Seventh Sunday of Easter May 16, 2021

All Saints’ Church Year B

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 1 John 5:9-

Psalm 1 John 17:6-19

The Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem, situated on the hillside of Mt. Olives, is a holy site for both Christians and Muslims, and believed to mark the place from which the risen Lord ascended into heaven.

Outside, in the courtyard, are hooks on the wall surrounding the chapel, and once a year, on Ascension Day, always on a Thursday, tents are spread throughout, and pilgrims gather from around the world to celebrate this in between waiting period of ten days: of the Christ ascending and the Holy Spirit descending on Pentecost.

On this Sunday after the Ascension, we celebrate that we are in the midst of a mini-Advent of waiting, of being in anticipation of what’s next.

Once in the courtyard of the Church of the Ascension, you are led with a paved path to a small, simple chapel. The main body of the chapel was built during the Crusader era, though the tradition of gathering at the site began in the 4th century, and even earlier in a cave nearby.

As you step into the chapel, you see immediately on the floor an asymmetrically placed frame outlining a slab of stone, imprinted with the right footprint of Christ. I was glad someone pointed the outline of the footprint to me; it’s not easy to see, as impressive as the idea of it is.

The left footprint is not there; it was removed and taken to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, where it is also honored and revered. Little do we know, especially in the midst of so much division today with the bombings going on right now in Gaza and Palestine, that faithful Muslims all around the world revere Jesus as the second most important prophet, right next to the prophet Muhammad.

I love the inter-religious nature of the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem. It reminds me that the Christ is so much bigger than any parochial view.

As you enter into the Church of the Ascension, you see a sign that says, “No Explanations.” The sign is meant to stop the tour guides from chatting away when really all one wants, and needs, is silence.

While there, I loved reading that sign, almost like a salve, because I didn’t want any explanations of why I was so moved to be in the church. I didn’t want anyone explaining and proving to me the Ascending of the Christ. I just wanted to live in its mystery and its beckoning call to me. No explanations, please…. Let me just be in the present moment.

The Ascension continues to express God’s empathy for us. It’s the book-end to the Incarnation. And in between is the Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Christian story- line. These ten days in waiting (Ascension-tide) invite us to reflect on our powerful story-line of faith.

Our God-story begins in the Incarnation. First there is the Incarnation of God through creation, revealing God’s spirit, full of the wonder and awe and beauty of created life. And then the second Incarnation is our Lord dwelling among us as human, so that we might see clearly the character of God and God’s intent for us through Jesus’ life.

We forget that Jesus’ life is the best way for us to understand who God is. We discover God’s character through Jesus. As Jesus’ life unfolds, we learn that God is merciful, forgiving, loving, inclusive, patient, humorous, and prayerful. God is willing to die for us, never giving up on us, though we continuously abandon and reject and dismiss. God’s love dominates and leads and embraces us no matter what.

God takes us in. And God experiences the human condition: Mary’s tears, Peter’s bumbling, the courage of the hemorrhaging woman, the conversion of Zacchaeus, the cynicism of the tax-collectors, the sadness of the men on the road to Emmaus, the thrill of Peter jumping in the water to follow Jesus, Mary Magdalene’s tenacity, the disciples huddled in fear, the stubbornness of Thomas.

God also experienced temptation and being misunderstood by friend and foe alike, and suffering alone, being in extreme pain, and dying in shame.

God knows inside out what it is like to be human. I like to think that God needed to experience being human to move from an “intellectualizing of it” to an embodiment of it. This may be heretical, but I think God needed to experience being human to truly understand the human condition. And in this “learning experience,” God love us even more, if that is possible.

The dynamics of believing, of having faith under Jesus’ direction, starts by pulling together people of very diverse circumstances. Jew and Gentile. Men and Women. Healthy and Unhealthy. Rich and Poor. Slave and Free. Jesus unites us, with no pre-qualifications. We are coming together united by an idea, not by tribe, all through God’s love, God’s design. The Beloved Community.

Amazing! Yet, this love is destroyed, because left to its own devices, this is what the world does. Betrayed, beaten, tortured, and crucified, this Love is put into a grave.

Yet, as we well know, because this is part of the amazing story-line of our faith, the crucifixion does not have the last word. In the raising of Jesus, God raises us up, as well. And we bask in the light of the resurrection.

This is Love that cannot be vanquished, defeated, or denied. And this Love is not of this world. Our disciples in these early days of Easter are becoming people of the way, following the resurrected Jesus, and finding a new path. They have rejected the status quo, risked the sting of injury and exclusion, and overcome their fear. They are being brought together to love each other, as Jesus loved us.

They do not belong to the world, just as Jesus did not belong to the world. They are now under Jesus’ care who will pray on their behalf, defend, protect, sanctify, and guard.

And so, imagine their surprise when Jesus makes his exit. Ascends! The disciples can barely keep up. They moved from fear, to trust, to resurrection-thinking, to hope, and then Jesus leaves! Again! And they know what the sinful world can do to Love. I imagine they feel abandoned, like Jesus felt on the cross.

And yet the only way Jesus can eternally abide in us and we in him, is if he leaves.

Jesus abides eternally, as he promises us the Gift of the Holy Spirit. The Church body is not complete on its own. We need the Advocate, the power of God’s spirit within us so that God’s Joy within us may be made complete. We are bonded together as the Body of Christ, to be witness to a Love that is greater than death.

In Jesus’ leaving, we are united by God’s active indwelling. We are to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world, healing as our journey, as we cast our lives under the mighty hand of God, surrendering to God’s will for our lives.

And like the Trinity, the Incarnation of God is revealed for a third time. First in creation and then as the Living Lord, and now, as Pentecost approaches, as the Body of Christ.

Yet today, we wait. In these ten days, we live in anticipation to be no longer an in-between people. God is working to actively fold us into the Body of Christ.

There needs to be no explanations, except this: The world will know God’s incarnation by our love.

Amen.