

7 Easter
The Sunday after the Ascension
May 24, 2020

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

I wonder if any of you have been having some of the feelings that I have been having. This COVID-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down for me ... in the greater world out there ... and in my inner world of my head, heart, and soul. Sometimes I can't even remember what day of the week it is. I find myself pondering priorities and rethinking decisions that I once thought were settled. I feel like I'm on a journey ... I remember the place that I left, but I'm not sure I know where I'm going, or how I'll get there. Every time I feel like I'm getting oriented to this pandemic situation, I get spun around by the unexpected. I want to move forward, but which way is forward?

For most of us, this in-between time causes anxiety ... this in-between what we knew just a few months ago, and what lies ahead of us. We have lost our mooring to the familiar, and it is as if we have been set adrift. We keep talking about the "new normal," and yet have no idea what that will look like. It is hard to get your bearings when all the landmarks seem to be changing.

As the community of St. Cyprian's we can't meet together, so we have to settle on a virtual worship service. On March 8 ... the Sunday before we had to shutdown ... we had 89 people attend our church service. We sat next to each other, we bumped elbows at the Peace instead of shaking hands, and we ate holy bread and drank sacred wine at a common meal. Even with the beginnings of health precautions in place, we were face to face ... looking in each others eyes ... and we were a community. Not just any community ... this community ... this community of faith ... St. Cyprian's.

I hate to say it, but the fact is it will be a very long time before that many people gather at St. Cyprian's again. It will take a lot of good medical science ... and social compliance with vaccinations ... for people to feel comfortable sitting shoulder to shoulder in the sanctuary of this church, and that may be years away.

This in-between time has us stuck with remembering what we called "normal," and another way of being which hasn't yet announced itself. It is as if we are at a threshold, not knowing for sure what will happen when we step across it. So, we can only trust, hope, and pray.

However, we are not the first people ... collectively as a nation, as a faith community, or as individuals ... who have lived in an in-between time. Today is the Seventh Sunday of our Easter Season. It is also the Sunday after the Ascension ... the Feast of the Ascension was Thursday, and we heard the story of the Ascension read this morning. This Sunday is kind of in-between-

time ... in-between Jesus ascending to heaven and leaving the disciples to fend for themselves ... and the coming of the Holy Spirit next Sunday on the Day of Pentecost.

Although it may feel like an empty time ... a time of not knowing what is coming next ... I believe it is pivotal one. It can be a time of fear and grief ... enough fear and grief to paralyze a person. Often we experience this empty time as scary ... a time of not knowing what comes next ... a time of not being sure of what to do or how to do it or even what the future holds.

Yet, it can also be a creative time. When nothing is certain, than anything is possible. It can be like the time between planting the seed and finally seeing the sprout emerge from the soil. Looking at the garden after planting the seeds it may seem that nothing is happening, but obviously new life is forming in the fertile earth in this seemingly empty space.

In its own way this is sacred time. There is a word for that ... liminal time ... a time when life and faith can change. As the disciples lived in that liminal time between the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost, so, too, are we living in a liminal time.

Last week I quoted Fredrick Buechner from his book, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*. This is another quote from Buechner ... this is from *The Return of Ansel Gibbs*, a novel Buechner wrote while he was still in seminary.

If you tell me Christian commitment is a kind of thing that has happened to you once and for all like some kind of spiritual plastic surgery, I say you're either pulling the wool over your own eyes or trying to pull it over mine. Every morning you should wake up in your bed and ask yourself: "Can I believe it all again today?" No, better still, don't ask it till after you've read The New York Times, till after you've studied that daily record of the world's brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If your answer is always Yes, then you probably don't know what believing means. At least five times out of ten the answer should be No because the No is as important as the Yes, maybe more so. The No is what proves you're human in case you should ever doubt it. And then if some morning the answer happens to be really Yes, it should be a Yes that's choked with confession and tears and...great laughter.

There are a lot of reasons people gather in faith communities. For some it is about the Bible. For others it is a denomination, or a creed, or a particular expression of theology. However, for me, what I believe we are doing when we gather as this community of faith ... even if is a virtual gathering ... is not about an intellectual assent to the words of a text ... whether it be our Bible, or the creeds, or the Eucharistic prayer from our Prayer Book, or some grand tome of theology. It is not about agreeing that the stories of our Holy Scriptures are literal facts and history. It is not about a once-and-for-all ... one-time-only intellectual decision regarding one's faith commitment. The account of Jesus living and dying and being raised again, and lifted up to heaven at the Ascension, is not the ultimate point of the story. For the story to be "true," we

must not stand outside the story and look in at it ... we don't even have to intellectually accept the veracity of the story ... but rather we must enter into the story and make it our own.

Imagine those people who were what we now call disciples ... the men, but also the women. They encounter a man named Jesus who had a peculiar way of understanding the holy and making it a way that brought a fullness of life that they had never known before. In him they saw the divine presence of God, and Jesus invited them to live the same kind of life ... he called it living in the Kingdom of God. But part of living this kind of life meant speaking the truth at all times ... and it included speaking truth to power. In Jesus' case, that meant Jesus speaking truth to the power of the Roman occupying government, and truth to the power of the priestly hierarchy in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. But this truth ... the truth about how to live life as if God were alive in one's self ... was more important than life itself. The powers that Jesus spoke truth to did what all powers do in those situations ... they killed the messenger ... they killed Jesus.

The disciples ... the men and women who had committed their lives to following Jesus and following in the way of Jesus ... seeking what Jesus called the Kingdom of God ... the disciples were stunned by his death. And they were even more astounded when they realized Jesus was still alive when they gathered together ... when they broke bread and drank wine and shared it with each other ... and they recalled what he had told them about remembering him ... and he was alive in their midst.

Then Jesus ascended into heaven. The disciples felt unsure about what to do next. They were afraid in this liminal space ... this in-between time. That is when they stood outside the story and looked carefully ... the story wasn't just about a man named Jesus ... it was about them if they would make the story their own. And that is what happened for them at Pentecost. They began living the life that Jesus had lived ... as best they could ... and began inviting others to do so as well ... and the Christian Church as we know it came into being.

We ... as individuals, and as a faith community ... are not the first to live in this sacred in-between time. I think there is much to be learned from those who lived in such a time before us such as the disciples at the Ascension.

Many are fearful and paralyzed by this liminal space caused by this COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Others are creative, and open to the opportunity to be the author of their own future. For me ... personally ... I am willing to trust the waiting, and to embrace the uncertainty. I believe that in so doing I can enjoy the sacred beauty of becoming. When nothing is certain, then anything is possible ... anything.

I'm reminded of a Shel Silverstein poem ... ***Listen to the Musn'ts.***

"Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the don'ts. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me ... anything can happen, child. Anything can be."

Sometimes in our fear and grief we fail to seek God's grace, love and mercy. Yet God wants more than that. It matters that we come from God, that we are created in God's image, and God wants us to be in God's holy presence. Our hope lies in the grace, love and mercy of God. Our hope is in a God who is God, however our limited minds understand God to be God. Our hope is in God who does what God does. Our hope is in God who loves all that is made; who takes the side of the poor and marginalized; who heals those who are outcasts; who welcomes all to the table.

I believe that in Jesus we have seen God. The gospels tell us of the life, teaching, healing, and ministry of Jesus. Early Christianity searched for an identity in a world already populated by Judaism, Greek philosophy, Roman imperialism, and Eastern mysticism. For me, what really matters is God's ongoing life, illumined for us in Jesus of Nazareth. It is about our citizenship in a Godly realm ... the Kingdom of God ... where love conquers hate, joy conquers despair, goodness conquers evil, and hope appears even in the midst of a pandemic.

As an Easter people, we believe that the risen Christ comes into our sacred space ... our sacred in-between space ... this liminal time ... and calls us outside into lives marked by peace, justice, servanthood, and hope. How will that happen? How will we see enough to find that kind of commitment? I believe that our primary work as people of faith is to know one another, to listen to the world around us, to hear questions that stir our imaginations, and in those questions to witness to the presence of God. This can be a fruitful time. I don't want fear or grief to decide my future or our future. I want us to be the author of our own fate.

The story of Jesus living and dying and being raised again, and lifted up to heaven at the Ascension is not the ultimate point of the story. For the story to be "true," we must not stand outside the story and look in at it ... we don't even have to intellectually accept the veracity of the story ... but rather we must enter into the story and make it our own. Rather than looking up at the feet of Jesus at the Ascension as depicted in the graphic on the cover of the bulletin, let us begin to look around at each other, listen to the world around us, to hear questions that stir our imaginations ... then we will know that we are in the presence of God. Then we can step over that threshold into our future with trust, hope and prayer.

I end with a reading from Paul's Letter to the Christians in Ephesus. It is read at the end of every Mission Board meeting as part of our prayers.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. (Ephesians 3:20,21)

Amen.