



MISSIONARY SUNDAY (Mission Work Abroad)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, August 3, 2008

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Lection - Acts 1:4-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 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; (v. 5) for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (v. 6) So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 7) He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. (v. 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.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Missionary Sunday (Mission Work Abroad) provides an opportunity to inspire and challenge the contemporary church to embrace a global perspective and commitment (Acts 1:8). This commitment is not just to the end of the street, the extent of our zip code or our denominational interests. God calls us out of our church pews, and beyond our comfort zones and preoccupation with ourselves, to live under the influence of a Missionary Spirit who empowers us for effective and responsible witness in the world.

“The term mission presupposes a sender, a person or persons sent by the sender, those to whom one is sent, and an assignment. The real sender is God who has indisputable authority to decree that people be sent to execute the will of God. In practice, however, the authority was understood to be vested in the church or in a mission society.” (Bosch, 1)¹

Thus, Missionary Sunday challenges the church to remember that the Living God is not a village God with a tribal ethic, existing for our concerns alone and confined to our corner of the world. The Living God is a missionary God, a sending God whose love knows no ethnic or geographic boundaries or limitations. Missionary Sunday provides an opportunity for the church to reflect upon and declare its commitment to the world and to think and act in ways that will help extend the Christian witness to the ends of the earth.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Acts 1:6-8

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In his book, Strength to Love, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. states that “one of the great tragedies of man’s long trek along the highway of history has been the limiting of neighborly concern to tribe, race, class, or nation. The God of the early Old Testament was a tribal god and the ethic was tribal. The consequences of this narrow group centered attitude is that no one really minds what happens to those outside of his or her group. If an American is concerned only about his nation, he will not be concerned about the peoples of Asia, Africa or South America.” (King, 27-28)²

King’s words reflect the interpretive challenge of world missions. Growing up in the Christ Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, I have vivid memories of the Missionary Societies led by Mrs. P. Travis and Mrs. E.E. Hill. Both groups (the #2 Missionary Society and the E.E. Hill Circle) were led by women in white dresses/suits and hats with a tenacious commitment and emphasis upon local acts of charity and benevolence. Foreign mission, as it was called at that time, was typically delegated to the convention (Progressive National Baptist Convention) with which we were aligned.

It was not until my seminary experience at Memphis Theological Seminary as an inquiring young minister, that my vision for God’s world was enlarged. As a pastor who is presently serving as a team leader for the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention’s Pastoral Excellence Program, I am grateful for an evolving “bifocal vision which is a balance between nearsighted and farsighted vision. Nearsighted vision concerns itself with needs which are close to home, while farsighted vision is concerned

with expansion -- looking beyond the immediate context to the world of need and opportunity outside our normal sphere of influence to take part in God's global action."³

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles (verses 6-8), the disciples are gripped by the tension between speculation of uninformed apocalypticism and the despair and stodginess of a church without apocalyptic hope. They lack clarity and understanding of the meaning of the "promise" (v. 4). They linked the coming of the kingdom with the expected restoration of the national theocracy. When they gather after Easter, they do so as those who wait and question. What they know of what has happened in the resurrection is the source of their hope but also of their yearning. Everything that has happened since the Lord's passion and victory over death has convinced them of God's triumph. As witnesses to the Lord's death and resurrection, and recipients of the Lord's instruction, they know that the decisive battle has been fought and won, but not yet. They want Christ to fulfill his promise of restoration, to finish the work begun. However, Jesus has not yet engaged in those Messianic actions that would redeem Israel. They ask the question that was not explicitly raised in Luke 24. "Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6; Luke 9:11). That was the question on everyone's mind. They still anticipated a literal Messianic kingdom patterned after the kingships of the Old Testament.

In verse 7, Jesus directs the disciples' attention away from the times and the seasons established by God. Jesus does not reprove the apostles for their heightened anticipation, or their confidence (though misinformed) in the biblical promises. The second coming, or Parousia, brings the ultimate closure to the story of the kingdom and the gospel. But that is not to be the focus of the disciples' attention. Instead, Jesus shifts the emphasis from speculation about the future to demonstration and transformation of the present. God's promise to revitalize Israel is not a matter of when (v. 7), but how (v. 8).

In verse 8, Jesus says, "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." The disciples would be empowered to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Jesus instructs the apostles to embrace a different redemptive reality. Although Jesus did not answer the apostles' questions concerning the precise time when God would restore the kingdom of Israel, he did promise them something far more important. They would receive the Holy Spirit as God's promise and the receptacle of power that would enable the progress of the gospel to go forward from Jerusalem to Rome.

Verse 8 also provides the framework for the Spirit's role within the faith community and a comprehensive mission strategy. The apostles would be empowered by the Holy Spirit, as the sending force behind the missionary enterprise, to go forth as witnesses in their own community (Jerusalem), their region (all of Judea), the region that was socially and ethnically different from their own (Samaria), and the world beyond their knowledge, (the Roman territories and the Mediterranean world). The Spirit is the Spirit of promise poured out on God's people in order to enable them to perform mission work in the

world. God's vision for the world would be accomplished through human beings empowered by the Spirit, sent into the world as witnesses-heralds of God's grace. Since these witnesses had touched, experienced, and felt God's grace, they could testify to it. The apostles would live under the realm and influence of a mission minded Spirit whose presence would empower them for an assertive, challenging, and counter-cultural agenda, an agenda that calls everyone from everywhere to effective responsible witness for Jesus in the world.

Furthermore, in verse 8, Jesus reveals the Church's proper response to the Great Commission. The centrifugal love of God (the love of God radiating outward to all of creation) would be accomplished by a demonstration of God's love shown through those who believed God, and were obedient to the will of God. God's commitment to the world is a responsibility to be shouldered by every believer.

Challenge

While waiting for Jesus' return, the redeemed believers were told what their primary function would be -- to faithfully spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Balancing breadth of vision with depth of impact is still a challenge. None of us has the emotional or spiritual capacity to respond to every need we learn about in the world, but we must not allow that to cause us to take on an attitude of apathy and indifference. It is easy to become overwhelmed by world events such as the AIDS crisis in Africa, the rape of women in Sudan, the eradication of malaria, world hunger, economic injustice, exploitation, and homelessness. But our limitations do not have to limit our faithfulness. We can act in faithful ways in spite of our limitations. We may not be able to change the world single-handedly, but we can make a difference in the world one hand at a time. The direction of the apostles was of primary importance then and now. Start where you are at the moment and take the message outward and watch it ripple as a pebble thrown into a pond, moving beyond your city, to regional influence, to worldwide impact. As the Spirit worked through their compassionate responses to the Gospel to change the world, may that same Spirit empower us to go and do likewise.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The strong unflappable tone in Jesus' declarations (verses 7-8), the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples (verses 4-8); and

Images that can be used: A globe, a collection plate (a symbol of shared giving), the cross (a symbol of the depth of God's love).

III. Other Material for Christian Education Purposes and the Sermonic Moment

The Pastoral Excellence Program of the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission is a creative learning experience funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. The purpose of this program is

to transform the ministry visions and magnify the pastoral impacts of African American pastors through executing multiple ministry immersions in African and African Diaspora contexts with consistent peer groups for mentoring and networking. Pastors who have personally experienced and engaged in ministry alongside international peers in various cultural contexts through Lott Carey travel opportunities testify to transformation and reinvigoration. See lottcarey.org

IV. Books on Missionary Work

- Campbell Seminar, and Walter Brueggemann. Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context, Papers from the Campbell Seminar. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Guder, Darrell L., and Lois Barrett. Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America. The Gospel and our culture series. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998.
- Borthwick, Paul. A Mind for Missions: 10 Ways to Build your world Vision. (1987) Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998.

Notes

1. Bosch, David. Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991. p. 1.
2. King, Martin Luther. Strength to Love. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981. pp. 27-28.
3. Borthwick, Paul. How to Be a World Class Christian. Waynesboro, GA: OM Literature, 2002. p. 55.