why Jesus prays fervently that they, and we, will stay the course. Protect them, God, he prays. Sanctify them, God. Send them, God. And reading this conversation between Jesus and Abba; his pleading on behalf of his friends makes one want to both lean in and turn away. Should we be privy to such raw emotion and heart-felt requests? Jesus fulfilled his mission and now they must fulfill theirs. Like him, the world will reject and persecute them. Grace and mercy are hard sells in a world that glorifies greed and celebrates retribution. Protect them, God. Sanctify them in the truth that is increasingly rejected, God.

The disciples, and us, have to continue to labor smack in the middle of the very same world that was about to reveal its character that very night when no less than the Son of the Living God would get arrested and accosted and then nailed to a spit of wood.  ***That***was the world in which they’d have to work and ***that***was why Jesus had to spend so much of this prayer begging his Father to give them all the help, all the protection, all the support he could provide. Letting them, and us, overhear, to make sure we know what lies ahead…

If ever we in the church needed a reality check as to what we should expect in ministry and in service to this world, the fervency of Jesus’ prayer here should remind us that we should not expect smooth sailing.  But why should any of this surprise us?  Jesus knew what we’d be facing.  Yes, he prayed for protection and strength, but he did so precisely because he did not necessarily think the world was going to be any more receptive to God’s kingdom than it had been in his own lifetime.

The truth is we need all the prayer we can get as followers of God, but we need it because Jesus knew that the evil one still has some kicks.  We ought to expect no less.  But the Good News is that Jesus is—right now—still praying this same prayer at the right hand of his Father… praying that God protects us; that God sanctify us… that we are set apart for his purposes in the world…

That's the new normal, for the 12 and for disciples ever since. Testify to the truth no matter the cost, knowing that Jesus prays for us and God protects us. So, why do we believers so often capitulate to the world rather than live the words received from our Lord? Why do we find ourselves living as the world, rather than in the world?

Well, if living in the way, the truth and the life was easy, Jesus would not have prayed so fervently for us on the cusp of the end of his earthly life. We forget that the door is narrow and that while Jesus' burden is light and his yoke is easy, bearing his cross means losing our lives.

But what does such a sanctified life look like; a life of witness, of living in the world in Jesus’ way? If we are not caring for the poor in Calcutta or Haiti, or part of the Church in places where we will be persecuted for it, how do we testify to the truth? Live the disciples' new normal in our own daily life?

I believe it is to witness and point to God's kingdom of love and justice and compassion. Witness to it, work for it, pray for it. Work and pray to end poverty. Work and pray to end hunger. Work and pray for a clean creation. Work and pray for an end to preventable diseases. Work and pray for gender equality. Work and pray for universal education for all God's children. Work and pray. Do the Gospel's work. Put your hand to the gospel plow. WITNESS!

Witness to Jesus whose ministry began with the words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Can I get a witness to the Jesus who said, "Whenever you do it to the least of these who are members of my family, you have done it unto me." Witnesses to the Jesus who said, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the merciful, the compassionate. Blessed are those who hunger and work that peace might break out, blessed are those who dream and work and labor and pray and thirst that God's righteous justice might prevail." Witness to the Jesus who said you shall love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself.

This is the new life we live…for some it is making sure all their local schools are safe and resourced with supplies and trained, fairly-paid teachers. For some it could be studying the history of the place where they live, looking at the zoning laws and showing up at the planning commission meeting. For others it is taking in a foster child or working on prison reform or fighting against gerrymandering. For some it is bringing relief to places hit by natural disasters, fighting for refugees, or doing their part for creation. It is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our Lord.

For each and every disciple of Jesus Christ, Matthias and the one known as Justus, for Peter, Martha, Mary and the countless ones whose names were never recorded but whose testimony to the truth spoken and lived made an impact, it means being sent, going out, loving the world God so loves, doing what we know Jesus calls us to do, no matter the price.

So, people of God, why are you looking up? Wake up, Jesus will be made known again, through you! Yes, one day he will come again but until then, you are it! You know what to do… you have witnessed it over and over and over again. And no matter the cost, spread the news unto the ends of the earth, knowing that Jesus is praying for us.