

Sermon for Sunday 21 May 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Seventh Sunday of Easter/Ascension Sunday
Scriptures: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 (UMH 781); Luke 24:44-53

“Translating”

As we approach the finish of the time between Easter and Pentecost, called “The Great Fifty Days,” I’m reminded of the saying by the great Bible translator, J.B. Phillips, “Your God is too small.” To paraphrase, I hear Luke’s telling of the ascension saying, “Your Christ is too small.”

By that, I mean, for us to have a religious leader who, like the psalmist said of King David, “sitteth at the right hand of God; to trace the footsteps of a human being who died, yet returned to life, and who then continued, as a teacher to complete training his disciples, during forty days, to carry on his ministry ... and yet who, by another biblical account, was raised up to heaven on the same day that he rose from the dead ... it’s all just too big a deal.

In so many ways: in scripture, and in Christian tradition, and in our own experience, we are describing the Spirit in the midst of us as a fellowship ... How else can it be put? Time and again we have the feeling, as I quoted Julian of Norwich last Sunday, that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Sometimes it’s an inner nudge; other times it’s a strong group consensus. Historically, it can be a revolutionary commitment by a whole nation, or by the Christian community, as in the Reformation... However we describe it, spiritual reality is a fact, a power, to be acknowledged, and prayed for, and then prayed over... even died for. Crucial as we believe science is in everything from personal habits to military actions, we are nevertheless obliged to say the spiritual element in existence is undeniable.

And that’s what makes my sermon title today, “Translating.” It seems to me we are translating when we read and use such things as the story of Christ’s ascension. After all, only Luke describes it in any detail. Mark and Matthew don’t even mention it, and John ties it so tightly with the resurrection that it’s difficult to separate the two as individual occurrences. Paul, as in today’s passage from his letter to the Ephesian church, expands the Ascension far beyond Luke’s description of a literal event ... and gives it even more power and reality in our personal praying and judging of events. The Spirit is real, for each of us ... and as we know, the doctrine of the Trinity, while nowhere in authorized Scripture... was produced by the Christian community at in the first three or four centuries after Jesus’ death, to explain and express our faith, and has stayed with us ever since.

I’m saying this is important, this Ascension story. It is deep human insight; but not a trick, or an obligation to believe in. The ascension of Jesus is an item we travel with, praying and using it to explain what God is doing and how we expect to hear, and answer, and respond. God is so human we can trust that he/she really knows what we need, offers it totally and constantly to us, and,” as I quoted our Bishop last week, “It’s all about love.” Forgiving and starting over are the basis of everything; and saying the disciples watched Jesus rise up and away, and were told by two figures clad in white to get busy doing what they’ve already been taught, makes sense.

On the other side, it's crucial, and we've spent far too little time and energy as a religious movement, recognizing that, as another scripture has Jesus say, "other sheep have I than this fold..."

I'm saying Christianity has a great deal of making up to do for our attitude that, because we have this beautiful imagery and this saving confidence, other people whom God has created, reached out to, forgiven, and constructively led, who don't have such literal imagery of an ascension and similar spiritual interactions with God, aren't in touch with the real thing. "Your God is too small" is something that they can quote back to us; and that will continue to be so this century, more than it's ever been before. Spirit doesn't just work with Christians. Power and grace, forgiveness and starting afresh, happen in ways we've yet to become familiar with.

Our own time and our own national life are heavy with failures on this level; and work at creating and sustaining, as Jesus said, "a house of prayer for all people," is prime business for us as a world power, and us as a denomination.

Let us remember both sides of this beautiful, essential story, and add Christ's ascension into our practice of prayer and service, all year ... through Jesus Christ.

Amen.