

Kenny Silva – Sermon – “The King Ascends His Throne” 2/9/20

Have you ever heard of a Pinterest Fail?

A pinterest fail is basically this beautiful image of a dish or a craft set up against somebody’s miserable attempt to pull it off. Allow me to demonstrate...

For me, the Pinterest fail is a hilarious illustration of what happens when our expectations bump up against reality...

Now, you don’t have to be a hopeless baker to struggle with this.

- Maybe you’ve showed up to a new job with a picture-perfect ideal of what it would be, but by the end of the first week you were ready to start shopping out your resume again.
- Or maybe you got to a new school expecting to start a brand new adventure, but then you were blindsided by the crushing demands of homework.
- Perhaps you blissfully said ‘I do,’ but as soon as you got home from the honeymoon, you realized that *being* married is a whole lot harder than *getting* married.
- Or maybe you started a family with the expectation of building this beautiful, happy home, but the reality of changing diapers, breaking up fights, and trying to function on two hours’ sleep has left you wondering how in the world you’re even gonna survive.

In today’s passage, we’re going to see what happens when earthly expectations run up against heavenly reality. But unlike the Pinterest fail, the reality Jesus describes is far *better* than the expectations we bring.

Now, if you’ll please open your Bibles to Acts 1:6-11, I’d like to say just a few words to remind us where we are in the book.

Last week, we looked at the first 5 verses of Acts. We learned about the Father’s **promise** that Jesus would be **present** with all His people by the **power** of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, that’s what Jesus told His disciples at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. He said, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

As I said last week, this is the distinguishing feature of Christian faith. No other religion can claim that its founder is present and active among its people. No other creed can attest that its God stepped down into human reality, lived the life we should’ve lived, died to pay the debt we owed, and rose to live among us as our Savior, King, and Friend.

But this claim about Jesus' presence leads us up against something of a tension, because the passage we're about to read is about Jesus' going away into Heaven—or, what the Church has traditionally called the Ascension.

In a word, this passage seems to be about Jesus' absence, not His presence.

To deal with that tension, we need to know a little bit more about the Kingdom and its King.

Acts 1:6–11 (ESV)

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed 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 and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

This passage begins with a set of expectations. We see that in v. 6, where the apostles ask Jesus, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Sometimes, we tend to read that question as kind of a presumptuous thing. Where do these jokers get off asking for Jesus to restore their precious little kingdom when He's got much bigger fish to fry like, you know, spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth?

The interesting thing, though, is that Jesus doesn't necessarily rebuke them here. There have been plenty of other times where the disciples would say something crazy and Jesus would clap back with a pretty stinging reply. But He doesn't do that here.

No, instead of criticizing or directly challenging their expectations, He shifts them.

You see, the disciples knew their Old Testament. They understood that prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Joel pointed forward to the day when the Spirit would be poured out on all God's people and that His coming would be the sign that God's glorious reign had broken into the world.

So, it makes sense that the disciples would ask this kind of question. Jesus had come and the Spirit was about to show up. The next step, as far as they knew, was for Him to get up on His throne and for Israel to reassert itself on the geopolitical scene.

But what does Jesus say in v. 7? “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.” In other words, fellas, this isn’t going down the way you expected it.

But this isn’t just a matter of timing... Jesus isn’t just shifting their expectation about *when* the kingdom will come. He’s also telling them *how* it’s going to come.

We see that in v. 8, where Jesus says, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

The striking claim here isn’t that they’ll receive the Spirit. The apostles already knew that. No, the really significant part here is that Jesus responds to their request for an earthly, physical kingdom by talking about the power that the *Spirit* will give them.

This brings us to our first point: **God’s kingdom power is spiritual.**

The kingdom of god is a huge topic in Scripture. It really takes the whole Bible to unfold it. Just to help us get our arms around it, Jeremy Treat—a TEDS grad and pastor in Los Angeles—describes the kingdom as God’s reign through God’s people over God’s place.

When I say the power of that Kingdom is spiritual, what I don’t mean is that God is unconcerned with earthly or material things. No, even a quick jaunt through the Gospels will show you that God is intimately concerned with the normal stuff of everyday life—from the food we eat to the money we spend to the way we love one another through practical acts of service.

What I’m saying, though, is the power that drives our kingdom existence comes from above by way of God’s Holy Spirit.

You see, the disciples knew this. They knew how tightly knit the Spirit and the Kingdom were. As we see in vv. 2-3, Jesus spent the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension talking about just that.

But even at the point of His departure, the disciples didn’t quite get it.

For them, it seems, the Spirit was a means to an end, and that end was the dawn of an earthly kingdom like what Israel had in the glory days of David and Solomon. It would be a kingdom like all the other kingdoms of the earth with a king like all the other kings.

And in an earthly kingdom like that, power is measured not by spirit but by the sword. Subjection comes by subjugation; citizens enter into the kingdom not because they’ve seen the grace and glory of the King, but because they’ve been coerced.

But Jesus’ reply to their question is meant to address that expectation.

John Stott puts it really well:

“It is important to remember that his promise that they would *receive power* was part of his reply to their question about the kingdom. For the exercise of power is inherent in the concept of a kingdom. But power in God’s kingdom is different from power in human kingdoms. The reference to the Holy Spirit defines its nature. The kingdom of God is his rule set up in the lives of his people by the Holy Spirit. It is spread by witnesses, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms, political intrigue or revolutionary violence.”

I think we all get this, right? In 21st century America, I don’t think we’re about to take to the streets looking for people to beat into conversion. If Max Lucado or John MacArthur or someone like that told us to take up our swords and go scare some folks into submission, I think we’d all shut that down immediately.

Fair enough, but the danger we do face is that we would trade the spiritual weapons of our warfare for political ones... That we would look to an earthly ruler to establish God’s kingdom here on earth... That we would rush to the front lines of the culture war and think of *that* as our reasonable Christian service.

Don’t get me wrong; politics matter. We should pray for godly rulers, and we should use all the democratic means at our disposal to build communities where justice rolls on like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

But, brothers and sisters, we can never let ourselves be deluded into thinking that the advance of God’s spiritual kingdom is contingent upon its earthly environment.

Throughout the world, especially in places like China, the kingdom is thriving and expanding at an astounding rate—regardless of what the political environment looks like... That’s not because God’s people have won the culture war. They haven’t.

It’s because they love one another, and they’re faithfully spreading the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to our second point...

The Kingdom Grows through testimony.

In v. 8, Jesus says, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

We might call this a one-verse summary of Acts. Like a table of contents, it lays out how the book is going to unfold. It also represents the geographic spread of the Gospel.

That kingdom expansion is driven by one thing: testimony, or witnessing.

Our word, *witness*, comes from the Old English word *wit*. We don't use it much anymore but, "to wit" essentially means "to know." Way back when, a "wit" was a person who knew his stuff. Today, we might talk about someone who has her "wits" about her.

Well, to *witness* is to speak to what you know or what you've seen. In this case, it's to tell the truth about who God is and what He's done in Christ.

Ever since the days when Moses led Israel out of Egypt, God had called His people to be true witnesses. We see that in the ninth commandment: thou shalt not bear false witness. We also see it in Deuteronomy 17 and 19, where truthfulness is placed on so high a pedestal that you could actually be executed for bearing false witness.

That may seem harsh, but in Israel, these rules about testimony were God's way of making His holy community a place of unwaivering truth and absolute purity. They reflected His desire to have a people who, in their words and actions provided a living testimony to the truth, goodness, and beauty of their God.

This living witness was meant to be a sign to the nations, a reflection of His glorious light before a watching world. We see that in Isa 49:6, where God says,

6 I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas explicitly quote this passage because they understood themselves to be swept up in God's mission to bring light to the nations.

And when the Gentiles heard about their mission, they rejoiced and glorified the word of the Lord. They received the disciples' eyewitness testimony and responded in faith.

Imagine that scene... imagine a group of people who were once aliens and strangers to the promises of God now being told the truth about His love, mercy, and grace... that the God of Israel is a God of compassion, that He sent His beloved Son to die upon the cross so that dirty, rotten sinners like them could be made clean, so that they could become sons and daughters, citizens of His glorious kingdom.

Imagine the people saying yes and amen, I want to be a part of *that* kingdom.

Well, that's what God is inviting us into. He's sent us out to expand the borders of His kingdom, but as I often tell my children when I see them heading into a battle—God wants us to use our words.

Be a witness; that's what Jesus wants us to do.

When it comes to sharing our faith with others, we often feel weak. We don't know what to say or how to say it. We're afraid we're going to say the wrong thing or that we aren't going to be able to answer their questions. We're terrified that we'll look foolish and that we'll bring dishonor to Jesus' name.

But consider what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5:

Proclaiming Christ Crucified

2 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. **2** For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. **3** And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, **4** and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, **5** so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

You see, these believers had drunk a bit too deeply from the well of Greek philosophy and rhetoric... They expected a witness to God's truth to be an excellent speaker, wise and eloquent. They expected a charismatic personality, a golden tongue, and a stunning powerpoint deck. *That's* how they knew the message could be trusted.

They had the wrong expectation about what a good witness should look like, so Paul had to point them back to the reality of God's spiritual kingdom. People aren't converted by slick speech. They aren't compelled into the kingdom through sheer force of argument. No, it is only by the Spirit of God working in power through our words that people hear and respond to God's Word.

What does that mean for you and me?

It means we can stop being so self-conscious about what we're going to say, and we can just open our mouths. We may not use the best words; we may fumble our way through a gospel presentation. But God will use that; He will use our weak and jumbled words to cut people to the heart and bring them into His kingdom. He's been doing it that way for 2,000 years, and He isn't about to stop.

...

Now, again, none of this is what you'd expect from an earthly kingdom, and you could imagine the apostles were a bit confused by how Jesus had subverted their expectations.

But before they could say anything else about it, before they could ask him a few more questions, Jesus was gone... whisked away on a cloud.

That brings us to our third and final point: **The King Empower Us From His Throne.**

So far, we've seen that God's Kingdom is a Spiritual Kingdom and that it doesn't grow by way of the sword or political coercion but by way of the Spirit-empowered testimony of its witnesses. But the question we asked at the beginning of our time still remains: why does the King step off the scene just as he sends His soldiers into battle?

Well, as we've said again and again, this kingdom is unlike other kingdoms, and its king is unlike other kings. And that's precisely what we see here in His departure.

In v. 9, the apostles look on as Jesus is lifted up and a cloud and taken out of their sight. This wasn't the first time Jesus had disappeared after His resurrection. In Luke 24, for example, Jesus breaks bread with a few disciples and then vanishes into thin air.

But this time is different, and the cloud is meant to make that clear.

You see, the cloud represents a familiar image from the Old Testament, first of the Shekinah glory that descended upon the temple in Solomon's day (Ex. 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10-11), and second of the apocalyptic Son of Man spoken about in Daniel 7:13.

At Jesus' trial, when his accusers asked if He was the Christ, He alluded to Daniel, saying "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:62) 1 Thessalonians and Revelation both pick up this imagery to describe Jesus' return in power and glory.

Here, in Acts, though, the time has not yet come for Jesus to break in as the apocalyptic king. The cloud isn't coming down; it's going up. So, the key question for us is where is that cloud taking Jesus?

Before we tie ourselves up in speculative knots, here's how the Bible answers that question:

Hebrews 1:3-4 (ESV)

³... After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high... That's royal language; it speaks of glory, honor, and authority. It's the language of enthronement, when the Messianic King ascends to David's throne and takes His rightful seat. And its from that place that our King pours out the Spirit upon His people.

This is why Jesus had to go, so that from His throne He could send the Spirit. He talks about that in John 14:7, where He says, 'I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.'

I must go so that the Spirit can come. That's the dynamic here.

And it's through Jesus' absence that the disciples are granted a spiritual presence and power that they never could've had if He'd stuck around the way they wanted Him to.

It's through His leaving, that Jesus is able to pour out His Spirit. And it's through the indwelling of that Spirit, that we all have Jesus in a more personal and powerful way than ever before.

This is the paradoxical truth that holds everything we've said so far together.

God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. It defies our expectations because its nature is unlike all the kingdoms of this earth, and its King is unlike any King we have ever known.

As His church, we are called to join Him in expanding that Kingdom as we bear witness to the gospel of His grace. From His throne, our King pours out His Spirit so that we can have everything we need to do that kingdom work.

The moment you leave this church, you're heading out into a spiritual battlefield. The seen and unseen kingdoms of this world continue to rage against our Lord and his Christ.

Yes, in vv. 10-11, two angelic messengers tell us that there will come a day when the Son of Man returns in the same way the apostles saw Him leave. And when He does, all His enemies will finally be placed beneath His feet.

But that day is not today.

So, the question they put to the apostles could just as easily be put to us,

"Men and women of Lincolnshire, Lake Forest, Vernon Hills, wherever... why do you stand looking into heaven?" Translation: what are you waiting for?

God hasn't called us to stand still and look up into the sky, but to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth. That is our kingdom charter; the spiritual warfare that our great and glorious King has commanded to carry out.

Our King is on His throne. The world may try to get you to believe otherwise, but He is seated in power. He is in control. And by the power of His Holy Spirit, He is with us, empowering our words and enlivening others' hearts to receive the Good News.

May His power be evident, even in the weakness of our witness.