

Easter 7 Year A

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For those of you who are liturgical junkies out there – and this may also be just as true for those of you who occasionally might get bored during church on any given Sunday and decide to use your free time to flip through the opening pages of the Prayer Book – you perhaps know that there are a certain number of holidays in our church calendar which carry the auspicious title of “Principal Feasts”. Does anybody here this morning have any guess about the number of “Principal Feast” days we recognize in the Episcopal Church calendar each year? That’s right... there are seven principle feast days, spread fairly well throughout the year. Two of those Principal Feasts, however, fall within 10 days of one another, while a third follows quickly behind, only one week later... so that in one brief 17-day window almost half of our Principal Feast days occur.

Acts 1:3 tells us that, following his resurrection on Easter Sunday, Jesus remained with his disciples “appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” Meanwhile, Acts 2:1 tells us “when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” Pentecost means “50” – and so always falls 50 days after Passover... the same Passover during which Jesus was arrested, executed, and ultimately resurrected. For all you math wizards out there, you can quickly calculate that 40 days after Easter fell last Thursday, and fifty days after Easter falls next Sunday. I will leave it to the real purists among you to figure out which Principal Feast day falls one week later, on the Sunday after our Pentecost celebration next week.

We find ourselves, then, on that curious Sunday which happens once each year between the Principal Feast Day of the Ascension (which occurred three days ago), and the Principal Feast Day of Pentecost (which we celebrate seven days from now). In fact, over the years, today has received its own special name, often being referred to as “Expectation Sunday,” as the disciples took to heart Jesus’ words which we heard in today’s first reading. Just before he ascended into heaven, Jesus comforted his disciples, saying, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” When and where and how that Spirit might fill them, the disciples didn’t have a clue. No one could have guessed that their wait would only last for ten days. But they knew something special was coming, and so they lived in that moment of expectation.

This had to have been an especially awkward time for the disciples... living in the “in between” times... in that time between the “already” of Jesus’ ascension and the “not yet” of the coming of the Holy Spirit. No one was sure what to do next, or where to turn, or how to act. And so, everyone waited... expectantly perhaps... but waited just the same. That “in between” time was a period of uncertainty, and ambiguity, and (I am sure) a certain feel of a loss of control, as well.

In many ways, I think the experience of the disciples may parallel our own experience here at All Saints as well, for we find ourselves deep in our own awkward “in between” time in so many ways. In the search for our next rector, the Discernment Committee has already announced that it is down to its final six candidates, but we are not yet at the point where that person has been called by the vestry. In our search for a new Director of Administration, Robbie Boyd has

already announced his plans to relocate to the East Coast after six years here at All Saints, but we have not yet found his replacement. You know of our Sanctuary Renovation Project, which has already been discussed for years now, and for which the plans are now finally coming into focus, but you know as well that we are not yet anywhere near the first day of work on that project. And the Capital Campaign to fund that project is already in its very earliest stages, but we are not yet anywhere near point of celebrating the culmination of that work. In so many ways, much as the disciples experienced before us, the proverbial “train has left the station”... but the destination is still nowhere in sight. We are deeply in that time of being “in between” the already and the not yet.

Just as the disciples experienced that “in between” time... just as we experience that same phenomenon here as a part of this community... many of us (perhaps, if truth be told, all of us) have that same experience in our individual lives as well. You know what it’s like... one part of your life seems to have come to a conclusion, but the next part of your life is still yet to be revealed. It happens as you move from one phase of life to the next... as you move from one home into another... as you transfer from one job into the next, or from employment into retirement... as one relationship comes to an end while another is yet to be formed... one chapter of your life story has concluded, but the next chapter is yet to be written.

You may have noted the death this past week of Maya Angelou, who died on Wednesday at the age of 86. Few people merit the distinction, “An American Treasure”... but surely Ms. Angelou was one of them. A woman of deep faith, of keen observation, and of a facility with words which allowed her to name and frame experiences which touched the heart of the world, Angelou was a writer,

poet, playwright, director, actor, and public speaker. Following the announcement of her death, Tim Safford, who is now the rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Philadelphia wrote of his encounter with Maya Angelou when he was on the clergy staff at All Saints in Pasadena by posting this on his Facebook page: Safford wrote, *When she preached at All Saints, Pasadena, my favorite line was something like: “How can a Christian say, ‘I am a Christian’ as if there has been an arrival at a final destination? My prayer is that I might become a Christian and escape the arrogance of ever thinking that I have achieved it.”*

Angelou understood that the “in between” was holy time, was a time when God might be most active and present in our lives, that the “in between” time sometimes offered the very stuff of life. In fact, it might be said that, in God’s economy, we are best described not as “human beings”, but as “human becomings”.

In today’s first reading, two men in white robes asked the disciples, “Why do you stand there looking up?” I can almost anticipate their response, “Well, it’s too bad you didn’t see the same thing that we just saw... we saw Jesus, 40 days after his resurrection, when we all had thought he was dead and then he came back to life, now being sucked up and taken on a cloud into heaven... if you had seen that, wouldn’t you want to stand there looking up for just a few minutes as well?”

The image harkens back to a similar moment recorded in Luke’s gospel, when two other men in dazzling clothes asked the women who had come to the empty tomb early on Easter morning, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The obvious answer, of course would have been, “Uhhh, this is where we left him two days ago... and we are quite certain that he was extremely dead then.”

So, for both the witnesses of Jesus' ascension standing on the mount called Olivet, and for those first witnesses to the resurrection in a burial garden near Golgotha, the questions which the two strangers in dazzling white clothes asked of them might have seemed a bit impertinent. But in both cases, however, there is a deeper question which was really being asked. The question might have been framed a little differently: "In this 'in between' time, why do you keep looking back at what did happen rather than looking forward at what will happen?"

When I was a kid, I loved it when the circus came to town. We all gathered expectantly, as the train would pull into the station. And then the grand parade would begin, as the whole assembly moved about half a mile down city streets to a large parking lot where the big-top tent had already been raised – the ring master in his red jacket and black top hat, the lions and tigers in their cages, the elephants lumbering along being ridden by scantily clad women, the jugglers and clowns entertaining the crowds. But when the circus acts would finally begin, there was something else I waited for, always nearly holding my breath. My favorite performers were the trapeze artists, those daring young men and women who would swing wildly above the masses, risking life and limb for all to see.

You know how it works. Hands over their head, a performer would jump from a platform high above the crowd, grasping a bar suspended from the top of the tent by two thin ropes. The trapeze artist would swing back and forth, higher and higher, back and forth, higher and higher. Meanwhile, one of their fellow performers would be standing high on a platform on the other side of the arena, swinging an empty bar, back and forth, higher and higher.

Finally, the moment of truth would come. At just the right instant, the performer would release their hands from the bar... sail freely through the air, twisting and turning in every direction... and then, just in the nick of time, grasp the empty bar which had swung just to the right place, just at the right time, to save them from certain disaster. The key to their success, time and time again, was that they would focus their attention not on the bar they had just released, but only on the bar which was swinging forward to meet them.

We all long for the security of a firmly grasped bar. But in reality, we live our lives in that “in between” space between one bar and the next. While that may not sound particularly comforting, it is the place where life is lived at its fullest, where the possibilities in front of us are most expansive, and where, I believe, God is most poignantly present in our lives. On this Expectation Sunday, may you experience the fullness... and the possibilities... and the poignant presence of God flying freely beside you between one bar and the next.

Amen.