

Acts 1:1-11 “Leveling Up”

This is the last Sunday of Easter season. The sad news is that we have to take the nice Easter banners and the lily cross down. The happy news? Next week is Pentecost in the Park which is my favorite non-Christmas/non-Easter service of the year! It’s also the last week of our “Good News is Coming” series which is a response to an article I read called *Can the Christian Church Outlast the Next Decade*. The author suggested that we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) don’t even know what our good news is. I firmly disagreed and have spent the last few weeks pointing out that we *do* know what our good news is, and that is, “God is reconciling the world to God through Christ.” Two weeks ago after worship, someone made a comment about this series. They said, “You’ve done a good job convincing us that we know what our good news is, but you haven’t answered the question that the article asked: Can the Christian Church outlast the next decade?” I was wondering when someone would catch on and ask that question.

First of all, he’s not asking if the Christian Church can outlast the decade we’re in right now. If that was the question I’d say, “Well of course, there’s only one year left!” Granted, some of us in the Christian Church are a little battered and bruised from everything that’s been happening lately. Here in Butte County we’ve definitely experienced some stress in the last six months, but let’s face it ... it wasn’t exactly a piece of cake before the Camp Fire was it? We were already facing a housing *crisis*, but the Camp Fire created a housing *emergency*. In our own congregation, we’ve had to say goodbye to two families who fled to Oregon – Meribeth Carlson and Diane Brown as well as

Chris Overacker and her mom. We've also had to say goodbye to others like Michelle Martin who have been pushed out of the area because there are no affordable housing options left in Chico. We're on day fifty-five of post-flood damage repairs here at the church. We're plugging along with no internet and limited phone capabilities. But ministry is still happening. We've still got worship space and God is still good. Can we make it through the two-thousand tens? No doubt. We'll be a little singed, a little damp and a little bruised, but yeah ... we'll make it. The question is, "Can we make it through the 2020s?" And my answer is, "Maybe."

"Well ... why would you say that Jesse? We've been on a roll here with encouraging messages about our 'good news!' Why are you going all Eeyore on us and ruining a good moment? Maybe. Good grief." Sorry. I'm not saying, "maybe" to be negative. I'm saying "maybe" because I really don't know. Honestly, who can predict the future? The best we can do is make educated guesses based on past experiences. I guess it's sort of like playing the Stock Market. So what does this have to do with the scripture in front of us this morning? Let's take a look. The book of Acts starts out with the author addressing "Theophilus" which in Greek literally means, "God Lover." We also know that the author of this book is the same person who wrote the gospel of Luke because he refers to the first book that he wrote and then gives Theophilus a brief recap of Luke's ending. Luke's ending was pretty simple. Jesus promised his disciples they'd be baptized with the Holy Spirit if they stayed in Jerusalem and then he was taken up into the heavens.

Acts, however, goes into a little more detail about Jesus' last encounter with his disciples. In Acts, the disciples ask Jesus, "Hey, isn't it time for you to come in and restore the Kingdom to Israel like you've been saying all along?" Jesus says, "Look, it's not for you to know the specifics about the time line. But when you receive the Holy Spirit, you'll have everything you'll need to go proclaim the good news to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and all the earth." *Then* he was taken up into the heavens. I like this because I picture the disciples getting all nervous about Jesus leaving them, so they ask, "Okay, we know you have to go, but ... is it time yet?" So Jesus told his disciples what I've been telling my kids for 23 years when they ask "Is it time yet?" He basically said, "Wait and be patient." Another thing Acts adds to the ascension story is how the disciples stood around looking up at the sky after Jesus ascended. And while they were doing this, two men in white robes appeared among them and said, "What are y'all looking up there for? He'll be back just like he said he would. Wait and be patient."

But I've got to admit, I'm not always very patient. When needed, I can project the illusion of being patient, but I'm not always successful. Over the years, however, I've discovered that when I practice genuine patience, most things end up working out in the long run because I'm working on God's timeline instead of my own. Sometimes people will come up to me with something that, to them, seems like a dire emergency. And they'll say, "What are you going to do about this preacher?! Because you need to do something *now!*" And at that point, I have two choices: I can let the adrenaline kick in, assume the level of anxiety of the person who's bringing the emergency to me, then *react* rather than respond. Or, I can consider what has

been brought to my attention and prayerfully bring the matter to God. The problem is, God usually says, “Wait. Be patient.” And that’s frustrating! Both to the person who brought this perceived emergency to my attention *and to me* because I just flat-out don’t like to wait! And yet ... quite often the answer that God gives to those who want something to happen *now* are *told* to wait. Abraham and Sarah want to know when God is going to hurry up and make good on that promise that they’ll be the parents to a great nation. Wait. Be patient. The Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness want to know how much longer they’ll have to trudge around before they reach the land of milk and honey that God promised. Wait. Be patient. The people who’ve been taken away from their homeland by the Babylonians want to know when they’ll be able to return home. Wait. Be patient. The people who are waiting for the messiah to come are wondering if God is even listening to their pleas for help. Wait. Be patient.

The prophet Isaiah told the people of Judah - “But those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” – Isaiah 40:31 And I can think of very few times in my life where waiting was not the right thing to do. When I “wait upon the Lord,” and I’m not talking procrastinating ... I’m good at that ... I’m talking about waiting on God’s time ... when I wait upon the Lord, things usually work out in the end. Maybe not the way I wanted, but it does work out.

I love role playing games. In the table top realm, I’m talking about Dungeons and Dragons, Pathfinder, ... games like that.

Video game-wise, I like Mass Effect, Arkham Asylum and Tomb Raider. The idea behind a role playing game is that you start out with a character that has very few skills, abilities or knowledge. But as the game progresses, you earn experience points in order to build up your character's skills, abilities and knowledge. That's called "leveling up." As the game increases in difficulty, you're able to keep up with the new challenges because you've leveled up. If you don't level up, you're stuck and you won't be able to keep up with the new challenges. When the disciples were just standing around watching Jesus ascend into heaven, the two men clothed in white had to encourage them to move on to the next step in order to meet the challenges of proclaiming the good news. Go wait in Jerusalem like Jesus told you, because you're going to receive a "level up" like you won't believe!

Following Jesus hadn't been very easy during the three years the disciples spent with him. They experienced some painful learning moments and of course there was the trauma of Jesus' arrest, betrayal and crucifixion. But on resurrection day, they learned that Jesus came through on his promise to return. And in today's scripture, we see how they are right on the verge of a level-up that will help them change the world. More on that next week.

So back to the original question: "Will the Christian Church outlast the next decade?" And again I say, "Maybe." So long as we're willing to wait and be patient. So long as we put our trust in God's timing rather than ours.