

“Blessing the Distance”

May 12, 2024

Our lesson this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke chapter 24. I will offer a reflection on several verses in the chapter as we listen for God’s word in scripture and in Spirit.

(50-53) “Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

These are the final verses in the Gospel of Luke. Volume 1 you might say as Acts was also written by Luke, and could be considered Volume 2, where a longer version of the ascension story is written. In this condensed account, some theologians translate it to be possibly late in the day of Jesus’ resurrection. In Acts, the account is 40 days after Easter, which was last Thursday. The 7th Sunday after Easter is often referred to as Ascension Sunday in the Christian tradition. 40 is a significant number in the Bible. A number associated with completion. All that Jesus was here on earth to do, was finished. He was to return to the parent who sent him, and he does. But not without a blessing. Jesus blesses them and in his blessing, he is gone. The blessing continues in the hearts of the disciples as they go forth worshipping God.

There is no account in Luke’s Gospel of the disciples saying goodbye. That always strikes me for some reason when I read about Jesus’ ascension. There is no goodbye, but instead, a blessing. Jesus lifts his hands and blesses them, then is carried away. No fanfare, press conference, party or champagne. Jesus returns, walks with them a bit, shares a meal, offers them all “Peace be with you”, and opens their minds to deep understanding of the words of God in scripture. And their hearts, it is written, were burning, as the realization of who Jesus was, is and will always be formed deep within. Then Jesus is gone.

I am sure their hearts, while burning with revelation, were breaking as well. This was their teacher, their companion, their friend. They spent years with him on the road, in prayer, witnessing miracles and healing, figuring out parables and deciphering paradoxes, learning all he could teach them, and loving him. They want him to stay. Just a bit longer. They receive the breaking of bread and a sip of wine. Remembrance, Jesus asks of them, and blesses the distance soon to be between them.

Peace be with you he says, and then sends them out. Everything I have said and done, you are witnesses. Now go out and proclaim to the world this peace I have given to you. Now go, now, go. They were to go and spread the good news they had received –blessed broken and shared, just as the meal instructed.

First, however, they are told to stay where they are until they realize the empowerment they possess, that we all possess, which comes from the blessing and grace of God. In our baptism, we are claimed by this power of grace, in our witness and actions, we are instruments of this peace. Empowered, then sent into the world as peacemakers and justice providers. Just like the disciples we go, with a deep peace that will never ever leave.

I think a lot about going forth these days. About leaving and about movements, about beginnings and endings. About blessings and the circle of grace that is holding me in my little part of the sacred creation. The blessing I cannot shape or control or bend to fit in an easy or acceptable plan. This is a blessing that leaves behind things familiar and comfortable. Healing the fractures of the past, listening and holding in prayer the path toward a more whole world, as our poet shared in the reading this morning. Opening my eyes to the God who meets us right where we are. Learning that a blessing of time is not something we are bound by, but filled with poetry and mystery, of Kairos places as well as the ordinary ones. Blessings of peace do not move in a linear way, typically, but twist and turn back and forth, circling back in surprise, when we need them the most. Peace be with you—our blessing to share.

Soon it will be time for me to lead and serve a different church as my journey in preparation for ministry flows along. I will miss you and SPC, no doubt about it. There is a blessing that will form in the distance between us, and a blessing in the time between now and then. Because I have loved you and been loved by you, I am empowered for a road such as this. I know of grace that comes bearing comfort and help and rest, a blessing from you, received with gratitude.

I go forth next month, as a faith leader in the Poor People's Campaign representing West Virginia as tri-chair of the Coordinating Committee. More than 30 states are sending representatives to gather in Washington DC in non-violent solidarity to mobilize low wage workers to the polls in the November election. We are calling on legislators to endorse a moral policy agenda if they want our votes. Justice as a blessing of peace. The campaign and this event has the support of our National Church, and if you go to the website you can watch a livestream press conference that was broadcast on CSPAN last week. Notice me in the little zoom box announcing, "WV is in the house, and we are mobilizing!" during the states roll call. Please join us if you want to share in this blessing of peace to the ones Jesus refers to as "the least of these".

I think of my classmates going forth as the semester at Pittsburgh seminary is nearing its end—*alleluia and amen*. For many of them, this is not just the end of the semester, but the end of their theological education, study and training. Now they are called to go forth, they have learned all they need to know, they are prepared, ordination for many await—gown now, shoo. I must admit the look on their faces is joyful, but also perplexing. They still have questions, doubts I'm sure, but go forth with a blessing of Peace and a call to serve.

On this Mother's Day Sunday, as wars rage and protests abound, I am reminded that the original message from a woman often on the move, was a plea for peace. The OG of Mother's Day, if you will, Julia Ward Howe.

Forty years or so before it became an official holiday, Ms. Howe issued a Mother's Day Proclamation, calling women of all nations to band together and promote peace across all the earth. She imagined a council of women, meeting together in solemn unity, discussing and achieving her vision of world peace. She wasn't a fan of decisions being made without the voice of women included at the table.

She writes in part:

“Arise, then... women of this day!

*We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country
to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.*

*From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own.
It says: Disarm, Disarm!”*

A visionary, yes, Julia was also a prominent American abolitionist, a feminist, and poet. She knew the ravages of war to people and land first hand. During the civil war, she nursed and treated wounded soldiers, Confederate and Union. She saw beyond the killing and violence done on the battlefield, and worked and tended to women who became widows, and children orphaned, moving beyond the physical wounds of soldiers, and offering what she could in counsel to the loved ones who were often overlooked casualties of war. Julia saw how war destroys families, how it damages our mother earth, and she decided to move toward a peaceful world—for all creatures of the earth.

The blessing I hear in this distance of time passed could be an opportunity for reconnection or re-commitment to this ancient calling. There are wars raging, still. Both abroad and within our own communities as injustice and oppression are persistent, we can hear and be empowered by this blessing, and move toward a peace that knows no boundaries. Protect the most vulnerable and heal the devastation brought on by violence in all forms. Something to consider as we hear both the blessing and cry for peace in our lessons today.

Our worship space is a reminder of how SPC goes forth in a blessing of peace. The posters and signs are from a peace vigil held on Good Friday where our Pastor and many others from this congregation gathered to pray for peace. The Peacemaking project of Guns to Gardens has transformed unwanted firearms from our community into the bells and garden shovel on the communion table this morning. The animals that join us each week are reminders of the peace SPC extends to our planet and all its creatures with welcome and gratitude. SPC goes forth with a blessing of peace in many ways with prayer and care in many forms.

As my semester is ending and then quickly beginning again in June, I started thinking last week about how and where I could refresh and relax in the distance between my studies. Having no time to plan a grand getaway, I thought of a friend from Wesley Seminary where I began education required for my ordination. He and I, along with two others, meet regularly by zoom, a small covenant group which began in a spiritual formation class. Even though I am no longer a student in the class, we remain close colleagues and companions on our paths to ministry. The distance between us geographically or by theological institution doesn't matter—this group of ethnically diverse and very different individuals, called by God, is blessing of Peace and we know it. Peace in the form of Spirit and mystery connects and diminishes the distance and differences between us, empowering us in our ministry.

So I asked this young hip pastor friend, if I could maybe come for a visit., meet him and his family—did he need any help with worship service one Sunday, I asked, prepared for a “no” if he was not available when I was able to travel. He lives on the island of Jamaica, and my arm could be twisted if it could be worked out.

Absolutely my sister he exclaimed! Please come and stay by us—I will arrange everything! He then added, in a quiet whisper, This is an answer to prayer, I need healing Spirit and sense of hope to get me through a difficult situation here. Of course, you will come. God has allowed this. I feel it just as I am sure you do. Or you wouldn't have called. Not today or with the ability to visit so soon.

So, I will go forth.

He called a few days later to talk through a worship invitation, asking if I would hold the children's time during the service, along with some prayers. Sure, I said, and we spoke of the rhythms of worship and children in his church.

I was thinking as we were talking of this scripture lesson, the message of Peace, of blessings, going forth, and Spirit as I had been developing the direction of a sermon reflection on Luke's Gospel for today. The words from Julia Howe and the prayers and readings I had chosen for the service somehow set me in motion.

I reached out to the Childrens Education committee, wondering if it would be possible to take something from the children here at SPC to offer as a gift to the children in Jamaica. In the spirit of radical hospitality, engaged compassion, maybe? Or as an example of who is your neighbor, perhaps? I could ask the Jamaican children to make something for me to bring back for them. A blessing in the leaving, a blessing in the distance between, making the blessing grow larger in the space that it creates. Peace, going forth, extended from one child to another. Our children are preparing something, stay tuned.

As I complete my time in ministry with you, SPC, I leave you with this blessing of peace. Go forth with it, as I know you will, and I will do the same. With love and gratitude for all you do and are, beloved children of God, please remember every breath between us is Spirit blessing, all that surrounds and accompanies us on our journeys is grace.

And the story continues, in the kin-dom of God.