

WORSHIP SERVICE MAY 24, 2020 – ASCENSION SUNDAY

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB

God of Jesus,

You are faithful beyond all ages. We thank you for this new day you have given us. We thank you for the gift of life and for all we so easily take for granted.

We especially thank you for your Son Jesus. Jesus is our savior, lord, inspiration, friend, and lover. Jesus' world was as unfair as ours, yet Jesus had a way of seeking out the folks most deprived of love.

Today we remember Jesus' ascension – his reuniting with your Spirit and his ultimate victory after choosing the path of suffering, sacrifice, and the cross because of his deep love. Jesus' ascension asks us to trust the path of humility and weakness rather than success and strength.

God, today we try to put ourselves in the sandals of Jesus' disciples as they watched Jesus go away before their eyes after the joy of seeing him risen from the dead.

Surely, they felt alone and unsure as they had to wait for the promise of the outpouring of your Spirit.

In these last weeks and months, we've felt disoriented, alone, and unsure. We can hardly make any plans without needing to simply wait and see, wait and see.

The threat we face is invisible, and even if we aren't personally so concerned about getting sick, we don't want to be the cause of sickness for others. Yet we wonder, how long do we live with this isolation and precaution? Like so many of the psalms, "how long?" is on many of our lips.

We continue to pray for members of our congregation who are deeply lonely and isolated as this pandemic continues. Give each of them an awareness of your love and your presence through the Holy Spirit. Inspire us all to find connection through acts of kindness and reaching out to one another.

We pray for farmers who are also waiting for the ground to dry, for the weather to change in order to work in the fields and see healthy crops.

In alternative ways, many families have celebrated the end of school, graduations, and transitions to a new stage. We pray for families as they make summer plans, since many of the summer activities we look forward to are cancelled. Help us to find healthy daily routines and to see opportunity for closer relationships in our families.

We pray for those who think of loved ones that are gone on the occasion of Memorial Day.

We believe each of these lives has eternal significance, because you are eternal.

We thank you for the richness of love that we shared with these people. Come alongside those of us who feel emotions of sadness and grief.

We look forward to the day when we will walk together with you face to face, and you will wipe all tears from our eyes.

Beyond our community, we pray for immigrant children who are now being deported while separated from their parents and families, adding to their trauma. We pray for all people fleeing their homelands out of desperation, with little to know security of their basic needs being met.

Raise up people to respond with compassion, and give our leaders wisdom and passion for justice.

We not only bring our requests to you. We also bring our thanksgiving and gratitude. Help us to practice an awareness of the things we can be grateful for in the moments when we are overwhelmed by feelings of loneliness, sadness, or anxiety.

We're thankful for the work of MCC in the last 100 years; we pray, God, for your ongoing blessing and guidance for MCC as they continue to offer "relief, development and peace in the name of Christ". We are thankful for the encouragement we receive from Michelle Armster today.

Thank you, God, for the beauty of your creation, for the warming days that welcome us into the out-of-doors.

Thank you for all your hidden gifts that we fail to appreciate.

In the name of Jesus who reveals your love, Amen

SERMON: *WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?* -- MICHELLE E. ARMSTER

This past Thursday, May 21, was Ascension Day. The day that marks 40 days after Jesus' resurrection and the day Jesus ascended into heaven.

Often, we do not pause on that day. Unless you were raised Amish or live near an Amish community, you would know because the Amish businesses are closed! But, how many of you, on Thursday, stopped and reflected about the significance of that day in your life as a Christian and to the life of the church.

I have to be honest; I have seldom done it myself. So, I decided to write this sermon on Ascension Day, and I asked myself:

What does/should Jesus' ascension mean to for my daily walk of faith?

What came to mind are a couple of thoughts that I would like to share with you.

First, ascension living can be lonely living. Think about. The disciples have traveled with Jesus for, at least 3 years – all over their known world. Jesus had accompanied them and had opened their eyes to a new way of understanding God and how to live- a fresh, relational, inclusive, justice-oriented community! He challenged the systems of oppression- religious, social and political. They saw him heal, feed and talk to a lot of people. They witnessed his trial and crucifixion (well the male disciples witnessed the trial, the women disciples stayed through to the crucifixion and resurrection- but that's a sermon for another time). Then, 3 days later, they heard rumors and bore witness to Jesus' resurrection. Then Jesus hung around for another 40 days and then poof- he is gone.

Imagine the air going out of their bodies, the confusion about what just happened, the questions about what to do next... what ... wait?

How long do we wait? How/when will we know the Holy Spirit has come? Now what?

An intentional retreat

Required solitude

Shelter in place

Physical/social isolation

And for how long?

I imagine the disciples felt a lot like we do now. We too find ourselves in a similar reality due to COVID 19. Although the disciples were looking forward to the Holy Spirit- we are trying to stay out of the reach of this mysterious, airborne, deadly virus. And we ask the same question- and for how long? Like the disciples, we gaze up toward heaven, waiting.

This space between the already and the not yet that we are living in can be understood as liminal space-the space in between.

What are you doing while you wait? What are we doing while we wait?

We have choices. We can continue to gaze up toward heaven, or we can listen for the voice of God, look for God in God's creation and begin to deepen our faith. For me, this shelter in place has been a bitter blessing. The bitterness comes in realizing that many people are vulnerable because of their jobs, health conditions and the color of their skin. I am grateful that I have a job that allows me to work from home- in safety and security. During this time, I have had opportunities to catch up with friends, listen to podcasts, dance around in my house, attend churches from Chicago to Oakland. And I am also aware that COVID creeps closer to threatening the lives loved ones.

A second thought about Ascension is that, while the disciples were and we are in this liminal space, this is an opportunity for renewal and reflection.

Now, can I make a confession? I am not doing well at renewal and reflection. It doesn't make sense. Yes, I am working from home, but I have no children or pets to care for. Yet, at the end of the day- I am exhausted. I go to bed with the promise that tomorrow, I will take time to read my devotional, pray and be intentional about my activities for the day. Then, I get up and remember that the best time to talk to mom is in the morning and I need to call her before the first zoom meeting at 8:30 am.

And before long, another day is gone. So, what does that mean- I need to care enough about myself to care for myself. This means I need to be disciplined enough to carve out time, in my day for renewal and reflection. And, I know, there are more lessons to come!

The third thought I have is that because Jesus ascended, and the disciples were instructed to wait on the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit who will come and create the church. That same Spirit that will move in and through the followers of Jesus and inspire them with boldness, faith and courage. That same Spirit who is with us today.

And we, too, are called to boldness, faith and courage. I believe we are called, in this time, to reimagine the church- recreate the church. We are called to be bold and discern how, if church is going to survive, we may have to change- and what will that look like.

We are called to faith and faithfulness because regardless of our present circumstances, God was and is and will always be. We don't have to like the situation; we just have to like ourselves in it.

And we are called to be courageous and be the hands and feet of Jesus and demand/work for justice.

Today, filed jobless claims reached 39 million people. The death toll, in the US, due to COVID is 90, 000. Scientists have said that we can expect an increase in sickness and death starting in the fall and, at the end of this pandemic- the numbers will be more than the 1918 Influenza pandemic. Economists have predicted that the economic conditions will be worse than the Great Depression.

These are frightening times, but the hope is in who and what we believe.

The hope is that as we love our neighbor as ourselves and wear masks, we are doing our part. As we open our minds and hearts to the still small voice of God, we will have the faith, boldness and courage to live out what it means to be a follower of Jesus-feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner and proclaiming the good news of freedom and justice in Christ.

May it be So.

Ase'

Amen