

"The Next Step"

Acts 1: 1-14

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Several years ago, a man went on vacation and picked up a big, fat book at an airport bookstore. As he relaxed in his hammock at the beach and read the biography of Alexander Hamilton by Ron Chernow, in his imagination, Lin Manuel Miranda heard hip hop songs rising off the page. At the time Lin Manuel was taking a break from his award-winning Broadway musical, "In the Heights." The actor, singer, and songwriter was as surprised as anyone to find great inspiration in the story of the man whose image is on the ten-dollar bill. The more he read, the more determined Miranda became to create a hip hop album based on the life of this founding father. In 2008 he started writing and quickly realized that this was going to become more than just an album of songs. And on August 26, 2016, the musical "Hamilton" opened to great acclaim on Broadway.

The show continues to be one of the hottest tickets in the history of Broadway. It is coming back to Chicago this fall. I have tickets to see it for the third time. There is much speculation about the reason for its popularity. I think one of the reasons is the quality and diversity of musical styles. The show includes jazz, hip-hop, rapid-fire rap, heartbreaking ballads, R & B, soul, grand Broadway dance numbers, and romantic love songs. It took Miranda two years to write the first two songs- and within the next four years he wrote fifty more.

What I find most intriguing about the show is the diversity of the cast, most in their 20's and 30's. Lin Manuel Miranda, whose parents are of Puerto Rican descent, lifted real life white people from the dry and brittle page of history and wrapped them in human flesh in glorious shades of black and brown. Two black men portray slave-owning, white presidents Washington and Jefferson. And it works.

Alexander Hamilton was a teenaged orphan immigrant who arrived in New York City with nothing and ended up being one of the creators of our fledgling democracy.

Hamilton fought in the Revolutionary War, set up the young nation's treasury system, among many other institutions that continue to function to this day- some better than others. Hamilton was far from perfect- the musical makes that perfectly clear.

One of the most powerful songs is, "One Last Time." It is President George Washington's resignation song to the nation he helped to create. In the early days of the nation Hamilton met with the Continental Congress and suggested choosing a president who would serve for life on "good behavior." Others saw this as a "pseudo" king- what they had

just defeated England to prevent. War hero George Washington was chosen to serve as the first president. After serving two terms he did a surprising thing. He said goodbye.

Lin Manuel Miranda said, *"The most extraordinary thing Washington did was to step down as president ensuring that this American experiment would continue without him. By modeling a peaceful transition from president to president, he put us ahead of every fledgling democracy on earth."*

Hamilton was Washington's right-hand man, and he did not want the first president to step down, especially because his nemesis, Thomas Jefferson was waiting in the wings to be president. In the original cast, Chris Jackson, as Washington sings about how he wants to teach the citizens of America, "how to say goodbye."

In a back-and forth-argument in the song, Washington sings, "I wanna talk about what I have learned. The hard-won wisdom I have earned."

Hamilton argues, "They will say you're weak." Washington counters with, "No, they will see we're strong." Hamilton insists, "Your position is so unique."

Washington responds, "So, I'll use it to move them along." Hamilton tries one more time, "Why do you have to say goodbye?"

Washington sings, "If I say goodbye the nation learns to move on. It outlives me when I'm gone. One last time."

The chorus sings, "George Washington is going home." And he does.

I am certainly not equating George Washington with Jesus Christ, but they do have one thing in common. They both knew when it was time to say goodbye.

We are standing on a bridge this morning; a bridge between Easter and Pentecost-between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the empowerment of his disciples by the Holy Spirit. This is an important interlude because it represents the transition of power from the risen Christ, who is about to ascend into heaven, to his disciples who remain very much here on earth.

It has been an amazing time for the disciples. For more than two months their lives have been a rollercoaster of emotions starting with the ugly death of Jesus which sent them into hiding. Then they received the unbelievable news three days later that his tomb was empty. They saw him for themselves, and he spent forty days with them- just like old times- almost. He spoke and they listened. They broke bread together and they basked in the warmth of his presence.

They never felt stronger, more courageous, or more solid in their faith than when they were with him. His presence gave them more wisdom than they could ever achieve on their own. And yet, they still didn't quite grasp his message. Even after all that had happened, they still asked, "Is this when you will overthrow the Romans and restore God's kingdom to Israel?"

Even after three years with him they still didn't know what kind of Messiah he was. They still wanted him to be an avenging Messiah who would lead an army to destroy the oppressive Roman Empire so Israel could become the nation they thought it was meant to be.

As they gathered around Jesus on the final day- of course, they didn't know it was the final day- they were psyched and ready to follow him anywhere. But he surprised them once again and told them to go back to Jerusalem and wait. Wait?

"Wait," he said. "Wait for the promise to be fulfilled." They were supposed to wait and to pray and to pay attention because when the Holy Spirit arrives, they will have to get to work. And then before anyone could even raise their hand to ask a question; before Peter could blurt out an inappropriate comment- Jesus was gone. Just like that. He was there and then... he wasn't.

And there they stood, staring up into the sky with their mouths hanging open, trying to comprehend what they had just witnessed. I don't know if they were mesmerized or paralyzed. Suddenly two angels appeared and asked the important question. "Why are you guys just standing here looking up at the sky? Jesus told you what to do. So do it! He'll be back some day but, in the meantime, you have work to do."

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *"The angels reminded the disciples that if they want to see Jesus again, it was no use looking up. Better they should look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their ordinary lives, because that is where they were most likely to find him- not the way they used to know him, but the new way, not in his own body, but in their bodies. The risen, ascended Lord was no longer anywhere on earth so that he could be everywhere."* (1)

For three years the disciples had the introductory courses on discipleship by following Jesus. But they had not yet gained the power to share their experiences, to witness to Jesus, and to change the world. That is what they were supposed to wait for. So, they went back to the city of Jerusalem, climbed the stairs to their upper room, and once again, they waited. With them were the women disciples who had followed Jesus along with his mother and brothers. They spent their time in wonderment and prayer. They also formed a search committee to choose a replacement for Judas. Matthias was their choice.

Jesus had told them many times about the Holy Spirit and how she would come to them and provide comfort, wisdom, and peace in his absence. But they had no idea what that meant. They are about to find out.

Today is the hinge- between Easter and Pentecost. The ascension of Jesus was the early warning system. The Holy Spirit is coming and when it does everything will be turned upside down and inside out. Today is a significant pause between the power of the resurrection and the empowerment of Christ's followers. Today is a reminder to stop gazing into heaven and wishing things could be like they once were. It is time to start looking on earth for evidence that Christ is still among us.

The ascension was a time of enormous transition for the disciples. Knowing that Christ now sits at the right hand of God gave them a whole new way of looking at life, at the world, at each other, at themselves. What appeared to be a tragic goodbye, an unwelcome ending, turned out to be just the beginning of new life for those closest to Jesus. This band of followers would no longer be "disciples"- students of a teacher. They would now be "apostles" - people who are sent out with something important to share with others.

It is hard to believe that these apostles- these courageous women and men of God we read about in the book of Acts are the same confused and frightened disciples we meet in the Gospel stories. Their transformation didn't happen overnight and neither does ours. It was a long and difficult process. They still had so much to learn but once Jesus was gone from their sight, there was no turning back.

Jesus gave his disciples a calling, but the Holy Spirit gave them the power to do all they were called to do. In his leaving, in teaching them how to say goodbye, Jesus opened the way for his Spirit to fill and empower them.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes it in a vivid and imaginative way. *"Jesus was taken away and they stood there looking up toward heaven. Then they stopped looking up and started looking at each other instead, and they got on with the business of being the church. It was almost as if Jesus had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, far, and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of earth."* (2)

The disciples were thrust into a future they had not planned on, and they weren't sure they were ready for it. How in the world could they continue in ministry without Jesus? He was their teacher, their leader. They weren't ready to move on without him. His promise of the Holy Spirit didn't make them feel a heck of a lot better in that moment. But it would.

Business professor Leon Megginson said, "*According to Darwin's ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES, it is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is best able to adapt, manage, and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself.*"

As the disciples found themselves in a changing environment on the day of Christ's ascension all those years ago, so does the church find itself today. Even before the trauma and chaos of the pandemic quickly forced us to change the way we do ministry, we were beginning to see the necessity of re-thinking the way we share the good news of Jesus Christ. The pandemic caused us to evaluate our relevance and accessibility to the people we call sisters and brothers and to those whom we have not yet met.

Many church leaders find this to be a very uncertain and scary time. Is the church still relevant? How do we proclaim the deep and meaningful good news of Jesus Christ in a world that is tik-tocking its way to five minutes of fame? How do we embody the importance of community in a time of deep division and suspicion? How do we make our spiritual lives a priority in a time of so many competing loyalties and commitments?

The story of the disciples is also our story, That fearful, anxious, bewildered, impatient, waiting group has no power of its own. And yet, power is given that causes this fragile little community to have the energy, the courage, the imagination, and the wisdom to change the world.

Those folks who stood there staring up into heaven were just ordinary people with a very bad track record. Their calling from Jesus didn't make them perfect. Their empowerment by the Holy Spirit didn't turn them into superheroes. They were still flawed, imperfect human beings, vulnerable to prejudice, misunderstanding, power struggles, and inflated egos. They didn't always get it right and they didn't always get along with each other. But they tried their best to follow Christ- they planted seeds—and here we sit today.

Now, it is our turn, to answer the call of Christ, to wait and to pray, to welcome the power of the Holy Spirit, and to go forth and witness to the truth we have seen.

As disciples, as apostles, of Jesus Christ. Let us not fear saying goodbye to things as we know them.

Let us fear never saying hello to the Risen Christ and to the wild and wonderful Holy Spirit! To be continued... next week....

END NOTES:

1. "Looking Up Toward Heaven," from *GOSPEL MEDICINE*, Barbara Brown Taylor. Cowley. 1995. P. 77.
2. Barbara Brown