

ASCENSION, 2014

As the story goes: a pastor who had experienced a tough several weeks decided that he just couldn't face his congregation the coming weekend and so, feigning illness, he asked a sympathetic retired priest to take the Masses for him the upcoming Saturday and Sunday. Mind you, I'm not talking about any previous or current pastors here at St. John the Baptist. Well then, that Sunday morning, father hit the golf course. Watching all this unfold from heaven, St. Peter was outraged and went to complain about it to God. God patiently listened to Peter's report and said that he would take care of it. Well, the pastor teed up, took a swing and launched his best drive ever and in total disbelief, father got his first hole in one. The excited priest danced for joy. Actually, he hit 2 holes in one that day. Meanwhile back in heaven, St. Peter was incredulous: Lord, what are you doing? I thought that you were going to take care of this guy? God just smiled and said: I just did. Who do you think that he's going to be able to tell?

Sharing good news is second nature to us; in philosophy, there is a saying that "good is diffusive of itself," which simply means that it is in our nature to share good news. We can't wait to tell others about a new child or grandchild, a winning lottery ticket or a recent visit home to visit family and friends.

And so along these lines, the ascension of Jesus is an important event that needs to be proclaimed because with his ascension, the Christ-event has come full circle. Jesus who is God, who became flesh and lived within the parameters of our human existence, has "gone home" to God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Actually the ascension makes perfect sense. Jesus' post resurrection appearances were not intended to go on forever and so it was important that they have a definitive end. If the appearances had just gotten further and further apart and then petered out, it would have been like a long good-bye that never quite allowed the parting individuals to get on with their lives. Just as flight instructors need to allow their students to fly solo in order for them to become certified pilots, Jesus had to leave his shaken and insecure followers so that they could get on with their mission of proclaiming his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

However at Pentecost, Jesus would be even more present to them by sending the Holy Spirit to transform them from fearful men and women into fearless disciples willing to give up even their lives so that his message would be proclaimed. Through the Spirit, Jesus would be present with each and every one of them, but now he could be with all his disciples at the same time, even though they lived in different locations and in different centuries. Consequently for the disciples, the ascension of Jesus did mark "the end of the world as they had come to know it," much like going to school is the end of the world as an infant knows it, or starting a career is the end of the world as a student knows it, or getting married is the end of the world as a single adult knows it or dying and going to be with the Lord is the end of the world as living people know it.

The ascension is as decisive as it is dramatic for it marks not only the ending of Jesus' time on earth, but it also marks the beginning of the time when we would now need to learn to experience him with the inner eyes of faith.

Ultimately, the ascension is a feast of confidence and faith, a celebration of reassurance. Lots of things in life are confusing; lots of things about our religion and religious affiliations seem complex. But the center is clear—into this whirling, swirling universe in which we live, Jesus is the vortex of our lives.

Certainly we know that it was not for his own sake that Jesus undertook the journey into the depths of human need, frailty and sin—but for our sakes. And as we respond, let us not fool ourselves into thinking that our life choices are always about choosing between good and evil; actually for most of us, the real conflict in life is that we are often tempted to choose the lesser good over the greater good. And when we do, we do ourselves a disservice and are especially in need of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But now let's look at this first Ascension Day.

One moment Jesus is telling his followers that the power of the Holy Spirit will come upon them and that they are to be his witnesses to all the earth.

That alone stuns them, but in the next moment, Jesus is lifted up into the sky, blocked from their sight by a cloud and then seen no more, leaving his followers staring skyward and straining to see whatever else might happen.

And that is when two angels in white robes appear and ask: Why do you stand looking up toward the sky? It would seem that the disciples are being told to stop staring off into the distance and to start looking at life around them.

In fairness, I think that we can excuse the disciples for their confusion. After all within seven weeks, the disciples had their whole world change: they experienced the thrill of Palm Sunday; Jesus' unexpected arrest in the garden, his unexpected crucifixion and his unexpected resurrection; then there were all those post resurrection appearances and finally they saw Jesus disappear into the sky right before their very eyes—truly, they must have been suffering something akin to shellshock.

There is a phenomenon that shell shocked soldiers experience called the "1000-mile stare." These soldiers are so shattered by what they have seen, heard and smelled on the battlefield that to some extent, their minds have shut down in order to protect the last dangling threads of their sanity.

And so on the day when Jesus was taken up and out of their sight, his followers must have had a similar sort of experience as they stared into the sky—a stare that revealed that they were in shock and didn't know what to do next.

And that is when the angels break the spell and tell them to stop gazing upward and start looking outward. In effect, the angels were telling them that Jesus' followers were to replace the thousand mile stare that sees nothing with what we might call a million mile stare that looks at life beyond this present moment.

It has been said that the most significant symbol on a tombstone is neither the date of birth nor the date of death, but rather the dash between those two numbers and so what we do with the time in between those two dates is what gives significance to our life, regardless of how long or short that life might be.

Imagine if you will that every day your bank account would be given \$86,400 and that money was to be used for whatever you wish. The only catch is that the balance will not carry over to the next day. Whatever money you don't spend is written off as a loss, never to be retrieved.

But now, let's get back to reality. Actually, every day, we are given 86,400...seconds. God invests 86,400 seconds in us every 24 hours. But then every night, God writes off as a lost whatever of this time we have not used well or have wasted. Fortunately, each day the Lord opens a new account for us.

Each day we have the opportunity to invest our seconds into values connected to justice, compassion, forgiveness and love.

Again, it is what we do with the dash of our lives that counts just as what Jesus did between Bethlehem and his Ascension is what gave meaning to his life.

In so many ways, Jesus brought God, who for many had only been living in the sky, into the day to day lives that we ourselves live. I think that it was Pascal who warned us to beware of those folks whose God only exists in the sky.

To put it more succinctly: Jesus' message was that the God you and I worship is an approachable God; after all, this God of ours asks us to feed the hungry, to visit the sick, clothe the homeless and, in general, to minister to our fellow human beings. In effect God is telling us that we worship Him when we help those in need. And so our God is a "down to earth God", a God who gives us tasks that even children can do.

This God is not only the one who created us, but is the God who is still creating us and loving us.

And so when Jesus said "farewell" to the disciples at the ascension, the disciples were challenged to engage life with this new understanding of God and how to worship him.

For us too, each day is a saying good-bye to the past and an embarking on what the new day brings, but if we wish to truly be alive, then we must learn to say good-bye, let go and move on.

When I was newly ordained, Sr. Margot wrote out some thoughts for me that I would like to once again share with you:

We who want to be close to Jesus must learn to live in a constant paradox to ourselves and to the rest of the world. Ours is the pain of constantly pitching our tent and folding it up again,

Of befriending strangers and bidding them good-bye,

Of loving the world but never being truly satisfied with it,

Of pouring our heart and soul into a project others have begun and still others will finish.

If we would not be torn in two by the tension of this truth, we must learn to live provisionally—to measure the road well. We need to make the most of occasions when we gather by the roadside, to break bread together and compared directions.

The understanding of our mission on earth must be discovered in the going, as we never really arrive, not even in a life-time... and this reality is the good news that we are here on earth to share with one another....