

In the Absences of Life, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. x7080504
Acts 1:6-14 and John 17:1-11
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It was an interesting scene on that mountain, Mount Olivet. Unbelievable events took place. Men in white robes appeared out of nowhere. Jesus ascended into the clouds. It had all the makings of a Stephen Spielberg movie with its special effects. It looked just like the ending of ET.

That is not a good comparison, but, the scene on Olivet is comparable to the exit of Elijah of the Hebrew scriptures reported in 2 Kings 2:11. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is compared to the Prophet Elijah. Elijah performed miracles that foreshadowed Jesus' miracles. He was a salvation figure for the Old Testament Israelites. To this day, the return of Elijah is anticipated by Jewish people as the ushering in of God's rule. While Elijah's disciple Elisha watched, Elijah was swept away by the whirlwind. Elisha tore his clothes out of anguish and mourning at losing his teacher, whom he called "Father".¹

This scene on Olivet is an answer to the disciples' question, "Where did he go?" It was the way they dealt with the absence of Christ from their midst. The manner of Jesus' exit reassured the disciples that Jesus was with God. He was still alive after the crucifixion. He was still in control after a seeming defeat. His manner and teachings were still normative after violence appeared to have won out.

The event on Mt. Olivet is called the Ascension and we celebrate today as "Ascension Sunday." It is the last Sunday of the Easter season.

There is disagreement between Luke and the other Gospel writers as to where the mount of ascension was. Luke said it was on Olivet, a short distance out of Jerusalem. Matthew, Mark and John say it was a mountain in Galilee, far to the north: Mt. Tabor. Why is there disagreement on such an important detail? We don't know for sure. It might have to do with the audience to which the particular Gospel was written. It could be confusion as the story was told to others.

The location is not as important as the directions the disciples were given by Jesus: "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."²

Today's transfiguration foreshadowed the great event of Pentecost which we will celebrate next week. The Holy Spirit, like a rush of wind, gave the disciples the power they needed to be Christ's witnesses.

The Disciples and early Christians had to live in the absence of Christ. They must have felt abandoned, alone, and afraid. That is why they stood there staring into skies. That is why they remained huddled in a room in Jerusalem for the next few days.

There are times when we ask, "where is God?" We experience pain and suffering and ask "Why?"

"Why did God cause this to happen?"

"Why was that baby born with that deformity?"

"Why do the good die young?"

"Why did God take her away?"

¹2 Kings 2:12

²Acts 1:8

“How come he got promoted and not I?”

“Where is the justice?”

We look for meaning and explanations. The answer comes from Jesus lips, “it is not for you to know times or periods”³

We are never going to know many of the why’s and wherefore’s of life. Human explanations do not suffice for many of the tragedies or inequities in life. How do we live in the absence of Christ? How do we live amid the sufferings of life?

First Peter (part of today's lectionary which we did not read here) speaks of the fiery ordeal to prove his readers.⁴ The early Second Century CE Christians faced tortures and burnings at the hand of Diocletian, the despotic Roman ruler. One way we survive the absences of life is to remember the fiery ordeals of thousands, even millions, of faithful who have gone before us and faced far worse than we will ever face.

“Fiery ordeal” could be used to refer to the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is no simple or easy thing to receive God's Spirit. There are times, I am sure, that it burns like fire as it empowers and strengthens. That Spirit empowered the early Christians to withstand adversity so they could continue to proclaim the gospel. That same spirit helps us live in the absences of life.

The Disciples did three things that carried them through the absences of life. First, they gathered together. There is great strength and comfort in gathering with other loving Christians. We have a tendency to keep our problems to ourselves. We don't want to burden others with our problems. We do not trust. We think others might gossip. Worse, we fear we may be rejected or laughed at. We need to gather with other loving Christians in confident trust. As we share our burdens and absences with fellow Christians, we gain sympathy and support. We find that others have shared similar experiences. We find compassionate and understanding ears.

Second, the Disciples devoted themselves to prayer. There is power in prayer. Devoting ourselves daily to prayer is important. When I do daily devotion consisting of Bible study, reading commentary, and prayer, I am renewed. I receive good news in the face of the bad news of the world. The Good News is that God is in control; there is order finally. I put things I cannot control into God's hands: “Okay God, I've done all I can do. I want to be rid of this. You make it turn out the way you want it to, and I'll try to accept it.” I know I am not alone in facing my absences. God is present in my absences of life.

Third, the disciples survived the absences by doing God's work. They were, and we can be, witnesses to God's love. It's true! As we help others overcome their hardships and absences, we realize that ours are not as bad as we thought. When you lose your helpmate, you look for another or you do it all yourself, but you press on. You can't sit around moping and feeling sorry for yourself, because that makes depression feed on itself. Do God's work. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” asked the two men in white robes. “Get moving and do what Jesus told you to do!”

Jesus, in the prayer recorded by John, gave God the glory. There is only one proper object of glory: not ourselves, not our pains, and not even Jesus. The only proper object of glory is God. If we give God the glory, even in the midst of our pain and absences, we can be restored and strengthened because of the suffering.

³Acts 1:7

⁴1 Peter 4:12