

May 20, 2007, Easter 7, Year C
Sermon Preached by the Rev. Nancy B. Dilliplane
Christ Episcopal Church, Rockville MD

In the name of God, Holy One, Holy Three. Amen.

I have an idea that last Thursday came and went as a fairly unremarkable day for most of us. Perhaps as the day the garbage was put out, maybe a dentist appointment, or a ball game. Choir practice.

Last Thursday, however, marked 40 days since Easter Sunday. Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension. The group who gathered for Wednesday Eucharist has already heard me say some of this, but, the Book of Common Prayer sets aside Ascension day as one of the 7 principle feasts of the church, ranking it in importance right along with Christmas and Easter. You get extra points if, after the service you can tell me what the other 4 principle feasts are.

Ascension Day, however, goes mostly overlooked, certainly by our culture, but also as a sort of poor second-cousin by the church. Possibly because it always falls on a Thursday, a day more associated with taking out the trash than with church.

But by overlooking the Ascension, we miss out on some of the richness offered us by the Church calendar. We end up going from celebration to celebration. From Easter to Pentecost. And we miss the in-between time, when Jesus has departed from the world, and the Holy Spirit has not yet come.

It has always seemed to me that folks who attend church only on Christmas and Easter, who go from celebration to celebration, without spending time in those desert places of waiting and longing and deprivation—Advent and Lent—miss out on the fullness of joy that is available to folks who have waited in the gathering darkness and seeping cold of December, or experienced the ablation of Lenten fasting, prayer and almsgiving. So, too, the coming of the Holy Spirit in wind and fire on Pentecost loses some of its impact when we don't pause to walk with those long ago disciples through the bewilderment of the next 10 days. Jesus has been taken from our sight, into heaven, leaving us alone, without God's tangible presence. Without this dark night of the soul, to use John of the Cross's words, we miss some of the power and relief and comfort of God's coming to us again as Spirit.

Suzanne Guthrie, an Episcopal priest, chaplain and author writes in her article, *The Turn in the Path*, that in her childhood church, the Paschal candle was extinguished on Ascension day, and not relit until Pentecost, as a sign of the mystery of Christ's departure. Ascension then, marked a short penitential season to allow preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit, in much the same way that we await Christ's birth in the deep blue of Advent, and make the purple journey towards Jerusalem in Lent, in anticipation of Christ's death and resurrection.

I wonder if this isn't a good practice. It reminds the church that Easter is not the whole story, and God's saving action is not complete, as some would have us believe, in the cross, nor even in the resurrection. Guthrie writes:

Easter is not the end after all. Easter is not the final destination for the disciples, and not the final destination of the soul. Nor is Easter the final destination of the church. Easter begins the transition between one reality and another. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit cannot take place in that outer garden where Jesus has not yet ascended to the Father, where he has presence and voice, wounds open to the touch, where he is the risen Lord of a hot breakfast and a marvelous catch of fish. The disciples must once more taste emptiness and detachment, and open again the once-broken heart yet to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Only then will they go to "the ends of the earth."

I like that imagery of re-opening once-broken hearts. There's a kind of honesty about our lives, that gets played out in the seasons of the church year, when fully lived, and echoes the cyclical way of God's felt presence in—and absence from—our hearts. Re-breaking our hearts keeps them soft, open to new possibility. Open to God.

It seems to me that it is as important to articulate the seasons of God's *absence*, as it is to rejoice in God's *presence*. And paying attention to the Ascension gives us a way to do that. If we really heed the story of the Ascension, we know that the coming of the Holy Spirit is not instantaneous. It's not that Jesus is taken up out of the disciple's sight, but it's all ok, because the Holy Spirit comes rushing in to fill the void. The Holy Spirit does, of course, but not for 10 days. Just as Jesus rises from the dead, but not before 3 days have passed. And God will fill broken open-hearts, but first we may need to really experience that brokenness.

Ascension and Holy Saturday mark real times in our journey of Christian discipleship. Times when we feel God's absence. Times when we are left to taste the enormity of life without God's presence. Times when we glimpse the abyss.

And it is here that the today's Gospel passage comes into play. Jesus takes his coming departure very seriously. He is aware of the reality of that gaping abyss, and he prays for his disciples who are about to enter that void. He prays hard. And not just for his disciples, but also for those who will believe in him through their word. In other words, Jesus is praying for the church. For us.

Jesus knows that his absence will be a particularly trying time for the disciples. In the arid space between his going, and his coming to them again, they—we—will face trials and temptations. Jesus knows about this first hand. Didn't Satan come to him during his own time in the wilderness?

Jesus prays for us in our wilderness moments—those moments when we are caught between Good Friday and Easter, or between Ascension and Pentecost. And here is an astonishing thing. He gives us not just himself, but each other. He prays that we all may be one. “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.”

This high priestly prayer of Jesus’, prayed on the brink of his departure, is what makes us church. Our oneness is important. Not in the sense that we all must subscribe strictly to a single doctrine, theology, liturgy or way of being church, but because it is to the church, as a community, as a whole—as one—and not to isolated individuals that the Holy Spirit comes.

In the Luke’s account of the ascension, Jesus tells the disciples that they are to remain in Jerusalem, together—as one—to await the promised outpouring of the Spirit. In the Old Testament, and even in the Gospels, we hear of the Holy Spirit coming to individuals—to Ezekiel, Simeon, Jesus himself. But at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit will come upon the gathered disciples, the nascent Church. Salvation comes first to the community, and Jesus’ prayer that all may be one, wills that this be so.

As a *community* we bear witness to the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. As *one* we baptize individuals into a community that remembers, shares a meal, and continues to beg our oneness as, week by week, the Holy Spirit is poured out on all of us.

And it is as one that we hold the faith for one another. During Easter, but also during Lent. During Christmas, but also during Advent. During Pentecost, but also during Ascension. It is for the desert seasons of our lives—for those Holy Saturdays when we cannot believe in resurrection; for those times when Jesus is taken from our sight, and we cannot imagine Pentecost; for those times when all of God that we can feel is God’s absence, that Jesus prays this prayer. It is because he has prayed us into community that we can sing the verse from the servant hymn: “I will hold the Christ light for you, in the night time of your fear. I will hold my hand out to you, and speak the words you long to hear.”

Because Jesus has prayed to the Father that we be one, we, first as a community, know ourselves to be loved with the same love with which Jesus was loved, before the foundations of the world. Then we can assure one another that we are held fast in that love, even in the times that God seems absent. This is Jesus’ prayer and his gift to the church. Our oneness holds the faith, even when, as individuals, we may wander in the wilderness, or grope blindly in the soul’s dark night.

And as we hold the faith for one another, God’s love for Jesus finds its truest expression—in us, as we are made one in this name. AMEN