

## Reflections on Faith and Life for Easter 7, May 24, 2020

Memorial Day week-end!

- The day we honor the memory of all who have died while serving this *one nation under God*.
- The first of three Sundays when we sing patriotic songs.
- A three-day week-end when, even without the coronavirus, we would probably have fewer than 30 people present in worship.
- An often rainy week-end for those traveling—if it rains on you, *remember your baptism!*

This morning (Tuesday) for only the third time in eleven years, I had an oriole on my deck. There was actually a red jam in my fridge (alas, not grape, but plum), so I jumped up and ran out to put a spoonful in a jar lid I'd nailed there last year (just hoping). Then I tried to stay focused on my devotional reading and prayers while keeping watch to see if the oriole returned. As I waited, it occurred to me that God may feel the way I was feeling. I'd put out a gift, and it was being ignored. God has put out many gifts, an infinite number of gifts—including his own Son!—and so often so many people don't even bother to check out this banquet of love. —My watchful waiting was finally rewarded when *two* orioles came to nibble at my offering. (Alas, this evening I found no jam, but *ants* in the dish. Did they eat it all? or were they just cleaning up?)

May 24<sup>th</sup> is “Ascension Sunday,” 40 days after Easter, the day when Jesus “ascended into heaven” where he is “seated at the right hand of the Father.” (Actually, Ascension is always on a Thursday, since that's 40 days after Easter; we commemorate it on Sunday.)

And Ascension is always the week before Pentecost, the day the Lord poured out the Holy Spirit on the disciples (who were still in the Upper Room where they had eaten their Passover meal with Jesus just before his arrest). “Pentecost” means “fifty days,” counting from what we call *Maundy Thursday*, which was a celebration of the Jewish holy day of Passover. This is my favorite of the Lutheran “high holy days,” which also include Christmas and Easter. It's a dramatic story, which we'll hear (or read) from Acts 2 next week.

One of the striking things about it is the 3000 new converts to the way of Christ. But the most amazing thing is that visitors from all over the “world” of that time were able to understand Peter's message in their own languages! There are 16 different regions named in Acts 2:9-11, and although Peter spoke in Greek (the common language of the time), “all visitors to Jerusalem” heard him in their own languages.

Why am I going into such detail now, when I'll be repeating some of this next week? Because this helps us understand the gospel from *this* week, John 17, which is called Jesus' “High Priestly Prayer.” The entire chapter is a three-way prayer: for Jesus himself (v. 1-5); for his disciples (v. 6-19); and for all believers (v. 20-26). And the constant thread is his prayer for *unity*.

Check it out! Read the whole chapter and see how it all fits together. Here are the obvious references to unity:

- 17:11d “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that **they may be one as we are one.**”
- 17:20-23 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, **that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us** so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, **that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity** to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

“Christianity” implies following “Christ.” One would think that Christ’s words and teachings should be important to those who call themselves “Christians.” It’s a theological tragedy that there are today **33,000 distinct denominations** in 238 countries, with more than 3,400,000 worship centers or congregations.

The ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) bases its theology (talking about God) and teaching on a consistent interpretation of the Bible, both Hebrew scriptures (what we call the *Old Testament*) and Christian scriptures. We are guided by the intense study and writings of Martin Luther, whose favorite saying was “Sola scriptura,” “only scripture.” Personally, I can’t imagine being bold enough to ignore the words of Jesus while proclaiming and living in direct opposition to his words and life!

The late Methodist Pastor Reuben P. Job writes about divisions in the world and those who delight in “driving wedges of division wherever they can. We see it in communities and we see it in congregations and denominations. One thing is obvious, and that is that those who seek to drive these wedges of division don’t hang around Jesus much. . . . His life was given to heal the wounds of division, and his prayer recorded in John 17 is an emphatic reminder of his determination to see divisions healed and unity restored: ‘Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one’ (John 17:11b).”

Job continues: “What would our world be like if this prayer of Jesus was answered today? What changes would we see in our communities and our congregations? We do not know all that would happen, but we do know that the changes would be dramatic, life-giving, and liberating. Let us pray that the prayer of Jesus will be answered in our time and where we live. And then let us promise God and one another every day that each of us will become a living answer to this fervent prayer of Jesus. It will change our world! (*When You Pray: Daily Practices for Prayerful Living*, Reuben P. Job, p. 118).

I may have gotten carried away in these “Reflections on Faith and Life.” It almost turned into another sermon—well, at least you’ll be prepared when you get to the *real* sermon this week! God’s blessings as you continue this time of worship!

Easter 7, May 24, 2020 – Order of Worship

**Call to Worship** (selected verses from Psalm 68, in bold; notes and questions are from Pr. Gail)  
**May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him.**

O God, who are your enemies? Show me my transgressions, so that I need not flee from you. Drive away from us, your people, all that draws us from you.

**As smoke is blown away by the wind, may you blow them away; as wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God.**

My faith is as light as the wind; please don't blow it away!

**But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful!**

Let me trust in your righteousness, your power to make me righteous before you.

**Sing to God, sing praise to his name, and rejoice before him!**

I will praise you, O God! O Lord, hear the praise of my lips and my heart—and my life!

**A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling; he leads forth the prisoners with singing.**

Widows, orphans, and the strangers in our midst, O God; these are the focus of your care—draw us, inspire us, teach us to care for them also.

**When you went out before your people, O God, when you marched through the wasteland [during the Exodus from Egypt and the 40 years in the wilderness], the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain. You gave abundant showers, O God; you refreshed your weary inheritance [the land you gave your people]; your people settled in it, and from your bounty, O God, you provided for the poor.**

Teach us, O God, teach your beloved children, to provide for the poor among us.

**Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth, sing praise to the Lord. Proclaim the power of God, whose majesty is over Israel, whose power is in the skies. You are awesome, O God; the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.**

You alone are worthy of praise, O God our Creator and Father. Give strength to us, your church, your body; give strength to all who worship you in Spirit and in truth. And with your strength, give wisdom and discernment.

**Praise be to God!**

Amen and amen!

**Confession of Sins:** Gracious God, we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we confess our sins—those known to us that burden our hearts, and those unknown to us but seen by you. We know that before you nothing remains hidden, and in you everything is revealed. Free us from the slavery of sin; liberate us from the bondage of guilt; work in us that which is pleasing in your sight; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Declaration of Forgiveness:** With a heart full of mercy and compassion, God saves us and forgives us all our sins. Christ, the dawn from on high, shines upon us, and by the light of the Holy Spirit guides our feet into the way of peace. Amen.

**Opening Hymn**

**God of Our Fathers**

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1 God of our fa - thers, whose al - might - y hand  
2 Your love di - vine has led us in the past;  
3 From war's a - larms, from dead - ly pes - ti - lence,  
4 Re - fresh your peo - ple on their toil - some way;

Leads forth in beau - ty all the star - ry band  
In this free land - by you our lot is cast;  
Make your strong arm our ev - er sure de - fense.  
Lead us from night to nev - er - end - ing day;

Of shin - ing worlds in splen - dor through the skies:  
Oh, be our rul - er, guard - ian, guide, and stay;  
Your true re - li - gion in our hearts in - crease;  
Fill all our lives with heav'n - born love and grace

Our grate - ful songs be - fore your throne a - rise.  
Your Word our law, your paths our cho - sen way.  
Your boun - teous good - ness nour - ish us in peace.  
Un - til at last we meet be - fore your face.

**The Greeting:** The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you. *If you are worshipping with others, say to each one, And also with you.*

**The Kyrie** (“Kyrie” means “Lord”)

In peace, let us pray to the Lord. **Lord, have mercy.**

For the peace from above, and for our salvation, let us pray to the Lord. **Lord, have mercy.**

For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord. **Lord, have mercy.**

For this holy place where we worship, and for all in Christ’s body who offer now their worship and praise, let us pray to the Lord. **Lord, have mercy.**

Help, save, comfort, and defend us, gracious Lord. **Amen.**  
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**Hymn of Praise**     *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies* (Katherine Bates, Samuel Ward)

1. O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain:  
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.
2. O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,  
Who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life:  
America! America! May God thy gold refine,  
Till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine.
3. O beautiful for patriot dream that sees, beyond the years,  
Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears:  
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,  
Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.

**Prayer of the Day:** O God of glory, your Son Jesus Christ suffered for us and ascended to your right hand. Unite us with Christ and with each other in suffering and in joy, so that all the world may be drawn into your bountiful presence, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Notes on the reading from Acts 1:6-14** The Book of Acts was written by the same person who wrote the gospel of Luke. If you look at the beginning of Luke, 1:1-4, and also of Acts (1:1-2), you'll see the name "Theophilus" in both; this can be either the given name of a man, or the generic Latin, meaning "God-lover," which could refer to any of us. Luke's purpose was to set down a chronological account of the birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The Book of Acts is actually the second part of Luke's gospel.

**A reading from Acts, the first chapter (1:6-14)**

(The risen Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples in Jerusalem.) **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 [see Luke 24:4; the same two men?] stood by them. The 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."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ["a sabbath day's journey" was less than half a mile, the distance allowed by Jewish tradition without violating the law; see Exodus 16:29: "Everyone is to stay where they are on the seventh day (the sabbath); no one is to go out." According to tradition they could walk a certain number of steps to care for their animals.] **When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying** [the Upper Room where they had eaten the Passover, Jesus' Last Supper]: **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.** [Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, had already taken his own life.] **All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.** The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

A reading from I Peter, the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter (5:6-11)

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, so that he may lift you up in due time. *Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.* [I like the *New King James* version of this verse: Cast all your cares on him, because he cares for you.] Be self-controlled and alert. *Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.* Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ,* after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Introduction to the Gospel (say it in your outside voice!) **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

The holy gospel according to John, the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter (17:1-11). **Glory to you, O Lord!** [Jesus has been talking to his disciples in the Upper Room after washing their feet and eating his Last Supper with them. His last words in chapter 16: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!"]

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people so that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now *this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.\** I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me *out of the world.* They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me,

and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them.

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I am not praying for the world,\*\*\* but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still *in the world*, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, *that they may be one as we are one*. This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ!

\*\* We're actually living in *eternal life* right now, because we know the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he sent!

\*\*\* In verses 20-23 of this chapter Jesus *does* pray for the world, that it cease to be worldly: *My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity.* Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Sermon The sermon is printed separately at the end of the order of worship (after the Closing Hymn and Dismissal).

Sermon Hymn

# Jesus, Still Lead On

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1 Je - sus, still lead on, till our rest be won; and, al-though the  
 2 If the way be drear, if the foe be near, let no faith - less  
 3 When we seek re - lief from a long-felt grief, when temp-ta - tions  
 4 Je - sus, still lead on, till our rest be won; heav'n-ly lead - er,

way be cheer - less, we will fol - low, calm and fear - less;  
 fears o'er-take us, let not faith and hope for-sake us;  
 come al - lur - ing, make us pa - tient and en - dur - ing;  
 still di - rect us, still sup - port, con - sole, pro - tect us,

guide us by your hand to the prom - ised land.  
 safe - ly past the foe to our home we go.  
 show us that bright shore where we weep no more.  
 till we safe - ly stand in the prom - ised land.

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**The Apostle's Creed:** God has made us his people through our baptism into Christ. Living together in trust and hope, we confess our faith.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.  
 Amen.

## Prayers of Intercession

Uplifted by the promised hope of healing and resurrection, we join the people of God in all times and places in praying for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

O God, call your people to be one, as you are one. Unite your church in the truth of your gospel, the love of our neighbor, and the all to proclaim your reign to all people. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Breathe new life into your creation. In this age of global warming, with the whole world at risk, bless the work of scientists, political scientists, and ecologists, that, humbled together, all people may repent and seek healing of this earth. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Make your justice known among the nations of the earth. Protect the vulnerable in all lands currently in crisis. In your divine power, take hold of leaders who use violence and greed as weapons. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Come to the aid of your children. We pray for those living with grief; those without supportive families; and for those who are isolated, powerless, or afraid, that all may cast their anxieties on your caring grace. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Show your mercy throughout the world on all who seek to treat, heal, and protect those suffering from or because of the coronavirus. May newly opened activities and businesses be places of safety and renewal. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

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We remember this Memorial Day week-end all who risked their lives to serve in our armed forces. Grant safety to those serving at home or abroad, and send your never-failing strength to guide and protect them. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Raise all your saints to eternal life. Until that day, we give you thanks for the faithful examples of those who have listened to your voice and now rest in you. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

With bold confidence in your love, almighty God, we place all for whom we pray into your eternal care; through Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

**Offering Song**

## For the Beauty of the Earth

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1 For the beau - ty of the earth, For the beau - ty of the skies,  
2 For the won - der of each hour Of the day and of the night,  
3 For the joy of ear and eye, For the heart and mind's de - light,  
4 For the joy of hu - man love, Broth - er, sis - ter, par - ent, child,

For the love which from our birth O - ver and a - round us lies:  
Hill and vale and tree and flow'r, Sun and moon and stars of light:  
For the mys - tic har - mo - ny Link - ing sense to sound and sight:  
Friends on earth and friends a - bove; For all gen - tle thoughts and mild:

*Refrain*  
Christ, our Lord, to you we raise This our sac - ri - fice of praise.

5 For yourself, best gift divine  
To the world so freely giv'n;

Agent of God's grand design,  
Peace on earth and joy in heav'n: *Refrain*

## The Lord's Prayer

Let us now pray as Jesus taught us: **Our Father**,  
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## Benediction

May the One who brought forth Jesus from the dead  
raise you to new life, fill you with hope,  
and turn your mourning into dancing.  
Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
Bless you now and forever.

**Amen.**

## Closing Hymn

### *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*

1. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
he is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

he has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword:  
his truth is marching on.

*Glory, glory! Hallelujah! Glory, glory! Hallelujah!*  
*Glory, glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.*

2. He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;  
he is sifting out the hearts of all before his judgment seat.  
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer him; be jubilant, my feet!  
Our God is marching on.

*Glory, glory! Hallelujah! Glory, glory! Hallelujah!*  
*Glory, glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.*

3. In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,  
with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me.  
As he died to make all holy, let us live to make all free,  
while God is marching on.

*Glory, glory! Hallelujah! Glory, glory! Hallelujah!*  
*Glory, glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.*

### Dismissal

Now stay in peace to love and serve the Lord!

**Thanks be to God!**

Easter 7, 2020, Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson's sermon

Note: God is good! As I was set to write this week's sermon (Wednesday morning), I received a ready-made sermon from Pastor Laurie Skow-Anderson, Bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. Now I know why my "Reflections" and text notes written yesterday were so extensive: I still got to have my say, and you get to enjoy another sermon from our Bishop!

### **Memorial Day /Ascension Day/Graduation May 24, 2020 John 17, Acts 1, 1 Peter 4**

Hello People of God of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. I'm Pastor Laurie Skow-Anderson, I serve as the bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. On Sunday, May 24, we remember Jesus' ascension in to heaven. He is lifted up into heaven, into the clouds. Just before he leaves the disciples, Jesus commissions them to be his witnesses. He says, "*You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.*" Let's think about the mission that Jesus gives us, his disciples today. How can we live out that commission even as we are challenged by the dangers of the Coronavirus? How can we "go to the ends of the earth," when we still need to

be careful, stay home and avoid group gatherings? The Wisconsin Council of Churches and the six ELCA Bishops in Wisconsin still encourage everyone to stay safe and make decisions that are in the best interest of your neighbor's health.

Because of COVID 19, your pastors and church leaders have had to make some major decisions in the way they do ministry. The synod staff, synod ministers, just like your congregation, had to make huge adjustments in our work during this pandemic. We are working from home using Zoom meetings, Facebook Live, creating video recordings and other resources for you. I want to express my deep gratitude to the Synod Ministers who have adapted and adjusted their work to serve you. Thank you to our administrator Liz Bartsch, Pastors Greg Kaufmann, Erin Nelson, Randy Olson, Deacons Laura Ramlow, and David Behling. We are here to help you so that together the next generation will come to know and love Jesus!

Thank you to YOU, the 198 ELCA congregations in the NW corner of the state of Wisconsin, for your faithfulness in following Jesus during these strange days. *I am particularly thankful for the ministries of our four Bible camps and the challenges they face. Luther Point, Luther Park and Wapogasset made the tough decision to cancel Bible camp this summer. Pray for them as they learn ways to help our kids learn to love Jesus without the kids actually coming to camp this summer. Keep them in your prayers.*

My concern, as we all long for things to go back to normal, is that we don't turn inward and look only to our own self-interests and our own personal preferences, but to think about the bigger picture, and seek the common good. What is best for others? What is the best way for us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves? What is God's will for our lives together?

Bishop Laurie's sermon, p. 2

The COVID 19 Pandemic has affected all of us in different ways.

- Many struggle financially. They have lost their jobs or their businesses have suffered
- Parents are stressed working at home and homeschooling their young children.
- Some can't visit older loved one living in senior assisted living. I've seen families standing outside a nearby nursing home visiting with their grandma or grandpa through the window!
- Some are the disappointed high school graduates, class of 2020, no way to celebrate.
- Me personally, I've not been able to see my granddaughter since this all began, because my daughter-in-law is pregnant with baby #2 and they are concerned about the virus. My second grandchild is due in June, and I think about that baby curled up safe inside its mother's womb in a fetal position. What kind of world will it be born into? Sometimes it seems to me that we are all curled up in a fetal position. When we are anxious and uncertain about the future it is so easy to become inwardly focused.

My heart goes out especially to high school seniors who lost the last few months with their classmates and teachers and whose plans for graduation celebrations has been cancelled or postponed.

I remember when I graduated from high school in May a long time ago. I spent the summer working and getting ready to go to college. I was a scared college freshman maybe more than most. I was terrified of failing. I was a farm kid, never been to the big city, the oldest child, the first in my family to go to college, and I picked a college 300 miles from home. The first few weeks at college I was just completely focused on not getting lost, finding my way to class on time and doing homework and not failing. Walking to class every day, I took the same sidewalk between the dorms and library commons to the classroom building. The sidewalks were usually filled with students coming and going. I kept my head down and purposefully walked to class. I was determined not to be late and not to fail. Did I mention I was really afraid of failing?

One day I was walking back to my dorm from the library along my usual route and I noticed a leaf falling. I was surprised by the leaf and looked up and was equally surprised to see I was standing under an enormous tree. In all those weeks of walking to class with my head down, I had never seen the tree. The trunk was this big and the branches were high overhead. It was a really big tree and I'd missed it. I hadn't noticed it at all. Even though I had walked past it dozens of times in those first few weeks of college, I was too intent, so inwardly focused on myself, and too afraid to look up and notice the amazing tree. In some ways this is a stupid story. The fact that I didn't notice a tree isn't important, but what the story is really about is being self-absorbed and self-centered caring only about myself, my success, my needs and not noticing the whole world around me. I was turned in on myself, or as one of my teachers said, I was navel gazing. Theologians call this self-centeredness, a form of pride, the original sin or in **Latin *incurvatus en se, curved in on oneself.***

Bishop Laurie's sermon, p. 3

In the three years that Jesus' disciples follow him, they were like self-conscious freshman, thinking about their own needs and survival. Jockeying for position, James and John asked Jesus, "Which one of us will sit at your right and your left hand in glory?" In our reading from Acts 1, it is 40 days after Easter morning and his first appearance to the women at the tomb. Jesus appeared to them many times and they've had all this time to remember the miracles, healings, the teaching of Jesus. But those closest to Jesus, his closest friends still don't know what to do next. They asked him, "Is now THE TIME?" Is now the TIME when Jesus was going to claim his earthly powers and put them in power and overthrow the Romans. They've been waiting for the time when their lives would improve; go back to normal, or at least to a time when they wouldn't be suffering under brutal Roman occupation and persecution.

Aren't we all waiting for everything to get better too, for things to go our way for a change, when is the time? How much long O Lord will we suffer under COVID 19 restrictions? When will things go back to normal? When is the time? Jesus told the disciples..."It is not for you know the time; it is in God's time."

But it was now TIME for Jesus to leave. He told his friends they were to be his **witnesses in** Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The word *witness* in Greek is Μάρτυρας the ENGLISH word *martyrs*. Jesus said you will be my witnesses/martyrs/sacrifice your own lives so that Jesus will be known to the end of the earth.

And then he ascends into heaven/he takes the invisible elevator straight up to heaven into the clouds. Jesus friends were gazing up toward heaven. Think about their bodily position. The disciples were gazing up into heaven, they were standing up, heads tilted back, look up beyond themselves. They were no longer navel gazing, they were no longer turned in on themselves, no longer in a fetal position. Jesus was sending them out beyond themselves to the world, when suddenly two men in white spoke to them.....The two guys in white said, he'll come back...Jesus will come back...but again NO time was given...so the disciples went back to the upstairs room and were together with the women who followed Jesus and they prayed...looking up to heaven...waiting for the Holy Spirit to tell them what to do now.

Looking up into heaven...it is physically impossible to be curved in on ourselves can't be gazing at your navel and looking up into heaven...looking up into heaven calls us to look beyond ourselves...looking beyond our belly buttons...self-centered narcissistic tendencies. They are looking up and beyond their own needs, wants and desires to the greater mission that Jesus has set before them. A mission they will accomplish with the help of the Holy Spirit.

In today's reading from John 17 we hear that as he prayed for his disciples, **Jesus looked up to heaven. The disciples overhear his** conversation with God. Jesus prays in effect, God you know, now's the time, the hour has come...you know all we've been through here...you know that we're in this for the long haul...we're in this together...and now it's time for me to leave them...so protect them...protect them...protect them from themselves and the original sin of humanity, turning in on themselves.

Bishop Laurie's sermon, p. 4

Friends, think about it for a minute. Where do we spend most of our time looking? At the ground? At our navels? At ourselves? Martin Luther said, in his lectures on Romans, "Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, [being] so deeply curved in on itself [*that what motives us is this sin that*] wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.

Where do we spend most of our time looking? At the ground? At our feet? At ourselves? Our navels? Are we curved in on ourselves?

***Where are we looking? Here we are now, all thinking about how our lives have been impacted by COVID-19. Are we looking up to heaven and out for our neighbor? Or turned in curved in on ourselves?***

Next Sunday, we celebrate Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The power of the Holy Spirit is the breath of life.

The Holy Spirit is the wind of God's creative fire that warms us and opens us up. We uncurl. We are born anew through the waters of baptism and stretch out the fetal position, We are released from the navel gazing position.

We look up to the heavens, and as we straighten we look up at the tree of life. We see the resurrected Jesus and experience his transforming love.

We look up to the heavens and see beyond ourselves and see the hurts and needs of this world. We see our purpose in God's mission and we are able to go and be witnesses for Jesus to the ends of the earth, which may be, these days, the end of the block, the other end of an email, to Malawi, Africa or the food pantry cross town. You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Today, let the Holy Spirit turn you outward to look up to the heavens. What do you see beyond, beyond yourself? Today, look up to the heavens. Make an attempt to pray beyond your wants and needs and see the needs of your neighbors. This next week, take a prayer walk. Look up past the tree tops, through the cross, to the heavens. Take a prayer walk around your neighborhood and pray for all the homes and business you pass. Pray for the people who live and work there. Pray that the Holy Spirit will show you how you can be a witness to Jesus' love to the ends of the earth.

Let us pray

We give thanks to you almighty God that your son Jesus humbled himself and came to live among. He humbled himself and gave his life for us. The corona virus has turned us inward on ourselves to focus on only what we want. Forgive us. By the power of your Holy Spirit turns us from our self-centered ways and turn us outward to love you and to love our neighbor. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN.