

Sermon for 29 May 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Seventh Sunday of Easter/Ascension Sunday/Memorial Day Sunday
Scriptures: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 (UM781); Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 44:44-53

“Awe”

As the first-century Christians struggled to say and share what gripped them, what drew them together and led them again and again to speak out, the word “awe” seems to reflect what at least one group of them experienced intimately. Over time, the ones among them we identify with the Gospel of Luke seem to have been able to express this in story form, in the two books we now know as Luke and Acts: .. the “Gospel,” or good news, according to Luke, and the “ Acts of the Apostles.”

These spiritual ancestors speak to us annually in a day set aside for a visual representation that would have made vivid sense to people in that time when God was above, in heaven, and people were below, on a flat earth.

The impact was clear: Those who centered their lives on the presence of God as a person, Jesus, the Christ, or as they put it, the Son of God, were overwhelmed and reassured by the thought, the vision, of him gathering them together, after his crucifixion, and rising up, up, into the heavens.

What that offers us, in our very different but still common experience as human beings, is a way, a thought, a symbol, with all the powers of conviction humans are capable of, of trusting God through Jesus of Nazareth.

Awe. It is one of the results of the Easter miracle. It is part of the attitude, the life pattern, we follow when we say nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is a week to test that belief. I spent the day after the shootings in Uvalde, 500 miles south of where I grew up in North Texas but still home country to me ... I spent it in a kind of trance. To be so aware how much worse off we are in this nation than many other countries are, in terms of violence, still stuns Americans. To hear the immediate deadlock in Congress against any changes in our gun laws; to hear the news reports; to compare it all with the week before and its more racially-toned details ... I only speak of these things because they are so close to our common experience as world citizens this week... everybody is thinking like we are thinking this week: “What ails us? Why can’t...?”

And I put this, as we are offered as Jesus people, against today’s image of Jesus really being in charge. Totally vulnerable; submissive to the way things are, like the Jews in the Holocaust or the slaves in our South, as well as all those people Rome crucified for all sorts of reasons ... and at the same

time elevated past our sight or touch, like God is, into an all-pervasive companionship with us that overpowers any other thought or feeling, at least at times...

This is not a time to avoid, to close ourselves off. This is a valley to walk through. We are so much closer to the rest of the world than we ever thought we could be, as Americans. All the people struggling in Ukraine have bonds with us we didn't expect. How do you treat children now? I listened to a man who's been studying the effects of violence on children since Sandy Hook all those years ago ... and he said there are people in their forties still traumatized by having been, not even in the same room, or the same building, as children when other shootings occurred. He said millions of lives have been affected by such violence, and only by paying more attention, not less, can we expect to relieve the trauma that's already been wrought.

I think about our day care, and wonder what we can do for those kids, and workers, and parents... There must be ways we, small but caring as we are, can contribute to the healing that needs to be done.

I think, too, about the question of violence in Baltimore, and realize that we've often been told our children ... because we are Baltimoreans, regardless of where we literally reside ...our Baltimore children are traumatized by the violence around them .. and of course we know, even as we rage against it, how natural it is for violence to beget violence, year after year and century after century, neighborhood after neighborhood and school after school.

The awe of this day, and this image of Christ being lifted up as the disciples watched, and then the interruption by the two men clothed in white, asking, "Why stand you looking up into heaven?"

This Jesus whom we follow is moving into the city, into the countryside, into the hearts and the council chambers and hospitals and the times yet to come where our influence needs to be, and will be, if we surrender our will to him.

Let us ... God help us ... join all the connections of this week-end of Memorial Day, to the richness of the picture of Christ's ascension ... and let this be a healing that only awe can produce, far beyond our present commitment. Show us, Lord, how to get involved, and be practical believers. Teach us how to be still and thoughtful, and then how to act in ways that parallel the work of other disciples through the ages and across the continents, so that your good world can grow more beautiful and beneficial than ever, in Jesus' name and through his vivid, felt companionship with each of us, Amen.

