

7th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 5.16.21

Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

John 17:6-19

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. (621)

Today is the last Sunday of Eastertide, the seven-week season of Easter.

Today is the Sunday after Ascension Day, which was Thursday, the fortieth day after Resurrection Day. This is the day Jesus is remembered to have ascended to heaven. Following the

forty days he remained as a resurrected entity appearing to the apostles—here, there, in the city, on the beach—now he was lifted up, on a cloud, taken out of their sight.

Today is the Sunday before Pentecost Sunday, when the Holy Spirit is celebrated as having come down and resting as tongues of flame on all who were gathered in Jerusalem that day. It's often considered the birthday of the church.

Today is an in-between day, a holding your breath day, the middle of a ten-day stretch of “what on earth just happened?” It's a day when we've been left, Jesus up and gone, and haven't yet received what's to come, the Holy Spirit not yet arrived.

It makes for a strange Sunday. I mean, those times in my life when I've been left: I don't celebrate them as holidays. Weirder still, the two readings we just heard, which both have us as left: they come to us from different points of Jesus leaving.

The reading from Acts speaks more to our moment today. An event that's remembered as the last event of Luke's gospel, it's also the first event of Luke's sequel to his gospel, the book of Acts, which recounts the acts of the apostles following Jesus' death, resurrection, and now ascension. An event that's remembered as the first event of the church, it serves as a hinge, turning our attention to all that Jesus did by the power of the Holy Spirit to all that the apostles would do by the power of the Holy Spirit. If we're left here waiting, it's with bated breath, it's with the sense that something else really will happen, and it'll be good.

The reading from John speaks of Jesus preparing to leave the apostles because of his coming crucifixion. That would be the next day, tomorrow—and this casts a considerably less forward-leaning form. Both have him lifted up. But with the ascension, he's lifted up on a cloud. With the crucifixion, he's lifted up on the cross. If there's glory to be found in that lifting up, which this gospel seems to think it is, then it's a glory of a most paradoxical sort. Maybe this is why Jesus seems at such pains to leave the apostles with a sense of being fortified, of feeling ready.

John's gospel remembers Jesus as talking a lot. Nearly half of the gospel is him talking, this second half featuring mainly what's called his Farewell Discourse and his High Priestly Prayer. Both are from the night of his arrest, offered at the table of the last supper. The Farewell Discourse spoke to us as excerpts over the last two Sundays, Jesus speaking to the apostles of his Father, that they should abide in him as he abides in him. The High Priestly Prayer speaks to us today, Jesus speaking to the Father about the apostles. The players in the triangle remain the same—the Father, the anointed one, and the apostles now called friends. It's the one being addressed that has changed, been swapped out one for another. Jesus once talking to his friends about the Father, he

is now talking to the Father about his friends—the prayer being that, though now left in the world, they would yet be fortified for continuing in their friendship with Jesus. Yes, Jesus’ manifest presence would be gone to them, but their mission would be the same.

Meanwhile, the press of the world upon them would be more felt than ever.

The world. The world. Thirteen times here, the world. The *kosmos*, as the word is in Greek. Repeated here so many times, what is it? You think you know. We all likely think we know.

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you...

“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

“They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world...”

Does it help to know the long history of this word?

Kosmos: its first extant use is in the *Odyssey*, Homer’s epic poem likely from the 8th or 7th century before the Common Era. There it suggested order, good order, specifically the order of rowers on a ship. Since I am a rower, and most rowers tend to think (rather zealously, if not self-righteously) that rowing is truth, I can get with this. A crew that’s operating in perfect order: it’s a feeling physical made spiritual, moving across water felt as flying through space.

From there, “cosmos” came to name all the ways in which good order reigns, and eventually it came to be of particular concern in the New Testament. In fact, I’ve heard it said that the Christian tradition really gave us the world. Of all the things the Church introduced into human imagining, the world is one of the most prominent. So encompassing, though, it’s hard to imagine our imagining of it, hard to imagine it was ever not as we imagine it. This thing that we feel as so fundamental that we can’t feel our feeling it, it was once a new concept.

I’ve heard it said the Church gave us the world—and I believe it.

Conjured in the New Testament 188 times, *kosmos* is in the Johannine books 104 times. These are the Gospel of John and the three Letters of John, which are books that share not the same author but the same original audience. They were an embattled group. They were an exiled group, one for whom the world had suddenly turned hostile and yet was where their love of Christ was to take them.

Here *kosmos* can suggest a number of things—things blessed, things bereft, things neutral on the question of morality.

One is the totality of creation as made by God. As such, the world has a beginning and, by implication, has an end, which is to say not just an ending but a goal or an aim. This itself is to mean it will be complete, even made perfect in fulfillment and wholeness, which (wholeness) equates to saved, *salus* being Latin for health and wholeness. The cosmos: the totality of all creation. Time, history, creatures and events, a process progressing toward its *telos*, its end made perfect by which all is revealed as having purpose, if purpose given in retrospect by means of redemption.

It can also mean the sum total of human interrelationships, its social building blocks, its local and national politics. The powers and principalities, the kingdoms of this world, but also households and families, villages and bloodlines and webs of friends.

It can indicate, in the words of one scholar I read, “the world of humanity in its lost condition.” But these are terms I wouldn’t quite agree with because one of the most interesting cosmogonies to me is the one developed in the Gospel of John, which is particularly forward-looking. How it understands the world and the purpose of the life of faith: the Gospel of John is especially forward looking.

The book begins, as you might remember, in the beginning, echoing the story from Genesis.

But it parts ways from that story in its imagining where we are in relation to that beginning.

Genesis imagines God completing the creation, setting humanity in its midst on the last day before God’s own Sabbath rest. The implication then is that the creation is now complete, and we are living amidst that completed creation, though having fallen from the state of grace we first inhabited. The project of the life of faith, then, is to try to return to the original state.

John’s cosmogony never imagines the creation complete. It imagines instead, as if amidst the creative acts of God, the word taking on flesh and living among us, later to be seen continuing in the Father’s work. It’s as if, according to John, Jesus has come as that *logos* made flesh, that eternal logic now in time, to bring logic and order and coherence and eventual completeness to a world not yet complete, yet incoherent, a world yet in progress but meanwhile seemingly random and even tragic.

This means that John's use of *kosmos* conjures not humanity in its "lost" condition but humanity in its unfinished condition. And this means that the project of the life of faith isn't backward looking but forward, isn't to return to some original state but to press on to a promised state. Ours is to move toward fulfillment, not to retreat back from the world. Ours is to lean toward perfection and wholeness and salvation, not to walk it all back.

I like this. I aim to live this. "I am not asking you to take them out of the world," Jesus said. "As you have sent me into the world," Jesus said to his Father, "so I send them into the world."

Early in my life as a preacher, my prayer book was a collection of photographs. I wouldn't have considered it so at the time, but I realize in retrospect this is how it functioned—as a prayer book.

It was a publication of the Newseum, a now (sad to say) closed museum in Washington D.C., this book kept finding its way back into my hands: *The Pulitzer Prize Photographs: Capture the Moment*. I'd flip through it, I'd search it like a detective poring over crime scene footage, I'd refer back to it to check if I remembered that one image right, that other image in its full context.

Pictures from 1941, a picket line in Detroit, to 1999, the embassy bombings in Nairobi, there are within these pages Vietnam, Civil Rights struggles, the Andrea Doria sinking, the forgotten children of Ceausescu's reign over Romania. Black students taking over the administration building at Cornell. A hole in Adlai Stevenson's shoe. A home-coming soldier touched down on the tarmac and his sister running toward him in her micro-mini skirt, wildly open arms. A white man attacking a Black man with an American flag on a pole during the Boston bussing crisis. There's joy and heartbreak and tragedy and horror in these pages. There are major news events and surprising moments of personal connection or personal loss, a photographer being in the just the right place at just the right time to give us all a deep look.

Taken as a whole volume, it suggests the random. But truth drives through it, pulsing, tear-jerking.

Here was my prayer book, I realize now. I was thirty years old, newly ordained. I was just out of school for the first time in a *long* time, and I was to have something to say every Sunday. So, quite by accident and then by compulsion, I'd search those pages, sometimes for a sermon, other times not for anything so desperately timely. I looked to it to teach me the world—blessed, bereft, wandering toward perfection, the herk and jerk of it, the tacking into the wind. Painful. Fearsome. Awesome. Sublime.

“I am not asking you to take them out of the world,” Jesus said. “As you have sent me into the world,” Jesus said to his Father, “so I send them into the world.”

Lots of Christianities encourage otherwise. Lots of Christianities preach grave warning, desperate escape. Lots urge near total separation from a world beyond hope, a world so fraught with danger and full of devils as to be too much for those as righteous as Jesus’ friends.

There’s little scriptural justification for this.

There’s still less anthropological reality to this, as Jesus’ friends are seldom the only righteous ones around here, as Jesus’ apostles throughout time are sometimes even less righteous than others around here. The Church has committed its share of history’s crimes. The Church has been complicit in some pretty monstrous stuff. Meanwhile, the world can boast of countless people who can only be described as Christ-like, if though quite by accident.

There’s really not much cosmogonic justification for considering the world as worthy of little more than abandonment—this world that is yet sustained, the world that yet manifests blessing even as it spins on bereft.

Today is in an in between day. Suspended between Jesus’ leaving and the Holy Spirit’s unmistakable arrival, today is a waiting-with-bated-breath kind of day, as if to suspend before us the question, the question, which will it be, blessing or bereavement?

Which will we be, bereft or blessed?

Which will be *do*?

The day enfolds us for us to decide.

Thanks be to God.