“***Taken Up from You***” by S. Finlan, for The First Church, May 24, 2020

**Acts 1:6–14**

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But 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.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.10While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.”

Aren’t the disciples funny? Here they are at the very end of their life-experience with Jesus in the flesh, and they are asking about Israelite power politics, in which they have a material interest. Jesus tries to help them shift their focus. He tells them they don’t need to know the details regarding Israel. They *do* need to know that the Holy Spirit will be poured out on them, and they will be his witnesses through the Jewish lands and beyond, “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This mention of the whole earth is his last word to them before he rises up into heaven.

As usual, his apostles have a more restricted and localized viewpoint, while Jesus has a more universal and spiritual view. Can we see ourselves in the apostles? Do we also have a restricted and localized viewpoint that needs some correction by Jesus? How could that *not* be true? Jesus is not just the one sent by the Father to show us how to live and love. He has a universal role. We need to recall what the New Testament says about Jesus’ role in the creation of the world. As it says in John, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3 NIV). And then, in Colossians, “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created” (Col 1:16). His view is not only worldwide, but heaven-wide. Of course our viewpoint is going to be local and narrow, compared with his.

At the very *least*, he understands what is needed to the ends of the earth. All the peoples of the earth are his children. But, limited though we are, we can be loyal followers, just as his original disciples were. Jesus understands that we have limitations. We care about what’s happening here and now, and we care about our families and the people we know. And it is normal to have national sentiment, though “Other lands have sunlight too, and clover, and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.” But none of us should put our national pride ahead of our loyalty to the one invisible God. And we need to trust that Jesus knows what the human race needs, and is working toward that end. It is a test of our faith, to trust that.

God has a far-seeing plan for each one of us, a plan for our growth. As it says in Jeremiah, “I will set my eyes upon them for good” (Jer 24:6). And as Paul wrote, “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion” (Phil 1:6). God finishes what he starts. We should trust that God knows what steps to take for the education of each one of us. God is engaged in the work of perfecting us, which is a very long-term project. My message today is about trusting God to carry on that work, beginning here and continuing in the afterlife. It is not for us to know the exact “times or periods that the Father has set” for that work, or to know all about what stages we will go through, but I want to encourage you to trust that the Father has a plan, which will allow us to develop our talents and hopes. The Father sees the big picture, and knows what we need.

In the same way, Jesus knew what his apostles needed. They needed encouragement and teaching, they needed the Spirit, and then they needed Jesus to depart, so that they could make their own decisions and do their best. They were to become his witnesses to the ends of the earth. They had to organize this effort themselves. The Spirit would come upon them with power. They would have what they needed to be effective preachers. Jesus had prepared them and guided them, and ministered to each one personally. Now the gospel was entrusted to their care. They would be filled with the spiritual power to embody the values of mercy, meekness, and purity of heart that Jesus taught. They were to embody the Godly character that Jesus demonstrated. They knew that the kingdom was not entirely exterior to them but was also interior—that, as ambassadors of the kingdom of God, they were to display the fruits of the Spirit in their lives.

And we are to do the same. Sometimes our growth will seem agonizingly slow, or the uncertainty too great, or our struggles too long-lasting. It is our human tendency to feel the apparent unfairness of any delays or uncertainties. When we look back later, these may seem like mere moments in our story. When we review our life story, we may see that our hearts have been deepened over time and that God’s will has been operative throughout. That’s one of the ways that delay can be good. We have to trust that God knows the times and the periods, and will complete the good work he has begun in us. God has set his eyes on us for good. This sets us free to focus on just doing our best in the moment.

We also don’t know the time of Jesus’ promised return to this world. We are told that he will return in the same way that he departed—coming through the air, and not as a baby—but no one knows when. Nor can we figure that out. It is for us to trust and abide. And we can do that, as the Psalmist said: “He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?” (94:9). Jesus sees and hears what his followers are going through. He ascended into heaven, but he is not so far above us that he doesn’t care. He nurtures us still. He pours the Spirit into us, to draw us back toward the Source—our true homeland.

So while we go forth on our journey, we can move forward with great strength, trusting in our Father’s love and support as we live and grow, day by day.