

Sermon: Year A, 7 Easter

Texts: Acts 1:6-14

I Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

Each of the readings we have heard this morning suggest, subtly but unmistakably, that there is a distinct trajectory to our lives. At any given time we are open to the dual questions of “from whence” and “to whither.” Trajectory is a good term for this arc, because it’s dynamic; it takes into account all the various forces that wield influence and thus determine both the specific points along our way and, then, the final point of conclusion – or, if I may use a less fashionable word, our ultimate destination. In light of these texts, it is appropriate to ponder, if these questions were asked of you today, what would be your response? What would you claim as the trajectory of your life?

We can mark many different ways by which we take measure.

- Youth matures into adulthood (we hope), and adulthood, more inexorably, and sometimes less gladly, culminates in what we call senior citizenship – which is both a biological and a societal defining.
- We spend most of our early years in education, acquiring skills that, when put to full use, provide us entry into gainful employment and lend us a professional identity. And, in turn, these often determine our reputation, our status, our material success, and, at long last, the nature of our retirement.
- Our time is reflected in places: the city of our birth, the houses of our childhood, the institutions of our education, the locations of our work, and the settings where we hope to enjoy our “golden years.”
- There are times when our whole world is defined by family, and then this is broadened to include peers and friends and then colleagues and a multitude of service persons, all of whom may eventually fall away until only the family once again remains.
- Tacitly, we expect that our wealth will increase.
- Less conscientiously, we may hope that our wisdom will increase in the same manner.
- Statistically, we assume that our arc will extend for at least eighty years, and more if you are privileged to be a woman.

These are all important factors in our life, but, in point of fact, they do not address the one, grand narrative that effects us all. For we must admit that we are all, unavoidably, creatures: our existence began with our birth, and our time will, inevitably, end with our death. Ironically, this most fundamental trajectory is the one most often forced to the margins of our consideration. It is met with indifference or resignation or outright denial – or more insidiously, it is simply pushed away from our consideration by the many, much smaller concerns of the day.

Yet these terms, and these events, push us to wonder what, if anything endures. Does everything spring from nothing and, just as mysteriously, return to nothing? Or, could we contend that, having arisen in birth, there is something intrinsic, something significant of us that does not fall away, but continues in a meaningful sense after death. This is not a sophomoric, theoretical question. It’s profoundly existential. More colloquially, this is a question of the permanence of home: where is it, who establishes it, and with whom do we share it? Does the trajectory of our

life lead us there or does it finally lead us back only into the undefined and unremitting darkness of pure demise?

This past Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension, the church's remembrance of Jesus' ascent to God, which passed, I would dare say for most of us, with nary a thought. Our schedules are too important to interrupt, even for reflection, and, all the more, this story seems to us, with our modern understanding and sensibilities, to be entirely too fabulous to warrant serious observance. It seems a vestige from a more primitive age, when gods supposedly occupied the skies and heaven existed somewhere above the clouds. The vision of Jesus disappearing upwards now seems awkward and comical, better passed over. We can see millions of light years out into other galaxies, but no streets of gold have appeared or angels gathered around thrones. The earlier physical placement of God and creation, framed by terms of up and down, above and below, have been eliminated, and with this, the account of the ascension has become something of an embarrassment, better quietly forgotten.

But this loss is disastrous for Christian faith because, without the ascension, we risk losing the whole trajectory of the Gospels. The Good News, after all, came first in the form of descent from heaven, the self-humbling of God in Jesus, the creator choosing to be united with the creation in birth. We have no trouble celebrating this yet, even if the incarnation is the least of what is enjoyed at Christmas. There is still something deeply powerful about the word "Emmanuel," God-with-us. It's a placement that is essential. God is not removed, abstract, ethereal, or distant. God is present, and by free decision, God determined to pursue and to suffer intimacy with us.

We love the story of this birth. The home God finds in Jesus is our homelessness: it begins with his being relegated to a stable and, thereafter, forced with his family to flee to Egypt. And soon enough, it continues with Jesus' living as an itinerant preacher, with no roof over his head, no house, no pillow, no nest. And this incarnation ends with the most conclusive ending we can figure: rejection, betrayal, abandonment, ridicule, condemnation, and execution. There is no way to be more intimately human with us. Nothing that we can imagine surpasses this passion, this freefall away from home.

But this end of ours is not the end of God. Jesus' resurrection marks God's refusal of such a final degradation. Easter is God's announcement that our ending is not our ending. Death itself has been defeated. Yet this, itself, is only a beginning. It's a re-creation that has its own development -- which the ascension then reveals. For the ascension is the true counterpoint and complement to Christmas, and it is of greater magnificence. As God descended to us, emptying himself, so we, now, by grace, have as our sure destiny ascension to God, in fullness, where intimacy doesn't wound us but edifies and delights, where the judgment decreed is not exile but embrace, where harm is met by forgiveness, where homelessness is vanquished in union. The ascension marks our destination, not literally, materially, above the clouds, but more comprehensively, as the glorious end point of all human trajectories. As Christ came to us, so, all the more, Christ will lift us all to God. What endures is our life within God's redemption -- which is God's radical claim that all of creation will be caught up within the trajectory he has designated and established, which is the infinite triumph of infinite love.

To lose the ascension is to cut short this divine arc, where, then, we are left too much within the world, too much limited by the fears we suffer and the wounds we inflict. Heaven increasingly becomes a dim and fragile fantasy, and hope becomes evermore distant. For all our efforts, evil continues. For all our work, pain continues. Our progress refines our violence; it doesn't eliminate it. Reconciliation can then seem impossible if not offensive. Communities are fractured by special interests. Intimacy is skewed by desire. And religious faith is reduced to either a kind of wistful, human ideology or the harsh threats of condemnation imposed against those who do not share the same convictions or live by the same rules. The trajectory of grace and life is lost; and death, once again, in one form or another, wins out.

The words of Jesus we have heard from John's Gospel are not exactly mellifluous. By any reading, they sound a bit tortured and difficult, as if reaching after something that they can't quite grasp. At the very moment of the disciple's desertion of him, however, Jesus looked up to heaven and prayed that they, his disciples, will be united with him in glory, in the union of the ascension, which, while yet to come, is the inexhaustible home that God is securing. Conclusion is destination, not decomposition. Words fall short here. They are not adequate to the intimacy with us that God is choosing. They can only really gesture or point – and they point upward.

Incarnation and ascension form the determinative trajectory of our lives, which, if we allow, can have great power and possibility, which may effect enormous transformation within our lives. But that story waits for another day, one more celebrated, seven days from today, the Feast of Pentecost, of the coming of the spirit, of the great overturning of God, of the death to self and of the birth of the church.

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