

Acts 1:6-14

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"⁷ He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ 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."⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.¹¹ 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."¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.⁵ So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.⁶ 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.⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.¹¹ 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. (534)

I nursed each of the boys for a long time—three years each. It came easy to us, and it was calming, and we enjoyed it, so we stayed with it for longer than most do, in this country at least.

On the night of Tobias' third birthday, I explained to him I wasn't going to nurse him anymore. We would find lots of other ways to be close, but we wouldn't be doing this anymore.

He cried a lot at that, and I did too, a bit, and he struggled to get to sleep, and I did too.

He cried each day afterward when he was about to ask for nursing and would remember we weren't doing that anymore.

Eventually, though, after a few days, he stopped crying about it, and I did too.

We have indeed found other ways of being close.

Jesus would be leaving his disciples.

We're still with him on the last night of his life, when he'd gathered with his friends in an upper room. Judas had just gone out to do quickly what he was going to do, and Jesus had just instituted the last supper, which would become the Eucharist.

Then he spoke to the disciples in what has come to be called his Farewell Address, which we've spent the last several weeks listening in on—a long discourse full of coded speech about how to understand him, how to imagine his mission as it relates to God and the World and this gathered body of friends which would become the Church. We've just come to the close of that, just embarked now on what's called his High Priestly Prayer. Now he was speaking not of God to the disciples but of the disciples to God.

It's as if he were the connection between the two, God and the disciples, between God and the World. It's as he were umbilical.

You know, the Temple was felt to be a lot of things to the Israelites, both the first Temple, which stood from about 900 to 586, and the second Temple, which stood from 536 BCE to 68 of the Common Era. One way it was imagined was as the umbilicus to the world. There was God who was as pregnant mother, there was the world, and more specifically the people Israel and Judah, which were as an infant in utero, and there was the Temple which connected the two, the umbilicus, the connection by which comes sustenance and nurturance, then the belly button, once the two come separate, though with this forever sign that they were once connected, a sign by which they might in some way still be connected.

You know, also, Jesus often spoke of himself as the Temple. Though it still stood during his lifetime, Jesus often spoke of the Temple's eventual destruction and of himself as taking its place in the people's spiritual and religious imagination, a foretelling that was doubly outrageous to the religious authorities, both that the Temple would fall and that a man such as he would take its place as point of connection, could possibly take its place, a man such as he, illiterate, childless, out of bounds.

But so it would be, the Temple torn down—*torn* down actually, over the course of a couple years, a slow burn of imperial hatred spread out over time, each day to return to the task of fastidious, cruel, stone-by-stone destruction while the people watched in daily horror that hatred could be so committed. What's more, it was this trauma that formed the backdrop of the three synoptic gospels, most acutely in the earliest extant gospel, the one according to Mark.

This is thought to be the first written of the four gospels, around the year 70, because it seems to come to us fresh from the upheaval and agony of Rome's destroying the Temple (cruelly, stone by stone), Rome's destroying the whole city Jerusalem, and their War against the Jews. There's an urgency in Mark's writing, and a quick fury in the actions of Jesus according to Mark. There's an understanding at work that Jesus has come to a world occupied by a foreign force, has come for the purpose of casting that force out. By his arrival in any given place, according to Mark, evil takes flight, darkness is made light, the unholy by its own volition skitters away. Mark's Jesus so fully manifests God's holiness that anything unholy can't stand in his presence. You can imagine a people suffering the menacing presence of an occupying force: they'd have been moved and made full by such a Christ as this.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke are thought to come to us from a decade or so later, when the destruction of the Temple and of the city had settled in the imagination of the people. The writing style of each of these books is more thoughtful, a bit slower. Matthew has it that Jesus comes fully informed by the Jewish tradition that was his home—he, according to Matthew, the fulfillment of it, actually. Luke's Jesus comes as sent to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews, a move toward the universal Christ that the Church would eventually more fully espouse. These books still bear the signs of the trauma of the Temple, but it's the difference between how New Yorkers spoke of 9/11 in the year after the attack and how our whole society speaks of it these nearly two decades later. There's a critical distance, an acceptance of this as settled fact.

John, however, the gospel we just heard from, seems to speak from an altogether different trauma. By the time of John's supposed writing, around the turn of the first century to the second, the fall of the Temple was even more a settled matter. Rome, though, was as ever a menace.

As for how the empire treated the Jews, there was a weird allowance, even if there were also occasional crackdowns. Rome respected anything ancient, and Jewish practice was indeed ancient. There had been innovation, of course. The fall of the Temple spurred a lot of change. Priests were

irrelevant now, as there was no altar for sacrifice, while rabbis took a new prominence, as the practice would largely be about teaching the scripture and traditions until such time as another Temple arose. For all this adherence to ancient tradition, though, this ancient people would be allowed their ways.

But there seemed budding among them a new way. Gathering from within the synagogues, there was this new practice, more and more prominent, less and less deniable. Though these people didn't cause any real trouble—they practiced non-violence, after all, and they just gathered in secret to say prayers and sing hymns and share a simple meal—they did refuse both to worship the emperor's gods and to worship the emperor as a god. And it was fine when the Jews refused to do so. Nobody expected them to do otherwise. But these people weren't Jews, or at least they weren't quite. They were some novel form of Jew.

See, these early Christians: they had attracted the attention of the empire. So, they had to go—out of the synagogues, out of their homes and families and neighborhoods. Their presence came at too great a potential cost, as too great a sure risk.

It made sense when you see it from the point of view of those who'd figured out a way to live unmolested. Remember the prayer from *Fiddler on the Roof*. “Rabbi, is there a proper blessing for the tsar?”

“A blessing for the tsar?” answers the rabbi. “Of course! ‘May God bless and keep the tsar...far away from us!’”

But when you look at it from the other side of the growing divide, it sort of hurts.

Do you know anyone who's been kicked out of her family, kicked out of his household? For being not quite right, for not living in such a way as keeps things safe and steady, or seems acceptable and correct? I imagine that hurts more than most things do, being orphaned like that, *willfully* orphaned.

The Johannine community had had to make its own way into the world. The community from which and for which this Gospel of John arose, as well as the letters of John, had had to make their own way in following the Way, turning to one another as a new family and a new practice when what was old would no longer hold.

I think this is why Jesus according to John is remembered as so very concerned about having to leave his disciples behind. I think whence comes his assurance that he would not leave

them orphaned, that another Advocate would come. This concern for a people left as orphaned is what we're hearing in his prayer to God, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you... I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world... They were yours and you gave them to me... I am asking on their behalf. (Glorify me as I have glorified you.) I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me... 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."

And, yes, of course, they would find other ways of being close. The Holy Spirit would come, or would come again just in a new way, which we'll remember next week on Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the Church. By this, the Church would be as the body of Christ by which those who followed Christ could do so in the presence of Christ; in the presence of one another, they would be in the presence Christ.

So, yes, of course, they would find other ways of being close because the separation between God and the world would never be so stark again, or would never seem as stark as it once did, at least not for long and not forever. When Christ, crucified, returned alive: here was a revelation that death isn't as stark as it seems, that separation because of death is but an illusion, if a very, very persistent one.

Meanwhile, though, he would be leaving them.

This leaving is what we celebrated this week, on Thursday, which was Ascension Day—not that we did anything actual to celebrate, not that we would have even if we hadn't been staying home to quell the coronavirus. Congregationalists don't tend to honor Ascension Day even when we're out and about.

And who can blame us? The fortieth day after Resurrection Day, this is when Jesus is remembered to have been taken up on a cloud out of the sight of the gathered disciples, taken up at long last to be seated at the right hand of the throne of God—so I get why we don't celebrate it. It'd be tough to make much of a celebration about being left behind, though I suppose we could be happy for *him*. "He got to go to heaven: hooray!"

As for what awaited the disciples still in the world, it was indeed a protracted period of waiting—ten days gathered in that now so familiar upper room, ten days with not just twelve gathered but about 120 followers, all now waiting to hear what would happen next. "People of

Galilee,” the two perhaps angels had told them, “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...”

So now they were to wait.

And wait.

Maybe you know how this feels...?

He was gone, and they were to wait.

And it would be easy to assume that this is the glory of which Jesus spoke in his prayer to God on that last night of his life—taken up on a cloud to heaven. It would be easy to conclude that this is the glory spoken of throughout John’s gospel, the glory of being taken up on a cloud and enthroned beside God. Talk about glorious! That’s quite an exit!

But, if glory is weight or substance or significance, then the glory John had in mind as regards Jesus was something else—for the significance of Jesus, which is the accumulation of the signs, these which taken together come to reveal significance, isn’t that Jesus was heading to heaven where he had a rightful place, but that he was heading to the cross.

In John’s gospel, Jesus is felt to have been glorified when he was lifted high on the cross.

In John’s gospel, the weight and significance of Jesus isn’t that he would take a place beside God the Father but that he would take on the cross.

He didn’t have to. He could have gotten out of it. There’s always a way out of trouble like that. I mean, if you’re high enough up in the pecking order, if you’re powerful enough, there’s always someone you could throw up in your place.

Or, he could have just stopped. I mean, if all he’d done in the eyes of the religious authorities was violate the traditional law in preference of a more unseen law, then he could have just stopped doing that, could have stopped gathering crowds comprised of people who, apparently, preferred the unseen law over the letter of the law since the letter of the law always got them tangled up and closed out. He could have just stopped seeing to justice for the people over and against righteousness for their religion, rightness according to social propriety.

And if all he did in the eyes of the imperial authorities was to be hailed and treated as a king, which is the capital crime of sedition, then he could have just clarified the point that he wasn’t a king, not really, not in *that* way.

He could have backed off: “Hey, I don’t want any trouble.”

He could have done what Peter suggested: “God forbid it, Lord, this must never happen to you.”

History had muddled along just fine until now, and so it would likely continue to do. The world, this confusing, conflicted place: why mess with good enough? With its general allowances for kindness and mutual benefit, with its occasional violence and its persistent insistence on war and its then decisions for armistice and eventual settling back into an exhausted mutual benefit, the world without saving grace would be fine. It would be fine. War and trade, war and trade, acrimony and transaction, fighting and calcultion—history could continue its grinding course. He could have *not* saved us from all that. He could have *not* poured out God’s grace that we might have another currency by which to live, the only true currency by which truly to live. Love! He could have *not* exalted mercy. He could have *not* insisted upon peace.

He could have just let well enough alone.

And maybe we’d have been better off. After all, the glorying in the cross: it’s a problematic notion. Really, it’s why all those cross-centered hymns: I hesitate to have us sing them. “In the cross of Christ I glory,” “Jesus, keep me near the cross,” “That old rugged cross,” I always want to clarify what exactly we see in the cross when we behold it. Because glorying in the cross: it easily becomes grotesque, even perverted. Really, to find the cross glorious can become twisted into a perverted enjoyment of suffering, a sadistic merriment in dealing or witnessing pain. Slave masters have used the cross to justify their cruelty. Women in abusive marriages have imagined their abuse as somehow their cross to bear, excusing their abusers as doing something that, if not right, isn’t exactly wrong. But it is wrong. It is exactly wrong. Beating and abusing people, or being a master of slaves: such things are indeed a wielding of the cross, but it’s the cross of empire, not the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ: what exactly do we see in that?

The cross of Christ is an undoing of all that justification, an undoing of all that perverted glee. It is the ultimate act of self-giving by which the world might be saved, God self-emptying that the world might be so filled—God poured out, grace upon grace. The stuff of life spilling forth, the milk of God-kindness flowing: no act of intimidation can hold it back, no portent of menace can dissuade its strong current of love.

Do you remember the scene, Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus bridge? Do you remember it from news reels, or from the movie *Selma*, or maybe even from first-hand accounts, someone you knew who was there, maybe you yourself? All I have to go on is from the movie, *Selma*, when black Alabamans in 1965 wouldn't tolerate being disenfranchised any longer.

Crossing the bridge to reach the statehouse would make not just for confrontation but would make for history. Awaiting on the other side were not only white police officers on horseback, but also possibly every white man of Dallas county over the age of twenty-one, every one of them now deputized, allowed whips, equipped with tear gas, armed with Billy clubs.

Crossing the bridge would hurt, might be deadly.

Not crossing was unthinkable—though, according to the movie, Dr. King did think about it. How could he lead this parade of his followers into such possible crucifixion?

But his followers spurred him on: how could he not? They'd come all this way.

On the one hand, I hate that this happened.

On the other hand, I see in it unmistakable glory, astonishing beauty in each of those people crossing the bridge, powerful with resolve. Really, I see in it even evidence that we have indeed found other ways of being close to God, close to Christ. It comes with being close with one another, held together in resolve, convicted in the faith.

I pray this closeness now more than ever—this which mobilizes for justice and truth, this which pacifies with reassurance and love. I pray this closeness because the world needs the church as ever it has—as injustice abounds, as corruption rots what had once seemed to have such strength and integrity, as all those old hatreds keep insisting upon themselves. The world needs that connection to God who is being as we struggle with questions like, “Why bother?” and notions like, “This has all become too hard.”

What's more, feeling more cut off than ever, I pray now more than ever that we not be left as orphans or feel ourselves so to have been left. Unable to gather in person with the people who gather in order to make God's presence manifest, we might doubt altogether God's presence, or forget what that presence feels like. The regular sustenance that comes in gathering in our sanctuaries to say prayers and sing hymns and share a simple meal: lacking this we might wonder whether we ever really needed it. The world's not so bad, after all. It has its consolations, has its distractions. Maybe all that quaint sitting and standing and singing and silence is stuff okay to

fade, like a dream on waking. Maybe all that enacting God's realm is like child's play, and we're adults now.

Well, I was baptized when I was three months old, and I've spent nearly every Sunday since then in church, and I miss it. I miss the beauty. I miss the made music. I miss the lightness and the seriousness. I miss the conviction that gets proclaimed and embodied and by which I'm sent out into a world that demands the sort of resilience and courage you get in church.

God is being, I know this. God is the all in all, and Christ plays in ten thousand places, and the Holy Spirit runs wild, unbounded. Wherever I turn to the Thou, there Thou is, abiding, availing—and same goes for you. Wherever you turn to the Thou, there Thou is, abiding, availing. We can do this anywhere, anytime. Where, thoughm and when do you tend to turn to this everlasting Thou but in church? Where do you ever give yourself the chance? Really?

I miss church, where I too am unleashed, unbounded to imagine what the world would tell me, "No." I can do this anywhere. I do it best and most truly in church.

So, I wait. In faith, I wait. Join me?

Thanks be to God.