

The Time Is Now
James 4:13-17 and Acts 1:1-11
May 21, 2017
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Stephen Hawking is a world-renowned physicist, mathematician, and cosmologist who might well have the longest list of credentials on his business card of any living human being. You practically need an advanced degree just to understand Hawking's areas of research. He's written many books, including the international best-selling *A Brief History of Time*. And, whenever the boundaries of human potential are discussed, a sound bite from Hawking is a certainty. From human space flight to alien life to theoretical physics, Hawking taps out mind-blowing ideas.

Now Hawking is claiming that if the human species is to survive, we need to populate a new planet within the next 100 years. In a new documentary that debuts this summer called "Expedition New Earth," the theoretical physicist says that, "with climate change, overdue asteroid strikes, epidemics and population growth, our planet is increasingly precarious." He goes on to say that Earth's cataclysmic end will likely be hastened by humans, who will continue to devour the planet's resources at unsustainable rates, as well as by the advancement of AI, artificial intelligence. Abandon Earth or face extinction. Those, according to Hawking, are our options, and we don't have a lot of time.

There are a lot of Christians who might agree with Hawking, particularly those of a certain theological bent who think the earth is doomed and what's required now is the patience to wait until we can someday punch our ticket to heaven and move to a "new creation." A better place is waiting, without all the mess we've created, and eventually, Christians will blow this popsicle stand and leave everybody else and the planet to their own devices.

Theologian and Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright strongly disagrees, saying, "Never at any point do the gospels or Paul say Jesus has been raised, therefore we are all going to heaven. They all say, Jesus is raised, therefore the new creation has begun, and we have a job to do." So, with all due respect to Stephen Hawking, perhaps instead of waiting to leave the earth for someplace better, Jesus would say that we as Christians should *advance* rather than *abandon* the earth. We should be about the business of developing and nurturing the earth into someplace better.

On Ascension Day, the disciples watch as Jesus seems to do what Hawking suggests: he scoots up and off into the heavens, disappearing from view in an exit worthy of a Hollywood sci-fi thriller, apparently deserting the earth and his disciples. But did he really? No, he emphatically did not.

For Jesus' followers, the ascension was a powerful catalyst that put them to work on the mission Jesus had left them to do. The days surrounding Jesus' death on the cross had been brutal for them. They scattered and hid, afraid, confused and grieving. Were their last three years all a big mistake? And if they weren't killed, too, what would they do next? Fish again? Go back to collecting taxes?

Then the resurrection changed everything. The disciples' mission was on again. We hear them in the beginning of the Book of Acts asking what seemed like a perfectly reasonable question: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6)

Jesus' response? "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (1:8) Jesus was echoing what the prophets before him had said. Israel had always had a tendency to be a bit too myopic. They forgot that Abram's blessing was to go to *all people*. They forgot that the temple was for *all nations*. They were passionate about being God's people in God's land but often neglected God's mission and justice. Jesus was perfectly clear in his last earthly words: advance the gospel to the ends of the earth—starting *now*.

And then Jesus appears to do what Hawking suggests we prepare to do: get out while the getting's good. Might the disciples have thought that Jesus got out and left a mess behind him, a mess they were going to have to deal with? How could they not feel completely abandoned? They are still standing there, craning their necks looking toward the sky, when angels appeared to get their gaze back down to earth. Jesus will come back just like he left, they said. Now stop staring! There's work to be done.

The ascension must have been a stunning spectacle to see. But even more amazing than Christ's departure was the unlikely lot with whom he left the future of his kingdom.

They grew up cleaning fish and collecting taxes—not as part of the educated, religious elite. They had misunderstood the parables. Fought over who was the greatest. Fell asleep in the garden. Denied Jesus in his final hours.

They'd only just begun to grasp the life and purposes of Christ over the 40 days since he "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." (Luke 24:25) Humanly speaking, it wouldn't seem that the disciples were the best choice to advance the good news.

But the ascension was powerful. It acted like a hinge between the resurrection and Pentecost. It told the disciples that Jesus' mission was now their mission. And, that made an impact. Far from feeling abandoned, they were empowered. He had left them with important work to do. They continued to praise God in the temple, waiting for Pentecost.

The ascension had a counterintuitive effect. Jesus didn't abandon his disciples. Instead, for the first time, they took ownership of the mission. The Spirit would come at Pentecost to give them the power to do it, but at the ascension, they finally understood their place in advancing the kingdom of God.

We celebrate Ascension Day so that we, too, can reflect on how *we* partner with Jesus in life and faith. It's a day to ask, do we have a clear sense of personal mission? Do we feel empowered to do that mission? Do we see the gospel as church work, something for the "paid professionals" to do, or as our own vocation? I think the ascension has four specific things to say to us about our life as Christians.

First, *it's on us*. Stephen Hawking, who is almost completely paralyzed by Lou Gehrig's disease, could justifiably say his physical limitations are too great to overcome, too great for him to continue to make a positive contribution to science and our world. Likewise, the disciples had plenty of excuses to avoid their mission, and so do we. Some people think they don't know enough. They're afraid someone might ask a question that they can't answer. And, of course, there's the excuse that true for all of us: "I don't have enough time because of the job, the family, the fill-in-the-blank." But in the 1st century and in the 21st, imperfect people are God's primary plan—not the backup plan—for sharing the gospel and spreading the kingdom of God.

Second, *we aren't alone*. The disciples were told they would have Help—Help with a capital "H", help who was a person, a part of the Godhead. They just needed to stay in Jerusalem and wait for that Help. As post-Pentecost Christians, we have already been given the same Spirit the disciples received in Acts 2, the same Spirit we'll celebrate in a couple of weeks on Pentecost Sunday. That means our limitations, like theirs, need not stand in the way.

Third, *we're in a partnership*. Paul said he didn't go preaching with persuasive words but with a demonstration of the power of the Spirit (1 Corin. 2:4). We're no different in our gifts and passions. We are given a mission, yes, but a mission in partnership with God. So, we can pray with purpose. We can offer our gifts and abilities, confident that God will use whatever we bring to the table. We can be alert to see where God is working and then ask, how can we join God in what God is already doing?

Fourth, *the time is now*. Revelation 21 speaks of the establishment of God's eternal kingdom: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the seas were no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (vs. 1-2) Notice that the new Jerusalem comes down—we don't "go up" to be part of it.

Like N.T Wright, I have to confess that it makes no sense to me either theologically or practically that God, who is revealed to us from Genesis to Revelation as a creating, loving God, would, in the end destroy it all. What we know about God is that God creates and re-creates, that God is always working to redeem, heal and renew all of creation. Stephen Hawking's warnings are based in the truth of science and we need to hear him. Our concern for and care of our planet and each other cannot be casual or thoughtless. It is, after all, part of the responsibility given to us in Eden, our responsibility to be stewards of the Earth.

But we can take the science seriously and at the same time proclaim a faith that draws a different conclusion than the one Hawking comes to. Our faith compels us to address the world's urgent needs and problems and work for solutions. It compels us to offer a vision of hope and transformation. It calls us to serve God and to work for the kingdom of God, "on earth as it is in heaven." We can't do that if we're wringing our hands like Chicken Little, worried that the sky is falling. The ascension of Christ offers us the opportunity to ask ourselves, "Am I advancing or abandoning my call to be a follower of Jesus Christ? Am I actively working for the good of God's kingdom?" The angels told the disciples that Jesus is coming back. What will he find us doing when he returns?

Amen.