

Sermon for Sunday 24 May 2020

Seventh Sunday of Easter/Ascension Sunday/Heritage Sunday/Memorial Day Sunday

“Spreading our wings”

Scriptures: Acts 1:6-14/ Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

Yet again, our focus is on the Holy Spirit.

The first reading for today, from the Book of Acts, is built on the Old Testament’s description of God riding the storms and clouds. Luke (presumed author of Acts) describes Jesus ending his resurrection appearances with an ascent into the heavens, as the gathered disciples watch.

Here we see the young church telling itself that the human being who had walked among them, and whose spirit continued to empower and unite them after being crucified by the Roman government, was as close, and as real, as God,

Finding ways of expressing their convictions in their Hebrew liturgy, they employed such passages as Psalm 68: “he gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God!”

Teaching the young church what to expect as it faced blame by the Emperor Nero for the fire that burned Rome, and many other trials, the Apostle Peter wrote, “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.”

And in the final lesson for today, John’s Gospel has Jesus’ spirit praying, “And now I am no longer in the world, ...Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

In all these ways, we watch the experience of faith take form and spread, in very human, artistic, and serviceable expressions. over the first decades of Christian history.

So, once more, I turn to us, here, now, and apply this clear, familiar, intensely usable material to things going on among us.

Ben Dorsey and I went, “virtually,” as we say, to the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies’ weekly workshop last Thursday on ways people have been applying their religion to our moment. The leader of our discussion was someone Ben knows well and I had met last year, the Rev. Alvin C. Hathaway, Sr., pastor of Union Baptist Church on Pennsylvania Avenue in the Upton community of Baltimore. He titled his reflection, “Serving in a Valley.” “That’s where we are right now,” he said.

His church is over 150 years old, and is right near where Freddie Gray was arrested. It has been a leader for social justice, educational uplift, and Negro progress, with the homes of

people such as Thurgood Marshall and other notables nearby. Now, he said, the life span of residents there is 30 years less than where his children have grown up in Roland Park. He said if we don't do something about all the living conditions that this coronavirus has exposed so clearly, improvement won't happen. Not the politicians, who depend on those who support them; not the business community, which focuses on a profit ... but religious folks, who are designated by our fundamental principles to deal with these issues, must act.

Please pray for ways our church can work with this outstanding pastor and his congregation.

Our liturgy for today relates the Holy Spirit to specific, current events: Memorial Day is, for Christians, not a glorification of war but its opposite. Our prayer refuses to let us forget the horror and total waste and foolishness it brings to God's good creation. The great hymn of thanksgiving insists that the God of Jesus, not the gods of war, rules over all our memorializing. What idiocy it is to think those who suffered did so rejoicing or even of their own free choice! War tears creation apart rather than building it up! The prayer in the Wesleyan tradition reminds us that our founding movement was part and parcel of Jesus' commitment to the least and the lost. We are in our bones servants, lovers of the uplift at work in our own time and place.

These reflections on the Spirit of Christ, which we call the Holy Spirit of God, help prepare us for the great concluding celebration of Pentecost next Sunday.

Amen.