

SERMON, MAY 28 2017
PROPERS FOR ASCENSION

ACTS 1: 1-11

EPHESIANS 1: 15-23

LUKE 24: 44-53

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

This morning's readings are the Propers for the Feast of the Ascension, celebrated on the 40th day after Easter.

Ascension is the day on which Our Lord, Jesus Christ, ascended to the Father in the sight of His Disciples, after those 40 days with them after His Resurrection, teaching them and preparing them for His departure, preparing them to take His work upon themselves.

How had He taught them; what had He taught them? Had they learned enough?

Quite recently I was reading an article about learning.

"It's about time" you may be thinking, and you would be right. The article explained many things that have puzzled me over the years.

Apparently, there are two broad types of learners in this world. There are "auditory learners" and "visual learners."

Auditory learners are the ones who listen to lectures and who actually remember them. I'm sure we all remember auditory learners, sitting in the front row in class, nodding and smiling, raising their hands to make comments. Personally, I'm not one of them.

I am, and have long been, a visual learner. I need pictures and charts and maps and kindergarten flannel boards to get the message. Write it out and give me a hand-out sheet and I can follow very well. At this age I can blame it all on my hearing aids but it has always been true.

A long, long time ago I had an adjunct faculty position at the Medical College of Georgia, lecturing on upper extremity anatomy. Having no seniority, and being adjunct, I was scheduled to have classes at one in the afternoon, after lunch hour. Not a great time to teach.

They struggled to stay awake but I could see eyes closing and heads nodding and people slowly slouching and I thought this stuff cannot be that boring. But memories of other classrooms and other lectures that inspired me to nap came flooding back so I started drawing pictures on the board, all kinds of diagrams, not all of which made sense, and they woke up, well most of them did. We are the visual learners.

Now you are probably thinking “is there a point to all this reminiscing?” Yes, there is, because I found myself thinking about auditory and visual learners in the past, specifically in biblical things.

It seems to me that what we call the Old Testament is the story of auditory learning prophets trying to talk to visual learning Israelites. They would stand out in the wilderness or on street corners in Jerusalem and tell anyone who would listen about the terrible state of affairs in the kingdom and how the nation had ceased to follow God and how they had to mend their ways, stop worshipping idols and other Gods, and get back to the way it had been in the past.

And the listeners, the visual learners, who missed part of the speech because there were no illustrations or charts, would politely agree and say “absolutely; we are appalled at what we have done and will certainly change our ways.” Then, after a week or two, they would slip back into idol worship and all sorts of bad things. It happened again and again.

There were however several instances when God’s message to the Israelites was really tailored to the visual learners.

There they were, all the Israelites, trapped on the banks of the sea. Over there was the Red Sea; back there was the Pharaoh and the entire Egyptian Army. The Exodus thing simply was not working out, no matter how reasonable it had sounded in the auditory speeches. They were in big trouble

Then, out of nowhere, a pillar of clouds came down between them and the Egyptians. It was like a huge sand storm. It was spectacular! It was a surprise! It was a visual learner's dream. The visual learners must have applauded and cheered. And then God parted the Red Sea so that they could run through and escape the Egyptians; three spectacular visual illustrations of the love and concern of God for His people.

That would certainly be something they would never forget, but they did. Very soon they were complaining about having to be in the desert, the heat, the food, the sand and before long they were worshiping a golden calf and all the problems began again no matter how many prophets appeared.

We really must remember that Jesus' Disciples and all His followers, for that matter the whole population of Israel at that time, were people of that Old Testament world. They had lived their entire lives in a world filled with auditory learning prophets and were simply yearning for one more great visual experience, a new Exodus moment, when God reached into their world and made His presence and His love very plain. They wanted and needed a real and tangible proof of God's presence.

And they received it in Jesus.

The visual learners were quick to recognize Him. Some of the auditory learning Scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees never recognized Him. He simply did not fit the image that centuries of prophets had proclaimed. And, for a moment, for three days, it appeared that those who sought to be rid of Him had won.

The visual learners who had recognized Him and seen the presence of God in Him, in His compassion and love for the poor and the sick and the rejected, the crippled and the lepers, the weeping widows and mothers, the blind and the deaf, they had seen it all, freeing them as He had freed His people so many years before

They had seen the triumph of God over death itself in the Resurrection.

In the First Chapter of The Acts of the Apostles Luke tells us that after the Resurrection "He presented Himself alive to them by many convincing proofs,

appearing to them over the course of forty days.” Paul tells us that in those forty days the eyes of their hearts were enlightened and He opened their minds to understand not only what they had seen, not only the visual learning that they had experienced, but the auditory learning they had received from centuries of prophets.

Even then, after tangible proof of God’s continuing presence there were some who failed to grasp what was unfolding before their eyes. They ask “Will you now restore the Kingdom of Israel?” They still saw Jesus in terms of earthly power, expecting Him to miraculously vanquish the oppressive Romans and restore the tiny state of Israel to worldly prestige. I dare say Jesus sighed.

Even then, recognizing how very complex and difficult we can be, as Jesus ascended to the Father, God made a gift for both the auditory and the visual learners among us.

For the auditory learners and for the visual learners as well, He has given us a teacher, The Holy Spirit “to lead us into all truth.” The Spirit is the intangible continuing presence of God speaking in our lives, if unseen then to be heard as a constant commentary on God’s will for His Creation, for you and for me.

For the visual learners, as well as the auditory, He has given us the presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist. When we receive the sacraments we are in Communion with Him; we reach out to Him and reaches out to us, a tangible, visible sign of His presence, His compassion and love for us all.

He has taught us, as He taught those Disciples, by His word and His presence. We have been, whether we know it or not, prepared to take upon ourselves the work He has given us to do.

In His Holy Name.