

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

May 17, 2015; the 7th Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19.

In the World but not Belonging to the World

We are coming to the conclusion of the Easter Season, this being the 7th Sunday of Easter...the Sunday after Ascension Day.

My first encounter with Ascension Day happened in England in 1992. I had been going to church for the first time in my life since Easter of that year, so for 40 days, six Sundays; I didn't know much about Christianity really...I knew something of God that had kept me going to church after that first mystical experience...but I was brand new at all of this in 1992, at the age of twenty-four.

I was in England, in Leicester, doing an MA program in English Local History, and my time there was coming to an end, so I was intent and focused on doing enough research to finish my Master's thesis.

So on that Thursday, 40 days after Easter Sunday, I was heading to the library, and I bumped into the priest from the church I had been attending.

"Are you coming to church tonight?" he asked me.

I'm sure I had a blank look on my face; it was a Thursday.

"It's Ascension Day!" he said with great enthusiasm.

"Oh, ok, right, sure, I'll be there."

I had no idea what he was talking about...but I did want to go...and it was in that moment that I had an experience of what I think we hear

Jesus speak of in today's Gospel reading, of being in the world, but not belonging to the world.

I had the thought, at that time, that this Christianity stuff was really changing my life.

I share my story with you, in part, to invite you to reflect on your life, and when you have felt, or known, or suspected, that your life, while in this world is not of this world, does not belong to the world...by world I mean all the expectations and structures that encourage us focus on what is material as a measure of success and measure of who we are.

There is a lot in life that can tell us we are not this or not that...not worthy, not successful; and even when we are successful by the world's standards, most have of us have been so conditioned by our culture to see what we don't have or are not, instead of what we do have and who we are.

There is a lot in life that can tell us to do things that we know are wrong in the sense of not being life-giving for us or others.

When we have God-moments, when we know that who we are is grounded in our belonging to God, well, that helps us to keep life in perspective...God's perspective...that each of you, every person, is a gift of God's grace to the world...in the world but not belonging to it.

When we have God-moments here in church, or on a sidewalk when we were thinking of something else...God helps us to choose the life-giving options for ourselves and others and for the earth.

The story of my first Ascension Day, I shared it also to make the point that God uses us to help people know to whom it is that they belong.

God is so much greater than the Church, but God uses the Church, uses us...for we are the Church, the Body of Christ...to touch people and

make a difference in people's lives and the life of the world.

So on my first Ascension Day, I did not know what that day was about, and since then I've realized that many do not know much about the day.

As a historian, I do wonder about how the Day came to be, and what really happened, but as a student of the faith, I'm more interested in what it means...what is the theology behind it, why did the idea of Christ's Ascension grab hold and have the staying power that it has had?

What does the Ascension tell us about God, and the salvation that we have through Christ?

Through Baptism, we have been united with Christ; therefore, what can Christ's ascension tell us about who we are?

So Ascension was, in some ways, necessary to the story.

The Risen Christ had been appearing in Risen form in specific moments and places..."come Thomas put your hand here."

"Come, and eat some fish" Jesus says on the shore after grilling fish on the fire.

The Ascension meant that one would no longer see the Risen Christ in bodily form, whatever that was like, in the world, but would be connected to Christ, in every moment and in every place.

The Ascension made the Risen Christ, the Cosmic Christ -- the Risen Christ ascended, not to leave, but to enter more fully into the life of the world.

This is the same Christly identity to which we are called, that through our faith and our awareness of who we are for God, we can live more fully into the world and the issues of the world, and be light in the world, without belonging to the world.

The 7th Sunday of Easter is an interesting in-between time, as it comes to us between Ascension and the Day of Pentecost.

In-between times can be stressful, it can hard to be grounded, there can be concern about the dependability of what we think might come next.

In the reading from Acts for Ascension Day, when Jesus/the Risen Christ is taken up into heaven, and his friends are watching this, two angels appear and say 'why are you staring up toward heaven', and they say this is not the end of the story.

We must continue to live in the in-between times, while we do anticipate seeing greater things that we have thus far.

For those who were waiting for the coming of Holy Spirit, such was the case.

We are remembering that time, and entering into it ourselves this week, in prayer.

We may wonder what it was like waiting then.

While we also know something of waiting now.

For in many ways, we are always standing on a threshold.

Esther de Waal writes of this in her little book, *To Pause at the Threshold: Reflections on Living on the Border*.

She writes of twilight as, "the time between times..and goes on to write: "Recently when a nun in her mid-nineties sent me a note on my birthday, she quoted a line of Hegel: 'The owl of wisdom flies in twilight' and then said, "I like to think that as we get older we live in two twilights; the evening twilight of letting-go and the dawn of looking forward.

In both, Christ is our Light."¹

¹ Esther de Waal, *To Pause at the Threshold: Reflections on Living on the Border*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2001, pp. 76-77.

Wonderful words about getting older; also about the many transitions we experience in life.

As well, I imagine that period between the Ascension and Pentecost, and perhaps our prayer experience of it now, is the evening twilight of letting-go and the dawn of looking forward.

What keeps us grounded in God in our inbetween times, in our times of transition, in those times when Christ seems to be ascending we do not yet know what will come next?

How do we live that prayer Jesus said for his friends then and now, knowing that change was coming, that he would not be with them, or us, as he had been?

Those words from John's Gospel are all about what God had already done, and would do, so that those who would live in the world could live as Christ's own, as disciples and friends of God, so as to continue the work of God in the world.

Practically maintaining this awareness--in the world but not belonging to it--can be difficult.

There are some questions that can help us, which are found in the book, *Moment By Moment: A Retreat in Everyday Life*.

Just hearing that title, helps me to think about taking life moment by moment.

The section in *Moment by Moment* entitled, "My Identity in Christ," seems like good prayer focus in response to our reading from John's Gospel and our consideration of this time in-between Ascension and Pentecost, and all other in-between times we experience.

What does my baptismal identity mean to me?

What difference does it make in my choices? (We will be discussing this for Episcopal 101 class this Wednesday. All are invited.)

These questions gets to the heart of what we might mean by 'our identity in Christ'.

How do I experience temptations to ignore or compromise my personal and Christian identity?

What has been the fruit of my struggles to live in a way that is true to my identity?

What helps me integrate my various roles into my basic identity?²

Let us pray,

Thank you God for claiming us as your own. We live in the world everyday as your children, as your friends. Help us in those in-between times, and in the times of challenge. Help us to remember that we do belong to you; that we have been created in your image; and that you are always with us. In the name of the Risen and Ascended Christ, we pray.
Amen.

² Carol Ann Smith and Eugene F. Merz. *Moment by Moment: A Retreat in Everyday Life*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2000, pp. 52-53.