New York City Amid a Time of Pandemic 2020
Parish of Holy Cross – St. John the Baptist
Midtown Manhattan

Reflections on the Liturgy of the Word in the Absence of the Sunday Assembly

Palm Sunday
Triduum

Eastertide:
Easter Sunday
Second Sunday of Easter
Third Sunday of Easter
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Sixth Sunday of Easter
Feast of the Ascension
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Feast of Pentecost
Feast of the Most Holy Trinity
Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ
At the inception of the year 2020, evidence mounted rapidly of a novel and lethal virus spreading throughout the globe. Possibly an inter-species contagion involving bats and humans, its origins likely traced to China. However, as of this writing, there remains much to learn of its murky origins and baffling transmission. Likewise, our grasp of the vital knowledge required for the development of satisfactory treatment and prevention yet evolves.

Whatever its origins, COVID-19 (its scientific, medical designation) quickly became an international plague befalling country after country due to our 21st century capacity for swift and relatively affordable air travel. As rapid-fire reports emerged, disputations and accusations outraced the accumulated data. International quarrels raged. The World Health Organization (United Nations entity) – publicly impugned. Medical expertise first exhausted, then sidelined.

Strategies for containment were fiercely debated. Some countries adopted rigorous shelter in place policies to lower the death rate and prevent medical facilities from being swamped – at what financial cost? Others pondered the option of herd immunity, allowing the virus to spread in the hope that a 70% rate of infection would produce a sufficient number of citizens fortified with shielding antibodies in their bloodstream to stem the tide – at what human cost?

Here in the United States of America, a frenzied scramble overtook the nation as local states attempted to shore up their hospital facilities, secure ventilators, acquire protective gear for medical workers and regulate movement on public streets. By far, New York State emerged as the epicenter of the pandemic. On March 20, 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo issued a directive outlining austere shelter-in-place restrictions, including suspension of public worship.

All of this triggered a traumatic decline of economic activity, leading to unemployment rates rivalling the Great Depression of the 20th century. Likewise, a goodly number of entrepreneurs faced immediate financial disaster and dim forecasts for future survival as well. Ensuing political debates at a national level were every bit as dismal as they were fractious. Indeed, the ironically named United States of America seemed to be coming apart. Even the simple task of donning a face mask for the protection of others morphed into cause for contest, even fisticuffs.

Then, at the tail end of Eastertide, a handcuffed black man in police custody – George Floyd – was murdered in Minneapolis, MN. A police officer knelt on the neck of Mr. Floyd for 8 minutes, 46 seconds – the final 2 minutes, 53 seconds of which the detainee appeared limp and without a pulse. All of this recorded on a “smart” phone by a young 17-year-old woman of color. A poignant twist. 21st century technology combating centuries-old brutality.

Cities across the nation imploded with revulsion and righteous indignation.

The vast preponderance of protesters were peaceful both in intent and demeanor, though some malefactors did engage in looting and rioting. As of this writing, questions of public safety, policing practice, systemic racism and national healing are rife. A time of peril? Or promise?


Future readers likely will find the following reflections especially timebound. This by design. Written for parishioners of Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist, here in the womb of midtown Manhattan amid the woes of 2020, as they encounter pandemic, prejudice, financial ruin. A sole focus: What does the gospel of Jesus Christ teach us in responding to these ills with faith, hope and love?
“Where did everyone go…. It’s like a ghost town!”

As is true for our fellow human beings around the globe, April 5th, 2020 – Passion Sunday – finds Catholics experiencing disorientation and loss, anxiety and grief. Faced with a virulent pandemic that places us all at grave risk and, in fact, makes each of us a potential threat to others, our every pattern of daily life is interrupted, distorted and altered – perhaps for the length of our lives.

For disciples of Jesus Christ who prize participation in the Sunday Assembly - where the paschal mystery revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is remembered, celebrated and ratified – this time of sheltering and physical distancing is especially dismaying. A bewildering time bereft of the gift of gathering, by the grace of our G-D, in liturgical engagement with the mystery of redemption – the gracious offer of mercy and love extended us in the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth.

On this Passion Sunday, we are shorn of the shared raising of palms we have come to treasure as a means of greeting and relishing the extravagant grace poured out in Christ Jesus. Likewise, we find ourselves devoid of the age-old communal processions that remind us of the profound journey to which we have been invited. Yet, we are not deprived of the passion and presence of the One who alone is our hope and salvation. While we may experience significant isolation, we are not alone.
The acute lack of social encounter and accompaniment men and women around the world currently endure is uniquely magnified for those of us who gather around the gospel in the parish of Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist in midtown Manhattan:

Aren’t we located at the Crossroads of the World with its heart in Times Square?

Don’t we receive the teeming commuters and visitors who pour through the cramped corridors of Penn Station every day?

Where did everyone go … it’s like a ghost town!

Currently, our locale bears more than a hint of the eerie: ominous emergency vehicle sirens amplify in the canyons of empty midtown avenues and streets; the cries of the haunted echo more achingly, more longingly amid the sullen quiet that has settled upon us; stray pedestrians shuffle by at a wary distance, face shrouded by cloth, feet engaged in a shamble by turns edgy and aimless.

Most stark in its absence? The crowds that constitute our usual reality here in bustling New York City. Crowds: sometimes arousing in us an energy and joy, other times annoyance and resentment, at all times a sense of both promise and peril.

The passion account in the gospel of Matthew calls our attention to the crowds that gathered in Jerusalem around Jesus of Nazareth. Upon his entry into the city, the crowd raised palms in homage to him, singing “hosanna in the highest,” welcoming a treasured guest as their hero and liberator. Lightning fast though, he would run afoul of the temple authorities, be denied and betrayed by his closest companions, arrested in the stealth of night, hurriedly tried in court, expeditiously sentenced to the cruel death of crucifixion. The crowds then fell prey to a vastly different voice, the menacing cry of recrimination and rejection: “crucify him! crucify him!” Far from their hero, Jesus had speedily become their handy scapegoat. Jesus’ death cry? “Why have you abandoned me? Where did everyone go? The capriciousness of crowds.

This Passion Sunday, in this dreadful time of quarantine and triage medicine, we are afforded the opportunity to reflect upon the things that bind us as a people, the dynamics that weave our social fabric. Amid that reflection, the gospel of Jesus Christ, poses the piercing challenge as to whether we find our connection to one another amidst the crowd in all its fickle loyalties, or whether we surrender ourselves to the communion offered us by the grace of G-D, the communion forged in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the communion manifested in the bread and wine of Eucharist, the body and blood of the One who beckons us to a life beyond destruction.

In this ironic moment, we know ourselves to be irreversibly connected, yet woefully alone. Biologically wired and vulnerable not only to one another, but to all species on the planet, all creatures of our G-D and King. And yet we find ourselves apart and isolated by physical threat, emotional fear.

And yet…

In this time, as in 1st century Palestine, Jesus is present, opening in our midst a space for communion in his name – an entwinement of our lives that neither threatens nor harms. However, be assured this communion is not without cost. We must surrender to the ONE who called us into being – by adopting a life of thanksgiving for the mystery of life in G-D’s grace, as well as a life of service to all those with whom we share this life.
This year, we have neither *palms* nor *processions* – no means of gathering in thanksgiving and service. Nevertheless, we are afforded the chance to recover and deepen our gratitude for the simple, yet profound gift of being gathered – not merely as a *crowd* in search here of fleeting heroes and there for enduring scapegoats. Rather, truly gathered, in recognition of life’s beauty and frailty. Gathered, in grateful service for the revelation of this life’s mystery and majesty through the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. We are not alone.

“*Where did everyone go? … it’s like a ghost town!*”

In an earlier time, we had an old-fashioned English word to reference the mystery of G-D at work in the world: *Holy Ghost.*

Perhaps in this strange, perplexing moment, we can pray to be joined with all those prepared to take this wheezing ghost town and fashion it into a gathering in the power of the *Holy Ghost.* A *communion* not of our own making, but rather the one that Jesus revealed in his life, death and resurrection. The *communion* made possible by the Spirit he breathed out upon his disciples.

Yes, we are currently apart. We are not alone.

Communion amid chaos.
Empty tables.

Empty tables, stacked chairs, shuttered windows, shattered lives.

Candor demands the admission that New York City is a boastful town: Broadway, Times Square, Central Park, Grand Central Station, the Statue of Liberty, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Empire State Building, the Guggenheim Museum… you get the point. Indeed, among its most prideful claims is the quality and quantity of its culinary options available to locals and international visitors alike. Current estimates suggest 27,000 or so eateries to be found in the city, with barely less than 11,000 in the borough of Manhattan alone. Foodies one and all – we expect it to be virtually impossible not to find just about any cuisine from around the globe.
Except not now. Not here. Not amidst this biological menace whose scope and duration elude calculation or corralling. Empty tables. Have we savored our last meal here?

As we commence this year’s Triduum – the heart of our liturgical worship commemorating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, our Passover from death to life indestructible – the Table of the Lord remains a table of plenty. Yet we can only gaze from afar through church doors and windows now shuttered to prevent unspeakable death tolls beyond comprehension. And so in a way, we join our Jewish forebears’ experience of exile: We have in our day no prince, prophet, or leader, burnt offering, sacrifice, oblation, or incense, no place to offer first fruits, to find favor with you.

The synoptic accounts of the Last Supper imply that there were other meals preceding it – a good many in fact. All our canonical gospels attest to this, as well as the scandal Jesus triggered among those who exercised leadership among Judaic believers: This man eats with sinners and tax collectors! Meals with Jesus always bore the prospect of controversy, accusation, tumult and disorientation. The Last Supper was no different.

Amid our present dislocations, it is helpful to remember the ruptures and apprehensions present at the Table of the Lord on this night. The night he associated the entirety of his life and mission with the Eucharistic banquet intended to accompany his disciples through thick and thin. Indeed, on the night he was betrayed.

On this night, those Jesus had drawn most intimately into his life and mission exhibited a general incomprehension of the depth of his desire. Peter, especially, proved himself unable to recognize or receive the profundity of the foot-washing towel with which Jesus approached him. Later, of course, as calamity morphed into deathly foreboding, Peter would rescue himself by feigning ignorance of the man.

On a night crumbling into ruins, the figure of Judas Iscariot remains singular. His motivations, anxieties, hesitancies and calculations remain forever concealed from our thoughts and assessments. Nevertheless, his fateful decision occasioned Jesus’ arrest in a gloomy garden as his trusted companions first slept, then fled. The establishment of the Eucharist and its ensuing celebration is decidedly not without its tragedies and threats.

This is true for us, right now, right here. The existing imposition of our provisional fast from the Table of the Lord, on this most holy night, nullifies neither its promise of deliverance nor its provision of strength for the journey through thick and thin. Our current moment represents not our abandonment, but our being swept up into the salvific mystery of a crucified and risen Lord.
These halting observations have been expressed far more succinctly, more aptly in the final decade of the 20th century by the accomplished sacramental theologian David Power:

The memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection is today celebrated amid the ruins. There are first the ruins of a Catholic piety that for four centuries seemed to hold Eucharistic devotion at the center of church life. When faulted for its inadequate basis in scriptural origins and early church tradition, it seemed to fall asunder. It remains in ruins, whatever nostalgic efforts are at times made to recapture it …

It collapsed along with the nineteenth century Catholicism that had attempted to protect people against modernity and the rise of a post-Christian society …

The ruins of the ecclesiastical edifice are found amid the ruins of an idyllic age of civilization marked by the conviction of progress in things human. Ironically, when the Christian churches became alert to modernity this latter was itself at the point of collapse. The coherence of states and societies within themselves began to dissolve as people contended over the values that must prevail for the human good. The coherence of a world order collapses as political, cultural and economic empires crumble and interaction between populaces is endangered …

The eucharist makes the church. It makes it as G-D’s covenant people. It makes it in the memory of Christ’s suffering, into which the memory of all human suffering is to be gathered. It makes it as a witness, in the midst of the collapse of the human, to G-D’s fidelity and love. Paradoxically, the sacrament can take on new shape as a coherent church action to the extent that Eucharistic memorial is alert to the human, to the ruins in the midst of which it is celebrated, to the victims of human history and the sufferings that show forth when the edifice of the human collapses.¹

Our time of danger and chaos is enfolded into the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. As ambiguous the end of our exile, as indeterminate the path forward, ours is a truly eucharistic moment – passage from death and its long shadow to life in the embrace of the G-D revealed in Jesus Christ.

Empty tables, stacked chairs, shuttered windows, shattered lives … rescued, renewed, raised up.

Eucharist amid the ruins.

Behold! The Lamb of G-D.

In the fourth gospel, John the Baptizer greets Jesus with this title – a moniker of immense foreboding, acute insight. As the prophet called to testify to the light coming into the world, John identified Jesus’ role as the One coming into the world as the Passover lamb. A sacrificial victim of purpose and resolve, intent upon illuminating the world and enlightening human imagination: the sacrificial victim to put an end to all sacrifice – to expunge the ancient human instinct toward sacrificial victims.

Our observance of Good Friday 2020, here in New York City, bears a distinctive depth of value and purpose. As a population under siege and under wraps, the stench of death wafts dense in the air, the taste of mortality thick in our mouths. We have little choice but to wrestle with the mystery of death, perhaps our least favorite among the facts of life. For us as disciples of Jesus, this day calls for remembrance of the life, mission, passion and death of Jesus by which we believe death itself has been destroyed. How does his inimitable death open the way to life indestructible in the embrace of our G-D? Time to prayerfully ponder. Here’s one suggestion.

In the long arc of history, an array of human civilizations has come and gone, myriad human cultures have arisen and evolved. For all their variety, they share a worrisome underlying set of dynamics and structures that have lain hidden since the foundation of the world.\(^2\) In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, these age-old dynamics are brought

---

\(^2\) Gospel of Matthew 13:35
out into the light that was coming into the world. The paschal mystery of Jesus Christ sheds light on these hidden forces that we might see and understand, hear and comprehend, repent of their lure so as to live out of a new way of being together. A life in deep relationship shorn of the rivalries, conflicts and violence that leave us prey to the powers of death. Jesus named this new way of being together “the kingdom of G-D,” a living communion in the power of the G-D of the living, not of the dead.

To repent of these death-dealing dynamics, we need confront the shape of human desire – a decidedly triangular shape. Perhaps a brief example here is in order. Imagine a noticeably young child given a toy with which to play. The child, at once, is delighted, intrigued and in abandon to the thrall of discovery. Now, in your mind’s eye, imagine after a short interval of time, a second young child is brought into that same room and given a second, different toy with which to play. What is the reaction of the first child? With exceedingly few exceptions, the first will discard her toy and reach toward the second, grasping after the new toy.

I’d like to suggest that a good many of us likely believe that at some point we have outgrown this pattern – but the far more likely truth is that we have become devilishly craftier in camouflaging it. We learn to desire through observance of another’s desire, our desire is shaped and developed through this triangular dynamic. Such is the basis of the rivalries, envies and conflicts that mar human cultures the world over.

Amid groupings of human beings, as competing desires rise to a breaking point, a fevered rush emerges in a search for someone to blame for the discord. Once identified, this one becomes the target of group furor. This one is selected for expulsion, to be cast out like a scapegoat, more often than not murdered to salvage some modicum of edgy peace – an uneasy truce if you will. This relative lack of conflict endures until the next frenzy of conflicting desire leads to a new search, a fresh victim. And on it goes.³

On Good Friday, believers in the gospel celebrate the victory of Jesus, Lamb of G-D. The innocent victim freely, fully stepping into the space of the scapegoat. Repelled, expelled, executed, tossed onto the soaring pile of victims accumulated throughout human history. But no ordinary victim this, rather a singular victor revealing the path out of this morass. The crucified and risen One teaches us to shape our desire after his manner of desire – a desire he learned from the Father in a love without beginning or end. A love without domination or subordination, without conflict or rivalry.

On Good Friday, we confront the truth that Jesus dies on the cross not because the G-D he addressed as Abba is blood-thirsty, but rather that it is we who are blood-thirsty. And blood-soaked. We are humbled before the selfless sacrifice of One intent upon getting us too see just how entrapped we are inside this insidious mechanism spewing violence, devouring victims. We are offered the gift of freedom from such enslavement, forgiveness for our prototypical sin, the sin of the world.

³ For a more comprehensive, subtle and sustained analysis of this line of thought, consult the published works of Rene Girard, who has traced these anthropological mechanisms under the category of mimetic desire. For a theological development of Girard’s work consult the published works of James Alison. See especially, The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes.
Such revelation is a profound gift to those of us living on the cusp of the third decade of the 21st century. Take a moment to reflect upon the “foundations” to which we are constantly invited to build a community of life. How so very much of our lives is built upon lazy, indeed deadly, designations of “us” and “them.” “You know how they are, don’t you? You know what they’re like, right?” And so, we purchase a cheap, paper-thin form of society built over against “them.” A counterfeit community complete with sham claims to sovereignty.

Such reflection is especially crucial during this moment in which we find ourselves hidden and huddled in the face of physiological hazard. Each and every one of us is presently a feasible threat to those around us, as well as potentially threatened by those around us. When threats run high, the field of potential scapegoats expands rapidly. Indeed, in a rush to judgment regarding the source of this pandemic, violence has already been visited upon chosen victims simply because of their ethnicity or origins. In the name of Jesus, by his grace, in his Spirit, let us resist and condemn such invitations – and challenge those who offer them.

In the eerie silence of our places of abode. Amid the ghostly silence of our hearts. This day, we resolve solidarity with the sacrificial victim who has ended sacrifice once and for all – the Victor over death and death-dealing, the Way to communion in G-D’s love.

Ecce Homo.

Behold! the man.

Behold! The Lamb of G-D.

Behold! The Lamb of G-D who takes away the sin of the world.

**********************************************************************

While public worship remains suspended here in New York State, you may find comfort in your personal prayer through this set of visual Stations of the Cross exploring the redemptive power of the paschal mystery amid our human history of suffering and violence:
TRIDUUM 2020
Easter Vigil

Parish of Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist
Midtown Manhattan

Light amid the Gloom of Night

Amid the brooding darkness rise the triumphant, majestic tones of *Exultet*:

The sanctifying power of this night
dispels wickedness, washes faults away,
restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to mourners,
drives out hatred, fosters concord, and brings down the mighty.

On this, your night of grace, O holy Father,
accept this candle, a solemn offering,
the work of bees and of your servants’ hands,
an evening sacrifice of praise,
this gift from your most holy Church.

But now we know the praises of this pillar,
which glowing fire ignites for God's honor,
a fire into many flames divided,
yet never dimmed by sharing of its light,
for it is fed by melting wax,
drawn out by mother bees
to build a torch so precious.
O truly blessed night,  
when things of heaven are wed to those of earth,  
and divine to the human.  

Therefore, O Lord,  
we pray you that this candle,  
hallowed to the honor of your name,  
may persevere undimmed,  
to overcome the darkness of this night.  

Receive it as a pleasing fragrance,  
and let it mingle with the lights of heaven.  

May this flame be found still burning  
by the Morning Star:  
the one Morning Star who never sets,  
Christ your Son,  
who, coming back from death’s domain,  
has shed his peaceful light on humanity,  
and lives and reigns for ever and ever.  

R. Amen.

Quickly, light the candle. Waste no time. Go and light the candle! Please. Read no further without a flame shimmering in the darkness of your home. Go. Comb through your dwelling and dig out the sturdiest candle stashed in your cabinets…OK, now light it. Good, now we can continue, our many flickering flames joining us to the one flame. The gloom of night – a metaphor employed by a wide swath of human cultures to reference threatening, disorienting, oppressive experiences that befall human lives – is especially dense these days for people around the globe. Frightened, bewildered, mournful, desperate: this a mere, severely truncated list of emotions provoked by this careening contagion blind to borders, cultures, age or ethnicity. In a macabre way, this virus has forced upon us a commonality that eludes us in our usual patterns of division and rivalry based upon differences both real and imagined. However, it is cohesion none would welcome willingly. Nor ought we. Nor need we. 

Christ our Light! Thanks be to G-D! Go ahead bellow it out loud. Sing it with verve. We may be apart but let your flaming candle join you to the glowing candles of fellow disciples here in our parish and believers throughout the world. All of us linked by the one flame blazing bright this night, the light of Christ, our communion and hope. Jesus of Nazareth spent the entirety of his life, mission and message proclaiming the kingdom of G-D. A realm gathered in G-D’s power, a space where G-D reigns and humanity, along with all of creation, flourishes and is made whole. The power and authority exercised in this realm unlike any other we have known from our human history or personal experience. Not the power of the bullet or bayonet. Not the power of the banker or broker. Not the power of the bully or tyrant. Not the power concealed in manipulative speech and coercive exploitation. Not the power wielded by fear-mongers, demagogues. Neither a
power that distorts, diminishes, demeans or destroys. Nothing like the usual suspects who pose as potent in our day, or in any and every other age. No. The G-D revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ reigns through the power of love. Divine love. Without beginning or end, a radical love that has power to persuade. The lure of G-D’s reign extends an invitation, an offer, a gift that awaits our free acceptance – or declination. Jesus wagered the entirety of his life and mission on the power of that love to succeed in changing hearts and communities. And on Good Friday, it appeared he was terribly mistaken, tragically wrong. And it was night. Amid the gloom of this night, we find ourselves shadowed by death – yes. But by more than simply death itself. We are hunted by death-dealing rage. Haunted by forces of violence and strife that leave us estranged from one another, threatened to our core, thrashed in spirit. The specter of Jesus’ execution seemed to confirm our gnawing fears. The long-reigning powers of the world did indeed have the upper hand. They had the last word. Jesus just another hapless casualty. His kingdom a phantom and failure. The good news, of course, is that G-D has the last word. And G-D’s last word is astonishingly like G-D’s first word. Live. Let there be Life. Let there be Light. In raising Jesus from the dead, the One he called Abba endorsed the fullness of his life and message. Vanquished the forces of wanton power. Defeated death itself. Thundered delight in the unflinching, perfect fidelity of Jesus to the mission of freeing humanity from its death spiral. Gifted writers of the early church cherished the Resurrection as the laughter of G-D. What pleases Jesus’ Abba is the faultless fidelity of Jesus to the saving will of Abba to recue humanity – not the shedding of the beloved’s blood, the annihilation of his flesh. Such carnage is the toil of a humanity yet in the grip of fear of death, searching for a scapegoat on which to hang the blame. A victim whose expulsion might, for a while, ease the discord and give way to a mirage of shared purpose. Until the next frenzy. Jesus, the innocent victim newly raised to life indestructible, once again comes among his own. Arriving in their midst, he does an astonishing thing. He greets them not with a word of reproach. Not a word of accusation or condemnation. This One who had been denied, betrayed, abandoned? Who had borne the insults, vicious beatings, public abuse and, at last, cruel execution? He greets them in love and forgiveness. The Risen Jesus’ first word: shalom, peace. This victim become victor breathes out the Spirit he shares with his Abba. It is in the strength of this Spirit that we are freed from death, released from our chains, empowered to fashion a communion of genuine peace. In the peace of the Risen One, we find our hope and our determination to live more fully in his name. We know ourselves this night to be under threat, surrounded by danger. At the same time, we know ourselves invited to abandon ourselves to the life indestructible of the Risen Jesus. In his Spirit, we renew our resolve to welcome the kingdom of G-D breaking into our midst and leading us to life in the embrace of our G-D. The strains of the Exultet rise once more. One last suggestion for deep reflection, not only on this night, but in the days ahead:

\[4\text{Gospel of John 13:30}\]
a fire into many flames divided,
yet never dimmed by sharing of its light,
for it is fed by melting wax,
drawn out by mother bees
to build a torch so precious.

The light of Christ we celebrate this night is not dimmed in being divided among us, rather it intensifies. The light of the Risen One allows us to see more acutely, even with the gloom of night enveloping us. Please, let us not fail to glimpse that melting wax and those *mother bees* included in this ancient ode. No mere quaint images, they herald the wider creation to which we are inextricably bound and in which we are unalterably enmeshed.

This pandemic now raging, emerged, at least in part, from our failures to tend the integrity of creation. This virus is an inter-species phenomenon – a reminder of our inter-relationship with all creation. The light of the Risen One shines brightly on our splintered relationship with the varied and many other creatures of G-D’s own making. Vanishing glaziers, roaring floods, ravaged ozone layers, dizzying rotations of drought and storm – these too are symptoms of a planet yet to be firmly ensconced in the healing balm of the Risen One, the invincible victory of the Cosmic Christ. On this truly blessed night we are heirs of the Spirit breathed out by the Risen One. Might we be found among those poised to cooperate with the passionate desire of the G-D who raised Jesus from the dead to bring all of creation to completion and perfection?

*Light amid the Gloom of Night.*
TRIDUUM 2020
Easter Sunday
The Resurrection of the Lord
Parish of Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist
Midtown Manhattan

Earth quakes, Tyrants tremble, Jesus reigns

*Herod:* He raises the dead?

*First Nazarene:* Yea, sire, He raiseth the dead.

*Herod:* I do not wish Him to do that. I forbid Him to do that. I allow no man to raise the dead. This Man must be found and told that I forbid him to raise the dead. Where is this Man at present?

*Second Nazarene:* He is in every place, my lord, but it is hard to find Him.

*Oscar Wilde, Salomé*
While others fled, the women remained. As others cowered in secret, the women risked a public presence. The gospel proclaimed this Easter Sunday recounts Mary of Magdala alone in the predawn darkness keeping watch at Jesus’ tomb. The gospel of Luke remembers a group of women in the graveyard bearing burial spices to properly honor the body of the One in whom they had placed their hope. So, too, the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Matthew. We do well to honor their memory and their witness.

Yet, it is precisely their role as witnesses that is so peculiar in the gospel accounts – for in their culture in 1st century Palestine they were denied the role of legal witness. They could not testify. They could not raise their voice. But, on the day that sees him rise, the women became the message-bearers of the unfathomable, inexplicable mystery of resurrection.

In light of Jesus’ life and mission, this appears to be no coincidence, no fluke. The One who had walked among his people opening the ears of the deaf and loosing the lips of the mute would once more give voice to the voiceless – this time with a truth beyond all telling. A truth that changes everything. Absolutely everything. He has been raised.

An empty tomb. A foot race between Peter and John provoked by Mary of Magdala’s strange tale. Terrified disciples fleeing Jerusalem for a hoped-for asylum in Emmaus. Burning hearts, broken bread. Our scriptures abound with a jumble of encounters, experiences and images as they strain to bear witness to the immensity of the mystery – that Jesus has been raised from the dead in the power of G-D.

At the news, the gospel of Mark reports wide-spread fear and trembling among both disciples and opponents of Jesus of Nazareth. Matthew is unique in reporting not one, but two earthquakes associated with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus – a ruptured earth providing escape from their tombs for those long dead. The witness of both of these gospels renders perfectly clear the divine power unleashed in the Resurrection. And, in the face of that power, the subversion of earthly powers. Resurrection is good news and immeasurable joy for the disciples of Jesus. It is also terrifyingly bad news for tyrants.

Death is the ultimate power of the tyrant; resurrection does not make a covenant with death, it overthrows it. The raising of Jesus frees us from injurious powers that diminish and destroy human lives and communities. It opens a space in our midst to be reconstituted by the power of G-D, gathered into a true and robust communion in the grace of the Risen One, fashioned as the living body of Christ in the world.

Perhaps this is the most painful part of our present situation of sheltering and quarantine in the face of pandemic. We are cheated of a great comfort in our being gathered in worship to ratify the covenant offered us in eucharist with our sung Great AMEN. We are cut off from the great Doxology offering public praise and honor to the G-D of creation and covenant revealed in Jesus Christ. But these days shall pass. Even now, we are the body of Christ by grace. Even now, we are heirs to Christ’s life-giving kingdom. No force in our earthly experience can rob us of these:

---

The arrival of G-D’s kingdom precisely in the world of space, time and matter, the world of injustice and tyranny, of empire and crucifixions. This world is where the kingdom must come, on earth as it is in heaven. What view of creation, what view of justice, would be served by the offer merely of a new spirituality and a one-way ticket out of trouble, an escape from the real world?

No wonder the Herods, the Caesars and the Sadducees of this world, ancient and modern, were and are eager to rule out all possibility of actual resurrection. They are, after all, staking out a counter-claim on the real world. It is the real world that the tyrants and bullies (including intellectual and cultural tyrants and bullies) try to rule by force, only to discover that in order do so they have to quash all rumours of resurrection, rumours that would imply that their greatest weapons, death and deconstruction, are not after all omnipotent. But it is the real world, in Jewish thinking, that the real God made, and still grieves over. It is the real world that, in the earliest stories of Jesus’ resurrection, was decisively and forever reclaimed by that event, an event which demanded to be understood, not as a bizarre miracle, but as the beginning of a new creation… it is the real world in and for which Christians are committed to living, and where necessary, dying. Nothing less is demanded by the God of creation, the God of Justice, the God revealed in and as the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth.⁶

He has been raised.

Earth quakes, Tyrants tremble, Jesus reigns.

---

⁶ N. T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God, 737.
...when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear...

Fear.

A formidable force. Coloring our thinking, our imagination, our interaction – fear effectively locks us up. An invisible prison, a costly confinement, fear snatches away our ability to trust.

While each of us as individuals has surely confronted our private fears, shared fear among a common people is a truly fearsome thing, taking on a life of its own. When collective fear invades our communities, we cease to be a genuine people. Rather, we morph into mobs capable of monstrous deeds.

At the risk of being exposed as one in hot pursuit of the obvious, these days of padlocked doors and gates find us locked up in fear. A shared fear. As statistics of disease and death mount, a good many of us cringe, transfixed before television and computer screens in search of a glimmer of hope and a means to put the threat to rest.

The few times we venture into the streets for food, medicine, and hygienic supplies, every step of the way is wrapped in tangible apprehension. Should we need to avail ourselves of public transportation, the panic is even more palpable. Every passerby a potential source of infection, each conversation a jumpy affair in the attempt to avoid another’s breath. Upon our return home, we strip away masks, peel off latex gloves, furiously scrub our hands and merchandise. Once more we enter into the uneasy quiet that veils our anxiety, boredom, frustration and fear.
The gospel passage proclaimed on this Second Sunday of Easter – the eighth and final day of the Octave of Easter – finds the early disciples locked up in fear. A very specific, shared fear. The quote from John’s gospel at the head of this reflection is only a partial one. The fuller quote reads: *On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews.* A text of distinct hazard in light of its subsequent interpretation.

Jesus’ execution, at the hands of the Romans in collusion with the Temple authorities, had first stunned his disciples and then broken them. Fearing for their lives, they holed up in a hidden room stewing in their mutual suspicions, resentments, recriminations – assigning blame for the betrayals, desertions, denials. While at odds with one another, in their shared fear they found a common focus – their fellow Jews who had rejected Jesus. And it is vital that we recognize and ponder that phrase: *their fellow Jews.*

The quarrel over Jesus’ status – his faithfulness to Torah, his devotion to Temple – was not a dispute between Christian and Jew. That debate was an internal Jewish debate. The argument was waged among those who stood in the shared tradition flowing from the covenant made with Moses. Various Jewish groups – Galileans, Idumeans, Judeans – differing in their assessment, their judgment. Each and every one of them negotiating their own fears and loyalties, protecting their turf and prestige. The result was surely tragic and fateful. Yet, we must observe it was not a Christian versus Jewish affair. Our gospel passion accounts are desecrated when they are wielded as weapons against anyone, especially Jesus’ fellow Jews.

Such acknowledgement remains crucial for us if we are to renounce the long history of vitriol and violence visited upon Jewish populations. A disfigured history of a hollow humanity. Pogroms targeting Jewish people – already recorded in the 1st century – blanketed the Middle Ages and continued their wrath into the 19th century. The Shoah (Holocaust) during the Second World War marks the agonizing summit of a calamity that yet haunts the conscience of Western nations. Yet, there remain strains of this odium floating through our culture here in North America, broad insinuations referencing money, finance, and a host of other prejudicial affronts.

To repeat: *Shared fear among a common people is a truly fearsome thing, taking on a life of its own. When collective fear invades our communities, we cease to be a genuine people. Rather, we morph into mobs capable of monstrous deeds.*

The Risen Jesus, a slaughtered Galilean peasant now exalted in the power of the G-D who had made covenants with Abraham and Moses, returns to free his Jewish disciples from the fear that polarized and paralyzed them. Freed them from fear. Freed them for forgiveness.

Freed from fear, freed for forgiveness is the dynamism through which Jesus’ Spirit fashions a common people entrusted with his mission. The Risen Jesus restored the shattered faith of his disciples. He healed the rift opened between the disciples and Thomas who had lost trust in their word. He commissioned them to be agents of his forgiveness. He continues to send us:

*Fear is useless, what is needed is trust.*

*Peace be with you.*

---

7 Gospel of John: 20:19
8 Gospel of Mark 5:36
9 Gospel of John 20:26
Broken hearts, Broken bread, Burning hearts

So, are you hungry yet? As for me? I am famished.


Eastertide 2020 is among the strangest of experiences. This season announces the good news of death’s defeat in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – yet we find ourselves spooked by a steady stream of morbid, heart-breaking images and accounts of lonely deaths in a time of isolation. The season restores to our liturgical worship the robust, ecstatic Alleluia – yet the heavens stay mute, impenetrable, no voices joined in sung elation. Summoned by our G-D to Eucharistic celebration of the paschal mystery’s revelation of a life beyond destruction, yet, bereft of the holy Assembly, we can only strain to hear that call in the depth of our hearts:

_ Listen graciously to the prayers of this family, whom you have summoned before you: in your compassion, O merciful Father, gather to yourself all your children scattered throughout the world._

So, are you hungry yet?

---

10 Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer III.
The gospel passage proclaimed on this Third Sunday of Eastertide invites us to a journey, lures us onto a road stretching between Jerusalem and Emmaus, that our eyes might be opened, our hearts warmed, our faith renewed. Dusk descends upon that road, a time of shadowy vision. A stranger emerges from the shades of the eve. Scriptures searched, bread broken and shared, sudden recognition, burning hearts – Emmaus. Eucharist. Easter.

The first day of the week. A long day. A confusing day. An illuminating day. In the pre-dawn murkiness, a distraught Mary Magdala arrives in the graveyard to discover a tomb without a seal, a crypt without corpse. Fearing the ultimate assault on the body of Jesus – grave robbing – she runs from the tomb to tell the disciples of her discovery and suspicions. In turn, Peter and John fall into a foot race, wildly running toward the tomb, incredulous and uncertain.

As the day draws near its close, Luke recounts two disciples making their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. On this, I have a hunch I’d like to share with you. As they made their way along that road, they were running away as fast they could. Fleeing the disaster that had exploded their hopes, they were running for their lives in dread that they might become targets next. Crucifixions are like that. The message implicit but by no means subtle: Step out of line and you’ll be next. Throughout human history, this is the ploy tyrannical power wields in order to cow subjected peoples into submission and compliance. Hence, the spectacle of executions. The crueler the better. The gorier the more valuable.

This running – by turns toward and away from the empty tomb – is not confined to the experience of these earliest disciples. Rather, this is an experience that disciples of every time and place share. For the two disciples on the road running away from Jerusalem, the passage was one of broken hearts and shattered faith. Their deepest hopes had been smashed. They now sought a form of asylum in Emmaus. For Peter and John running toward the empty tomb, the foot-race was a broken-hearted sprint hoping-against-hope for a surprise.

Broken hearts.

As disciples of Jesus, all of us have experienced broken hearts in the face of life’s mystery. Surely, there is no believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ who cannot share in the heart-breaking, realistic words of the disciples on the road: “But we had hoped …” Don’t those words ring true to your experience? With all in our lives that is beautiful and awe-inspiring, who of us enjoys exemption from failures and disappointments, trauma and heartbreak? “But we had hoped” – a dream never materialized, a promise proven false, a future foreclosed, even dead.

What could be more tragic than a dead future? An anecdote told of the great author, Ernest Hemmingway, suggests he once was challenged to write a short story in only six words. His reply, scribbled on a soiled café napkin: “For Sale: Baby shoes, never used.” Tragic. The tragedy does not cease with what happened. The tragedy extends to the gaping abyss of all that might have happened but now surely will not happen.11

To enter into the mystery of Easter, to be enveloped by the mystery of Eucharist, it is imperative to begin there – with a broken heart, running away from the empty tomb, running toward the empty tomb. A lost job, an alienated daughter, a marriage betrayed, a dreaded diagnosis, a spouse ravaged by addictions, financial ruin, friendship estranged, death from viral infection – we each can add a deeply personal experience that pierces the heart. This is where Easter breaks in. Where Eucharist begins.

11 For both the anecdote and accompanying insights, I am indebted to the work of David Lose from the website, Dear Working Preacher.
In the fading light of dusk, the Risen One approaches the fleeing disciples inquiring into their upset and haste. They reply with news of the hideous events in Jerusalem that snuffed out the life of Jesus and swallowed whole their faith and hope.

“But we had hoped he was the One …”

Next, a conversation searching their treasured scriptures. A new revelation with astonishing depth and breadth opened to them. Far from vanquished, the crucified and risen One reigns. His power? Disclosure of the mechanism of violence underlying human history – the blood-thirsty search for victims upon which to build first a tomb, and then, a phantom foundation for human community. At last revealed, this dynamic is dethroned by the Risen Victim now offering forgiveness, not reprisal. He empowers those once complicit in his demise to live free of all death-dealing, to be agents of his mercy and forgiveness for all the world.

Finally, with the fall of night, the meal. The breaking of bread. Despite the deepening darkness, the disciples finally see. They recognize him: Jesus, risen from the dead. Jesus, alive in the power of G-D. The Risen One opening the way to life beyond destruction. With this, their broken hearts melt into burning hearts. Freed from their fear, they are sent to proclaim the good news to others.

The pattern of Emmaus is the pattern of Eucharistic celebration. We begin with broken hearts. Summoned by the G-D revealed in Jesus, gathered by his Spirit, we search the scriptures to hear again – here and now, in our time and place – the astounding story of G-D’s boundless, passionate love for us revealed in Jesus Christ. We invoke his name and call upon his Spirit around the table of thanksgiving – the altar that puts an end to all sacrifice. In broken bread and shared cup, we eat and drink as Jesus taught us – sharers in his very own life, flesh and blood. In the sharing of this meal, fashioned into the Body of Christ for the world, we are sent with burning hearts into the heart of the world. Go now, proclaiming the gospel with your lives.

So, are you hungry yet? As for me? I am famished.

While for now, as we shelter in place and practice physical distancing, we must pause in tasting and seeing the goodness of the Lord, the invitation stands sturdy, the promise unbroken.

Anyone who eats this bread believes in a new world where bread is for all, poor as well as rich. Everyone who drinks this cup shares a covenant with all the world’s broken-hearted. 
So, let us eat and drink as Jesus taught us, and may this meal provoke in us a hunger that can never be satisfied until we taste the fullness of his kingdom.

So, are you hungry yet?


Broken hearts, broken bread, burning hearts. He has been raised.
Fourth Sunday of Easter
2020

Parish of Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist
Midtown Manhattan

Even though I walk in the dark valley
I fear no evil; for you are at my side.12

Each evening, at the stroke of 7 PM, it begins.

A lone set of hands leaning out of an open apartment window clapping. Slowly. Then swiftly, numerous others join in – clapping their hands with escalating speed, settling first into a rhythmical pattern mimicked by others and then a raucous cadence spilling a joyous cacophony onto the streets below. The mounting sound is augmented by emergency vehicle sirens and automobile horns. Those so skilled lend the sound of their musical instruments. Amateur percussionists add the clatter of clanging pots and pans. A glorious, mighty sound reaching to the heavens. A scene repeated in neighborhood after neighborhood here in our urban abode.

Each evening, at the stroke of 7 PM, the New York City salute begins.

12 Psalm 23. This is the psalm chanted as the Responsorial Psalm for this day’s Liturgy of the Word.
A salute to all those, seen and unseen, offering selfless service during this time of biological siege and social distress. Doctors, nurses, aides; medical technicians, hospital nutritionists, emergency medical professionals; firefighters, police, sanitation workers; grocery store clerks, delivery drivers and bikers; public utility workers, mass transit personnel, information technology personnel. This list is nowhere near comprehensive. And that is the point – there are many unseen and under-appreciated folks helping to ease the difficulty of these days.

Each evening, at the stroke of 7 PM, begins the opportunity to forge a new future, the prospect of a polity more generous in its spirit, a society knit together in a wider solidarity. An opportunity, not an inexorable outcome. A relapse into splintered factions, angry divides and selfish pursuit remains also entirely possible. How might we help to assure the emergence of the former, rather than the latter? What might we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One, contribute to this endeavor?

This fourth Sunday in Eastertide turns to the Gospel of John bearing witness to Jesus’ role as a gate – a sheep gate. The Johannine witness reports this claim made by Jesus: “I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.” The image is not particularly familiar to us living in a 21st century cosmopolitan center of commerce, finance and artistic endeavor.

The gateways of our experience are more like passages through swarming locations like Penn Station and Port Authority Bus Terminal; the tunnels borrowing under the Hudson river here in midtown as well as lower Manhattan; the bridges stretching across the East River; the turnstiles affording access to the Subway system. These are the “gates” of our daily encounter.

Like a sheep gate, each of these passageways is a crowded, chaotic, competitive place. Just as sheep jostle one another, squeezing through the gate as they are herded in and out so that they might find pasture, we enter into these dense spaces, rubbing elbows, bumping into one another in the rush to arrive at the various destinations of our own pasture. While currently that commuting adventure is vastly diminished during this time of sheltering and physical distancing, nonetheless our pasture – sustenance, salary, medical attention, and the like – remains a remarkably social affair.

Perhaps this anomalous time is a particularly apt one in which to reflect upon our manner of negotiating these gates of our daily life. Our culture has coined a telling phrase: the rat race – a literally accurate description for those who experience travel by subway! Have you not seen those critters along the tracks? Life as a blur. A contest. A joust. An antagonism.

With the considerably diminished number of commuters, the blurred nature of the daily commute abruptly yields to a clarity of vision both sudden and sobering. No longer eclipsed by the masses, the faces and voices of those struggling with mental illness are inescapable.13 No longer blended into the background, the ravages of addiction manifest starkly in the faces and mannerisms of so many of those wandering these transportation hubs. Presently, it is virtually impossible not to see the vulnerability, the frailty, the desperation evident in the lives of a good many our fellow travelers. Unless, of course, one elects not to see – or not to care.

---

13 According to the Manhattan Institute website, during 2015–17, the number of seriously mentally ill homeless New Yorkers increased by about 2,200, or 22%. 


In “normal” times, the hordes with whom we contend as we enter the gateways leading to our pasture help to obscure the presence of these wretched fellow travelers. In “normal” times, our annoyances, angers, aggravations lead to awkward altercations, shouted accusations, occasional assaults. The density and intensity lodge themselves in our spirit as we force our will on those who impede our movement in any way – to grab that seat, squeeze through that doorway, hail that cab. A rat race? For sure. Like sheep in the gatefold scrambling for pasture? Indeed.

For those of us who lay claim to the wisdom of the gospel of Jesus Christ, how might we offer witness in these gateways? We might begin by recovering a reverential imagination with which to enter them. What if we imagine that the Risen One is that gateway?

For starters, I’d suggest we’d have to surrender our perception of others as “fellow travelers.” Rather, we’d imagine them just as the gospel names them: sisters and brothers. “When did we see you naked or hungry or …”¹⁴ The sorting of sheep and goats found in Matthew’s gospel pivots around the recognition of our suffering brothers and sisters as worthy of our respect and aid – as vehicles through which the Risen One is present. Those who see and respond are the “sheep” Jesus declares worthy of inheriting the kingdom prepared before the foundation of the world – the “sheep” who pasture by passing in and out of the gateway that is the Risen One.

As we await our circumstances to return to “normal,” perhaps our time of reflection now might help us to determine how then we will return to our daily gateways. No one of us can solve the sizable challenge of remedying the ills of all of our brothers and sisters. What we can do, though, is resolve to recognize our solidarity in our shared need for pasture. We can respond individually as our means and talent allow us to. We can advocate for public policies that provide practical solutions and tangible healing to the most vulnerable and forgotten among us. And, yes, we can celebrate and support all those who spend themselves heroically amid dire straits so that the least among us might enjoy pasture and passage through the dark valley.

Even though I walk in the dark valley
I fear no evil; for you are at my side.¹⁵

Each evening, at the stroke of 7 PM, the New York City salute begins.

Boisterous applause, exuberant shouts announcing our solidarity, our shared need of pasture. Praise for the heroic commitment of so many, ensuring that no one be left alone in the dark valley. We bask in the goodness of those who serve so selflessly. We glory in the Risen One who remains at our side – not least through those grace-filled hearts and heroic hands.

Each evening, at the stroke of 7 PM, a mighty sound erupts among us.

A mighty sound in wonderment for the humanity and graciousness of so many among us. A mighty sound pleasing in the sight and hearing of our G-D.

---

¹⁴ Matthew 25:31-46.

¹⁵ Psalm 23. This is the psalm chanted as the Responsorial Psalm for today’s Liturgy of the Word.
“... their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution ...”

The Book of Acts – the second volume from the author of the gospel of Luke – traces the advancement of the earliest disciples living in the power of the Spirit breathed out by the Risen Jesus. Tracking their engagement of a preaching mission and their embrace of a common life, we are afforded a series of capsule descriptions of the community’s experience. Among them:

- They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.\(^\text{16}\)

- All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need.\(^\text{17}\)

- The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common.\(^\text{18}\)

- There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.\(^\text{19}\)

---

\(^{16}\) Acts 2:42  
\(^{17}\) Acts 2:44-45  
\(^{18}\) Acts 4:32  
\(^{19}\) Acts 4:34-35
Meanwhile, our second reading from today’s liturgy recounts a rather different occurrence:

*As the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.*

Ouch. That didn’t take very long, did it? What on earth happened? Old habits die hard!

In announcing the *kingdom of G-D* and gathering disciples, Jesus of Nazareth invited those he called to embrace a fresh set of loyalties – loyalties vastly wider, allegiances more far-flung than anything for which cultural experience could have prepared them. For Jesus’ contemporaries, *kinship* patterns determined belonging, identity and community – family, village, town. Bloodlines and language surpassed all other considerations in understanding to whom one belonged, with whom one was in living relation. Clear lines defining insider and outsider.

The issue of language in 1st century Palestine was fraught. Who spoke Aramaic? Who spoke Greek? Aramaic-speakers held their fellow members of the covenant of Moses who spoke Greek in disregard and mistrust. Their orthodoxy and fidelity were held suspect. And, if the truth be told, those who spoke Greek tended to be in closer relation with elites living in cities, and also enjoyed significantly better earning opportunities. Economic envy among imperiled peasants?

If the matter of language was burdened, bloodlines were even more so. Familial relations determined your economic options, your officially recognized “honor,” your bonds and boundaries. In such context, this saying of Jesus functioned as dynamite: “*Who are my mother and my brothers?*” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”


The scriptural account of economic strain between Hellenists and Hebrews conjures the furies of both bloodlines and language. Greek-speaking Hellenists. Aramaic-speaking Hebrews possessed of presumed superior bloodlines. Squeezed in the middle were the widows – desperate, vulnerable, exposed. A quarrel at the crossroads for the community of believers.

The dynamism of the Risen One’s Spirit – trajectory and aim – eclipses the stale divides that threaten true communion. The danger of relapse into factions born of language, ethnicity and bloodlines threatens not only the earliest believers in Jesus’ Way – it is a temptation that skulks the Church in every age. Communion or Crevice?

*Crossroads.*

In our extremely perplexing time, remembrance of the early church struggles to live fully into the gospel of Jesus Christ is vital to our own vigilance so that we steer clear of the snares of bias. As a living communion, our common anthem: *In Christ there is no east or west, In him no south or north.* This is the distinctive witness we offer globally and in every local church.

---

20 *Acts 6:1*

21 *Mark 3:33-34*

22 *John 14:6.* From the gospel passage proclaimed in the Sunday Assembly today: “I am the way and the truth and the life.”
Communion.

“As their numbers grew…” The longer the passage of time, the wider the swath of cultures, the more daunting the challenge of the crossroads. For disciples of Christ, gradual retreat into less expansive relationship remains ever a danger. Refuge in chauvinism an alluring illusion.

Crossroads.

This Christian commitment to communion in the grace of G-D poured out in Christ Jesus is our perennial mission. I would like to suggest that at this exceptionally global moment – in all its intensity, its complexity, its menacing force – our witness is also timely and opportune. For in this time of imposed sheltering in place, grievances old and new rapidly simmer and flare.

Each day, with this health crisis extending in duration, our social fabric frays. Sheltering in place is one thing for those with backyards and sprawling homes. Quite another experience in a cramped apartment in Hell’s Kitchen or a studio apartment in the upper reaches of Chelsea.

Reports of health care disparities multiply daily. Brown and black people are dying at rates that far exceed the rest of the population. In an uncanny parallel to the vulnerable Hellenist widows in the Book of Acts, residents of nursing homes appear helpless before the onslaught of Covid-19.

How about testing for the virus? Various quarters report uneven access not least determined by wealth, fame and connections. So, too, access to the financial relief funneled by the government through various banking institutions. Some connected businesses gamed the system. Small businesses relying on small banks find themselves, at best, at the end of the line. Many workers are ineligible to apply. Need we say more about access for immigrants? The undocumented?

Here and now, the witness of a community marshalling its resources for the benefit of all, most especially the most vulnerable and forgotten, is needed more than ever. This time and this place cry out for the witness of a community prepared to confront its inequities and biases, so as to resolve them in favor of true justice. Now is the time for that kind of community to shine.

Our heritage tells us that by the grace of G-D – not our own doing – we are that community. Through the power of the Spirit of the Risen One, we are that communion. That Spirit moved Hellenist and Hebrew followers of Jesus’ Way in 1st century Palestine to re-forge their relationship in light of justice – divine justice. That same Spirit moves among us in every age, beckoning us to live more fully into the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ – Light of the World.

Cooped up, hunkered down – we habitually find ourselves harried, restless, jaded. Perhaps we each can carve out a more refreshing niche amid our arid surroundings. A place for prayer and for reflection on our shared vocation to be light of the world through the grace of our G-D. Here is one suggestion:

How about finding some time to go online to read up on and critically study Catholic Social Teaching? It is our body of shared wisdom around the demands of divine justice – formally framed at the rise of modernity and forged in the consequences of three revolutions: American, French and Industrial. An evolving tradition, today it grapples with our own present revolution – the Digital Revolution – providing resources and insight worthy of our time, effort and resolve.

A caveat. The very suggestion presumes access to a computer and the internet. Access – to employment, healthcare, financial relief and so much more – is the justice question of our day. Just as once the Spirit of Christ claimed access for those neglected 1st century Hellenist widows.
“Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”23

We all have heard them, haven’t we?

Lawyer jokes, of course. Exhibit A: *How do you tell the difference between a lawyer and a snake? The briefcase.* Perchance you’d like to share a couple or three from your own hearing? We love to tell jokes such as these as they vent our frustrations and misgivings. They poke fun at the lofty. The humor fades to wistfulness, though, when we actually find ourselves in need of a terrific lawyer, a compelling defense. In brief, an advocate.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always”24

The Advocate.

Why would Jesus’ disciples need a lawyer? Yet, that is precisely what Jesus promises: A Paraclete. The Greek term derives from legal terminology for an advocate or defense attorney. Other potential translations include mediator, intercessor, comforter or consoler. Specific to the gospel of John, the Paraclete is also a teacher and witness to Jesus. So, the Paraclete is both a lawyer and a witness in the face of a court challenge, a legal prosecution. What might the charges be? What accusations might need to be countered? What verdict lies in the balance?

23 1 Peter 3:15. This quote is taken from the second reading of the Liturgy of the Word for the 6th Sunday in Eastertide.

The Accuser.

Let’s talk a little bit about Satan, shall we? Before we get too far along, we need to rid our imaginations of a good many images that suffuse our popular culture. Renditions that tilt toward the cartoonish: red devils sprouting horn and tail; a ghoulish figure wielding a pitchfork; a gruesome, deformed creature brandishing fire and brimstone. None of these helps us along the path of understanding. In fact, as often as not, they distort our imaginations, confound our comprehension, blind us to an important truth.

In scriptural origins, Satan is the accuser. One who wields accusation via deception and empty promises. Accusations launched against unsuspecting, blameless targets. Accusations hurled at innocent victims, capriciously chosen, deemed to be social threats, villains to be vanquished. Accusations creating convenient scapegoats, along with empty promises asserting that their removal from the scene will restore harmony and calm.

This satanic cycle of accusation run amok has tainted the entirety of human history, stained the full gamut of human cultures. The cycle traces to our very origins. Consider the witness of the Book of Genesis: Cain and Abel, offspring of Adam and Eve. Dislodged from the Garden of Eden. Clashing desires. Quarrels over honor. Rising rivalry. Accusation. Murder.

Abel removed from the scene. Tension temporarily resolved. Though till his death, Cain roams the earth uneasy, exposed. Forever a potential victim to be sacrificed to the next group frenzy of entangled rivalries, feverish clashing desires. The victim mechanism. At our origins.


Jesus of Nazareth is the first Advocate refuting the work and method of the Accuser. The entirety of Jesus’ life, teaching and mission centered on the revelation and rout of this victim mechanism hidden since the foundation of the world. In his life, he relentlessly restored those who had been cast out: a shunned Samaritan woman, a man born blind, countless sinners gathered at his table, a lunatic roving a graveyard in Gerasene, a shamed woman hemorrhaging blood.

In Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, we discover the culmination of the revelation, the full and ultimate rendering of the verdict. G-D’s own verdict. Life. Life indestructible. Death defeated. Accuser cast out. Advocate vindicated.

Of course, at the time of their baptism, all disciples of Jesus Christ share in that divine refutation: Do you reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises?

I do.

How about you?

---

25 For a more comprehensive, subtle and sustained analysis of this line of thought, consult the published works of Rene Girard, who has traced these anthropological mechanisms under the category of mimetic desire. For a properly theological development of Girard’s work, consult the published works of James Alison. See especially, The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes.

26 Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults
Why would Jesus’ disciples need a lawyer? Because while the final verdict has been rendered, the accuser continues to attempt prosecution of the case. Constant are the invitations to build a social life upon the tomb of a sacrificed victim. The identification and repudiation of scapegoats remain far too widespread within human cultures to ignore. Furthermore, believers in the gospel enjoy no exemption from the temptation. Hence, another Advocate.

The sending of the Advocate is meant to strengthen us, accompany us in our mission to announce the good news of the victory accomplished in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To reinforce our comprehension of Jesus’ life, teaching and witness – so that our witness might remain authentic, unambiguous and effective. That we be afforded defense against any impulse to participate in the murderous search for scapegoats.

This, plainly not because we possess a moral superiority to others. Rather, it is we who are possessed. Possessed by the Spirit breathed out by the Risen One. The Paraclete. Another Advocate. And in that embrace, we are entrusted with a holy, inimitable mission to assist others in glimpsing the truth about our human tendency to create sacrificial victims. A charge to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news that we have been afforded a path out of the death-dealing. No more victims.

To evangelize. To respond to the challenge announced in today’s second reading: Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you yet do it with gentleness and reverence. To offer a defense. The defense taught us by the Advocate.

Gentleness.

Reverence.

Evangelization. A task calling not for thunderous display, but gentle witness. Not gruff judgement, but reverence. Reverence for the G-D revealed in Jesus Christ. Reverence for all those called into being by that same G-D of creation and covenant. A mission, once and for all, renouncing any violence visited upon victims. Reliance solely on the grace poured out by the crucified and risen Christ, whose Advocate is our sure defense.

In conclusion then, Exhibit B: How do you tell the difference between a lawyer and a snake?

The difference between an Advocate and an Accuser?


Your honor, the defense rests. He has been raised.
"Why are you standing there looking at the sky?"²⁷

Now what?

How often in your lifetime have you been stymied, befuddled, overwhelmed before an enigma or event that unexpectedly befell you? Standing suddenly before an inscrutable, opaque reality, without a clue as to its meaning or how to proceed? Intimidated. Stumped. Panicked.

Now what?

If the apostolic witness is to be trusted, the earliest disciples’ experience of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection was often such an event. Early in their encounter with Jesus, the disciples experienced a sense of excitement and exuberance. Here was a new teaching – one with authority and power, not like the instruction of scribes and pharisees that had grown so stale and listless.²⁸ Jesus then drew them to a mount with a new teaching that announced a bloodless revolution in G-D’s power. A revolution revealing those assumed to be shameful to be, rather, clothed in an honor woven by divine power. *Blessed are the poor, the meek, the mournful…*²⁹

They marveled at the power that radiated from his being. Healing a shamed woman hopelessly hemorrhaging, Peter’s mother-in-law’s fever, the deranged daughter of a Canaanite woman –

²⁷ *Acts 1:11.* Taken from the first reading of the Liturgy of the Word for this feast of Ascension.

²⁸ *Gospel of Matthew 7:28-29.*

²⁹ *Gospel of Matthew 5:1-12.*
conspicuously not a member of the covenant made with Moses!\(^{30}\) He drew his closest disciples to yet another mountain where his glory radiated, linking him to Moses and Elijah – fulfillment of the law and the prophets. And yet, even on that glorious height, seminal hints of danger and doubt crept in as Jesus uttered cryptic comments about future tumult and hostility.\(^ {31}\)


*Now what?*


*Now what?*

Jesus bursts through locked doors. *Shalom.* He steps out of the shadows on the road to Emmaus. *Burning hearts.* He cooks up a sunrise breakfast on a seashore. *Revelation.* Finally, on yet one more mountain, he commissions his disciples to go out to all the world bearing the fullness of his very own authority and power. And then …

*He vanishes from their sight.*

*Now what?*


*Why are you standing there looking into the sky?*

Returning to the Father, the Risen Jesus commissions the disciples to embark on a decidedly earthbound affair. Their gaze directed not skyward, but earthward. Their voices to be trained on those around them. Witnesses to an indestructible life in G-D’s power as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who now reigns both in the heavens and on earth.

The *Book of Acts* narrates the earliest disciples’ gradual rise to the task, maturing in their vocation. Yet, in the embrace of the Spirit, they did learn to become effective witnesses to the life indestructible of the Risen One who defeated death and its long shadow. Witnesses to those around them who had more than their own fair share of “*now what*” moments: illness, crushed poverty, Roman occupation, loss of a child, shattered faith, faded hope, and so much more.

*Now what?*

Baptized disciples of Jesus Christ, we, too, are commissioned, here and now, as witnesses to the life indestructible revealed in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. Gospel witnesses to those with whom we share this current calamity of biological siege, financial ruin, psychological stress and social strain. In brief, we, disciples of Jesus Christ, inhabit a distinctive role amidst the human family’s response to this global “*now what*” moment.

*Now what?*

\(^{30}\) *Gospel of Matthew* 15:21-18.

\(^{31}\) *Gospel of Matthew* 17:1-13
At this juncture of jeopardy, the path forward necessarily demands sympathetic attention to the roiling anxieties experienced by so many around us. The threat of physical demise alongside the loneliness spawned by “social distancing” erodes the mental balance of so many of us. Tragically, resort to suicide is in increasing evidence among us. How might the gospel of Jesus Christ inform our response to these needs? What personal solace? What compassion?

Now what?

This galloping health crisis confronts us with the unavoidable fact that its burdens are anything but evenly shared. The disparity between those who enjoy ample access to ongoing healthcare and those who do not manifests in the yawning socio-economic chasm between those who recover from this pernicious disease and those who succumb. A gap implicating societal views as regards ethnicity and race. From a gospel viewpoint, what resources and insights might we offer in the public debate about healthcare? What public policy measures and structural adjustments ought we support and pursue?

Now what?

Financial ruin encircles us. Par for the course, those most imperiled enjoy the least resources to ride out the storm and, eventually, to rebuild both a life and a living. Small “mom and pop” businesses under threat of extinction. A slew of enterprises running with slender operating margins on the verge of collapse.

In our own backyard, think of the many restaurants here in Hell’s Kitchen and upper Chelsea. If, and when, reopened, they will be forced to reduce capacity by as much as 50 percent. Is it possible to survive? What of the lifelong efforts of their owners? What of their employees shorn of significant wages and tips? What of the help hidden away in cramped and scorching kitchens? Please. Do not raise the issue of documentation. Not in this urgent time. Please.

Now what?

Our predicament can be catalogued far more exhaustively. Food supply chains. Mounting social unrest. Entrenched political divides. Dispute over medical wisdom vs. financial strain. Feel free to add any number of issues that catch your attention these days.

Increasingly, we find ourselves imperiled and panicked. The kind of dread in which the Risen Jesus first appeared to set his terrified disciples free from their fear. Shalom. Peace.

This is not an invitation to a Pollyanna-ish avoidance of reality. It is an invitation to fully embrace reality with faith and hope in the presence and promise of the Risen One. Release from paralyzing panic. A way forward.

Time to roll up our sleeves. Much hard work lies ahead. Profound thought, meticulous analysis crucial to forging our future. Spirited discussion regarding the kind of public policy that ought to guide that future. Unquestionably we will be different – forever changed. In all this, as disciples of the Risen One, we have gospel insight to bring to all those public debates, as well as a personal, compassionate touch for individuals in need of mercy and healing.

Now what? Time to witness to the truth of G-D’s victory in Jesus Christ.

“Why are you standing there looking at the sky?”
Seventh Sunday in Eastertide
2020
Parish of Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist
Midtown Manhattan

“...they are in the world, while I am coming to you ...”

These days the world looks like a different place.
Quite literally.
Perhaps you have seen some of the photos from around the globe in which members of the animal kingdom currently roam in places heretofore dominated by humans. Possibly you’ve noticed those snapshots capturing the remarkable reduction in airborne pollution levels over the past few weeks. Or you might have read those reports detailing a quantifiable drop in seismic activity under the earth’s surface. So long as a good many of us have extra time on our hands these days, we do well to reflect a bit more expansively on our creaturely life. As a gift from the Creator, humanity’s location in this vast cosmos.

The gospel passage proclaimed on this seventh Sunday in Eastertide is a portion of Jesus’ farewell discourse from the gospel of John. He prays passionately for his disciples that they be granted a share of divine protection, a share of his glory, the glory of the Triune G-D. The G-D of creation and covenant. The G-D he was revealing in life, death and resurrection. He does not pray that they be saved from the world. Rather he prays they be saved in the world. Saved with and in the world. Creation brought to completion and perfection. Fulfillment of Creation.

Theologian James Alison has articulated this relationship between creation and salvation broadly and boldly:

[H]ere is the central point: we understand creation starting from and through Jesus. God’s graciousness which brings what is not into existence from nothing is exactly the same thing as Jesus’ death-less self-giving out of love which enables him to break the human culture of death, and is a self-giving which is
entirely fixed on bringing into being a radiantly living and exuberant culture. It is not as though creation were a different act, something which happened alongside the salvation worked by Jesus, but rather that the salvation which Jesus was working was, at the same time, the fulfillment of creation.32

Admittedly, that is a dense, provocative passage. But I would like to suggest that it is well worth your while to ponder. Pause. Pray. Perceive.

In this endeavor, a second theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, might aid us in our perception:

As the first fruit of an abundant harvest, the Risen Jesus Christ pledges a future for all the dead, not only the dead of the human species but of all species. In Jesus crucified and risen, God who graciously gives life to the dead and brings into being the things that do not exist will redeem the whole cosmos. As Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century preached, “In Christ’s resurrection the earth itself rose.”

The reasoning runs like this. This person, Jesus of Nazareth, Wisdom incarnate, was composed of star stuff and earth stuff; his life formed a genuine part of the historical and biological community of Earth; his body existed in a network of relationships drawing from and extending to the whole physical universe. As a child of the earth he died, and the earth claimed him back in a grave. In the resurrection his flesh was called to life again in transformed glory. Risen from the dead, Jesus has been reborn as a child of the earth, radiantly transfigured … The evolving world of life, all of matter in its endless permutations, will not be left behind but will be transfigured by the resurrecting action of the Creator God.33

Deep Incarnation.

Now is an opportune time to rethink our place in the world, to reimagine our cosmic abode in the grasp of the G-D revealed in Jesus Christ. In 2015, Pope Francis issued a robust encyclical urging us, exhorting us to be transformed – mind, imagination, heart and will – in our lives as creatures of the living G-D: Laudate Si’. With all the time presently on our hands due to sheltering policies, why not give it a generous read? Francis opens his tome thus:

“LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord”. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs”.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth


(cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. (1-2).

As Capuchin Franciscan friars serving on the parish staff here at Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist, we stand in this esteemed tradition of Franciscan reverence for all creation. Francis, John Baptist, Sal, Basil, and myself take pride in the pope’s reliance upon Francis of Assisi to structure his own thoughts, as well as his admiration for the poetic prowess on display in our founder’s *Canticle of Creatures*. Francis of Assisi did indeed possess the soul and imagination of a poet. And yet, his vision was beyond poetic. It was and is the vision of a mystic. Someone who enjoys entrée to the divine gaze of the One who creates and saves.

Annually, on October 4th, the feast of Francis of Assisi, Franciscans around the world celebrate the rite of the blessing of animals. Here in New York City, the gathering rounds up house pets of all shapes and sizes: dogs, cats, birds, fish and the like. In rural regions, the blessing is offered for livestock and such. If we were to step more fully into the mystical vision of Francis, we’d extend blessing to waterways and grain fields, the stars and planets of the heavens, as well as the hidden atoms that comprise the core of every creature on earth and in the heavens.

Leaving behind the poetic, returning to prosaic, scientific terminology: we dwell within a massive, intricate ecosystem that sustains all life on this planet. To the extent it is healthy, so are we. To the extent it is in peril, so are we.


*Bring to mind the picture of our planet taken from the moon. There it is, a beautiful blue marble spinning against the black background of space. Now imagine that under its shielding atmosphere there exists a network of living creatures ranging in size from wee microorganisms to giant sequoias and massive blue whales, including humans toward the larger end of the scale, all interacting with the land, water and air of their different ecosystems. In scientific terms this enveloping skein of life is called the biosphere. In faith terms, it is called the community of creation. Picture yourself as an indigenous member of this community.*

The basis for this sense of community is, of course, the belief that the whole world comes from the hand of the one gracious God who created everything out of love. Not only that, but throughout time every creature with its relationships is held in existence by the same vivifying Giver of Life. At the end, all will be gathered into a new heaven and a new earth by the same divine, ineffable love. Such is the doctrine of creation in its threefold fullness.\(^{34}\)


These days the world looks like a different place.

“...they are in the world, while I am coming to you...”

---

\(^{34}\) Johnson, *Creation and Cross*, 199.
How does each of us hear them in our native language?" 35

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.

Dutifully learned in our youth, of course. Do you any longer genuinely believe that?

On this great feast of Pentecost, we revel in an astonishing event. Disparate peoples folded into shared understanding, concord of mind and heart beyond the barriers of language. An eruption of Spirit fashioning the prospect of authentic communication. A word of union and understanding. A word of peace dispersing angry, hurtful words of division and rivalry.

Words.


That burst of Spirit amidst the earliest disciples signaled a new creation. As once the Spirit hovered over the waters of chaos bringing forth creation, in Pentecost, the Spirit hovers over the confused tongues of humanity bringing forth understanding and peace. Spoken through the prophets in history, the Spirit of Pentecost brings forth truth and the witness of the church.

Words.

For a scant moment, consider the vast variety of words you negotiate on any given day – angry, insightful, confusing, thoughtful, instructive, deceptive, manipulative, healing. Living here in the 21st century, we are heirs to a technological inheritance that affords us the prospect of unparalleled communication – printed page, radio, television and, of course, digital media transmitted via the worldwide web. Hence, you might imagine that we are engaged nowadays in a massive conversation across cultures and classes. The evidence suggests otherwise.

Rather than broad conversation, what has emerged is a welter of slender, siloed discussions in which we tend to talk only to those with whom we are already in agreement. The resultant social fabric is stretched both thin and threadbare. This manifests daily here in our own culture, as well as in cultures flung around the globe. Divides expand. Assumptions calcify. Facts fade. Conversation withers on the vine. Common engagement ebbs. Community splinters.

A second more pernicious dynamic is correspondingly on display. We witness more than a few miscreants deliberately distorting our communication, falsifying the information available to us. By stealth they pollute our pool of shared truths. Some for personal gain. Others for political clout. Still others for global domination. Make no mistake though, these exertions are tenacious, furtive, sophisticated and detrimental in the extreme – a wary world of deceit.

Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can break our spirit, our affiliation, our trust.

The vigil mass for this feast of Pentecost offers us the tall tale – literally – of Babel and its ill-fated tower. A realm of confused speech, futile communication, scattered inhabitants. I imagine the majority of us learned the anecdote as young children. I can testify that as a child it vividly captured my imagination. Here and now, I would like to set my imagination free.

I’d like to suggest reading the story of Babel in light of the larger Book of Genesis. After creating human beings, the Creator gave them the mandate to multiply, spread throughout all the earth, and exercise stewardship over its manifest gifts. Enter Babel. Migrants on their way to the ends of the earth make the choice instead to abort the journey. They settle down in one place to make a name for themselves, building a monument to the heavens to declare their sovereign rule. In essence, they exercised an instinct toward empire. Single rule. Single word.

The story of Babel is the narrative of the interruption of the human vocation. A failure to multiply and diversify. A refusal to spread far and wide. A botched stewardship.

The Liturgy of the Word for the Eucharistic Assembly on this Sunday of Pentecost recounts the eruption of Spirit that restores and renews humanity’s vocation – renews the face of the earth. The journey to the ends of the earth resumes. Authentic communication revives.

How does each of us hear them in our native language?

Pentecost does not commence this earth-shattering, earth-healing conversation by virtue of the imposition of a single language, a single word. Rather, the early disciples are equipped by grace beyond measure to enter into the many languages of their contemporaries:

Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene;

visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues! \(^{37}\)

That’s quite an assemblage, isn’t it? Don’t fail to take notice of that inclusion of both Asia and Arabs. Verily, an act of communication of immense magnitude. Chaos and confusion melt away. Vengeance and rivalry flee before the face of forgiveness. A wary world of deceit collapses. A nascent world of wonder and truth emerges. The truth of G-D’s mighty wonders.

The wonders of G-D in our own tongues.

Pentecost returns us to the capacity for wonder, for marveling – awestruck by the mystery of G-D in our midst. To sing of the raw beauty suffuse throughout the cosmos. To marvel at the song and dance; the artistry, poetry and erudition arising from sundry human cultures across the span of time and space. To bask in the G-D given, human capacity for compassion and heroic service – a divine gift to be deeply reverenced during this time of biological siege.

At the heart of all these wonders? The revelation offered us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the proclamation trusted to the Church brought into being by the Pentecost eruption of Spirit. We, as disciples of the Crucified and Risen One, as bearers of the Spirit breathed out by Jesus Christ, carry this truth as we continue the journey to the ends of the earth.

The truth of G-D’s wonders in the defeat of death and death-dealing. The truth of G-D’s wonders in unmasking the victim mechanism that still harries human culture – the search for scapegoats upon which to erect a bogus common life. The truth of G-D’s wonders in the raising of the innocent Victim who initiates a new history – one of forgiveness not retaliation. The truth of G-D’s wonders in the gift of the Holy Spirit bringing forth the church as witness to this fresh history fashioned in the grace and mercy poured out in Christ Jesus. The truth of G-D’s wonders in delivering us living, efficacious words to proclaim all this.

Such is the firm foundation in which we flourish. To which we beckon others.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love.

V. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.
R. And you shall renew the face of the earth.

Let us pray. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant us in the same Spirit to be truly wise and ever to rejoice in His consolation.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Faithfully learned in our youth, of course. Do you any longer genuinely believe this? I trust so.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son

This is not the piece I set out to pen. That one shelved. Sidelined in light of present reality.


2 minutes and 53 seconds. That same knee still pressed against the neck of a black man who had grown unresponsive. Found to have no pulse. Limp. Between life and death? An eternity.

The initial report from the medical examiner’s office suggested no findings supporting a diagnosis of traumatic asphyxia or strangulation, the legal complaint reports. Instead, it observed that George Floyd had coronary artery disease and hypertensive heart disease and “the combined effects of Mr. Floyd being restrained by the police, his underlying health conditions and any potential intoxicants in his system likely contributed to his death.”

Potential intoxicants in his system?

And then the video.

And then rippling explosions in cities around the country. Fire and fury. Smoke and savagery.

America’s singular original sin – poisonous race relations, the inexorable inheritance of the brutal practice of chattel slavery. A gaping, open wound with countless manifestations in our country’s history. George Floyd’s eerie cry: “I can’t breathe” sickly summoning the memory of Eric Gardner moaning that same tragic trope on July 14, 2014 in Staten Island, NY. More recently, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old EMT worker in Louisville, KY, shot in her bed after midnight on March 13, 2020 by three police officers serving a “no-knock” warrant. Ahmaud Arbery, 25, shot dead in February 2020 in Brunswick, Georgia, after two white men chased him, supposing he was a burglar.
Amidst this agonizing horror, add the dreadful current pandemic. The pressures, pains and politics of our present vulnerability expose further disquieting fault lines of massive proportions among us. Think of it: even the simple act of donning a face mask as a means of protecting others and self somehow has become the locus of volatile conflict, unspeakable rage, outright hatred. The United States of America?

Such ferocious, raw enmity. How did we ever come to such a place?

How to speak about the feast of the Most Holy Trinity in light of all this?
Perhaps the better question is how can we NOT speak of the Most Holy Trinity in light of all this?

The Mystery of the Triune G-D.

The revelation of the Trinity unfolds in the life and ministry of the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. In faith, we believe the person of Jesus Christ to be the visible icon of the invisible G-D.  

He is what G-D’s own life looks like under the conditions of enfleshed human existence:

The reign of God preached by Jesus is where God’s life rules. This rule is the opposite of tyranny and arbitrariness. God’s rule is accomplished by saving and healing love, by conversion of the heart, through the forgiveness of sin. God’s household is administered (economized) by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, who rules through justice, peace, charity, love, joy, moderation, kindness, generosity, freedom, compassion, reconciliation, holiness, humility, wisdom, truthfulness; and the gifts of prophecy, healing, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues. The Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ leads the sinner to atone and rejoice, moves the hardened heart to compassion for the enemy, enlightens the heart and mind to see the glory of God in the “little ones” of this world, welcomes and accommodates all into its bounty, and even changes our idea of who belongs as a family member in God’s household. The reign of God is governance for the sake of communion. It entails a radical reordering of existence: our attachments, our familial relationships, our worship, our fears and anxieties, our way of relating to others.

I urge you to linger over that passage. Its richness illustrates what it is like to live in the power of G-D’s own life. The astonishing breadth exemplifies what it means to confess and witness to G-D. To dwell in the house of the Lord.

To be a member of the household of G-D. To live in the name of G-D. In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of G-D reveals the heart of G-D’s own life. The revelation of the living G-D as perfect and profound love without beginning or end. A loving communion without rivalry or conflict, without division, domination or subordination. A boundless, deathless love so penetrating and fecund that it brings creation into being. An incessant “dance” among the three persons of the Most Holy Trinity poured out into time and space to

38 2 Corinthians 4:4


40 Psalm 23:6

41 Ephesians 2:19.

42 The earliest thinkers exploring the mystery of the Triune G-D resorted to the language of dance to describe the perfect union of Father, Son and Spirit. The Greek term is “perichoresis,” – an eternal elegant dance among the three persons in effortless harmony, thorough solidarity.
rescue humanity from slavery to death and to bring creation to fruition and perfection. Father. Son. Holy Spirit. Revealed in Jesus Christ.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.43

This feast affirms the ineffable love that is the G-D revealed in Jesus Christ. The unutterable love that is the G-D of creation bringing forth the world through the Holy Spirit. The profound love that is the G-D who so loves the world that the Son is sent to heal it and rescue it from extinction. Such is the G-D we worship in doxology and confess by living into the vision of the reign of G-D—the realm in which G-D’s own life becomes ours, for the sake of communion.

In this time of rage, grievance, accusation and melancholy, disciples of Jesus Christ more than ever must live into our faith in the triune G-D. Human beings are made in the image of the living G-D. Imago Dei. As such we come from eternal communion and are made for communion in history. And that demands very practical efforts to forge a common life in the grace, peace and justice of our G-D. Demands every effort to bring forth calm and rectitude amid these furies.

In this triune faith, we witness to G-D’s justice. And we witness to G-D’s peace. Justice for George Floyd and his family, as well as every single victim whose plight is made known. Peace in every community in this land, and throughout the world. G-D’s own peace. Not simply the absence of inequity, but the fulsome presence of justice. The eternal communion of the Trinity lived out here and now as communion in history. Lived out by us. Here and now. Immediately. Beginning with all those who lay claim to the gospel of Christ as wisdom and Jesus as Lord.

8 minutes, 46 seconds. Between life and death? An eternity.

2 minutes and 53 seconds. Between life and death? An eternity.

All our days. Between life and death.

The Most Holy Trinity – an eternity of living communion poured out into history. Our history. In that history, continuously we find ourselves stretched between life and death. Let us choose life in the name of the living G-D. Let us pray for the accompaniment of the G-D revealed in Jesus Christ as we seek to dry the tears, mend the tears, quell the fires, console the mournful and fashion a new and sturdy life in concert with one another.

G-D help us.

May almighty G-D bless us and walk beside us: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ  
2020  
Parish of Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist  
Midtown Manhattan  

We, though many, are one body,  
for we all partake of the one loaf.44

Corpus Christi.  

For those of a certain age, this feast is one steeped in pomp and pageant. Elaborate the  
choreography. The eucharistic Body of Christ solemnly carried through the local neighborhood  
announcing the depth of Catholic faith and practice in Holy Eucharist.  

The Body of Christ.  AMEN.  The Blood of Christ.  AMEN.  

Alas, we are not yet in a healthy enough environment to enter into the eucharistic assembly for  
the celebration of Sunday mass. Given the uncertainties surrounding the transmission of this  
virus bedeviling us all, we must forgo our participation in the communion procession. Forestall  
our reception of the Body and Blood of Christ. Delay our AMEN of assent and belief.  

Delay our AMEN. Not forsake it.

44 1 Corinthians 10:16-17. The second reading from the Liturgy of the Word for this feast.
I suggest to you there is no more vital word in all our liturgical rites, all our elaborate public worship. With our AMEN, we assent to our common prayer and ratify its being offered to the living G-D in our name. During Eucharistic celebrations, we include the AMEN when we sign ourselves in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. With the AMEN, we ratify the prayers offered on our behalf by the presider. We complete – yes, complete, make whole, sanction – the Eucharistic prayer at its concluding Doxology with a full-throated, sung GREAT AMEN.

In the communion procession, we first approach and then receive the eucharistic bread and wine with an AMEN – expressing our faith in Christ’s real presence to us, as well as our assent to become the Body of Christ in the world, in service of the world of G-D’s own making. An AMEN addressing the twin realities at work in the Body of Christ: eucharistic and mystical. In eating and drinking as Jesus taught us, we become the mystical body of Christ as expressed by Paul, the Apostle in the quote at the head of this piece:

We, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

AMEN.

Deliberation on all of this has deep implications for our manner of ministry and worship as members of the body of Christ – the mystical body of Christ. Here, I would like to quote at length from someone who was something of a mentor to me. Robert Hovda, who spent many years at St. Joseph’s parish on 6th Avenue in Greenwich Village. While I did have the privilege of multiple conversations with him, the real mentoring took place in the eucharistic assembly within which I often prayed, and Robert would frequently minister as presider and preacher.

**************************************************************************************

Who Celebrates Sacraments? The only possible answer to the “who?” is “the baptized and presently committed faith community, the Sunday assembly, the church.” Both worship (including sacraments) and mission are the whole church’s work, service, ministry in and for the world. As the body of Christ, the entire faith community (concrete in every Christian’s local church – that is, the Sunday assembly) is the basic minister. All individual and group particular services in that ministering community are specialized, auxiliary, and dependent on the ministry of the whole, because none of us individually is the whole Christ. The body needs many part-time and full-time servants, skills, talents, energies, voices, hands, feet, and so on, to do the body’s work with good grace and maximum effect. The point here is the whole church’s need and the whole church’s work.

Once we grasp that basic ministry of the whole church, both for worship and for work, then we can begin to understand and have a proper regard for all the specialized ministries the church needs. The trouble is that our clericalism has so distorted those roles that the understanding we seek keeps slipping out of our grasp. Our feelings about baptism and the initiation process are underdeveloped. Our feelings about ordination and vows are vastly overblown and inflated. Our language betrays the inversion. “They” are the church. “We” are “their clients, their patients, their consumers.” NO. The sacraments are liturgies which all the baptized celebrate as Christ’s body (in a particular place and time), and in that celebration as in the rest of our life as church we employ specialized ministries for the many tasks which require given talents, training, commissioning or ordaining. We are a community of differing gifts – none of us passive, none of us capable of doing everything that needs to be done.

So, the clergy do not “bring the sacraments to us.” Our celebration of the sacraments needs them and other specialized ministers for the sake of right order, relating this celebration to those
of other local churches, appropriate leadership, embodying our solidarity in Christ. When we act in concert with the leadership of these specialized ministries, then, that is what we must see: ourselves, our embodiment – not an outsider, not a stranger, not an enemy. His or her voice is our common voice. His or her hands are our common hands. That is why they are the voice and hands of Christ . . . because we are Christ’s body.⁴⁵

For members of the body of Christ in Baptist traditions, it is common in the call and response pattern of their prayer for the minister to use some variation of: “Can I get an AMEN? Or, “the church of G-D says:” . . . “AMEN!” This is no mere technique, no cleverly designed artifice to keep congregants engaged or awake. It is resort to the holy word that ratifies our shared transformation into Christ’s chosen vehicle for the healing and salvation of the world.

Body of Christ. AMEN.

On this marvelous feast of Corpus Christi – the Body and Blood of Christ – those of us in the Roman Catholic tradition here in New York City await the return of the Sunday assembly celebration. This year we have no processions: neither through our local streets, nor up the center aisle to receive holy communion. Our AMEN is delayed. But never to be forsaken.

The Body of Christ. AMEN. The Blood of Christ. AMEN.

The Body of Christ living in the world by the grace poured out in Christ Jesus.

AMEN.

---

During this somber period of suspended public worship, parish members persist in their commitment to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in impressive ways, both small and large.

Our efforts to feed the hungry endure throughout this time of psychological anxiety and social strain. In these urgent times, through the ingenuity and dedication of those leading these ministries, we have been able to redouble these endeavors. The number of folks now in need of the very basics for survival swelled substantially and suddenly as the economic consequences of this pandemic have taken their toll without regard for race, ethnicity or social class.

The many unsung heroes who volunteer, week after week, at our food pantries and soup kitchen have made valiant efforts to meet this need. During the current pandemic, this entails considerable risk and personal courage. Masks were never more important. Donations as well.

*Bread of Life Food Pantry* – Vince Pisani, Sr. Mary Perasa and their many dedicated assistants.

*Crossroads Food Pantry* – Ed Reigadas and his merry band of energetic faithful volunteers.

*Harvester's Soup Kitchen* – Dominic and Jia Guastaferro and their robust roster of loyal partners.

Our church doors have remained open throughout this peculiar time to provide a haven of calm reflection. Parishioners have made frequent visits for private prayer, observing recommended “social distancing” techniques – manifesting faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship.

Those charged with the maintenance and security of our two worship sites are responding in exemplary fashion – habitually cleansing surfaces, while encouraging “social distancing.”

Our pastor, Francis J. Gasparik, OFM Cap., has worked ceaselessly, creatively behind the scenes to shore up our financial health which has become compromised by these many weeks deprived of public worship and the free-will offerings of those gathered for prayer. He also has provided ample encouragement for the creation of this current modest outreach to parishioners.

Our Director of Music and Liturgy, Thomas DeFrancesco, has been instrumental in the production of these reflections. They posted on our website on a weekly basis. Those postings included multiple links to scripture, hymnody, psalmody and video material. He has been crucial in the choice of the aesthetic selections themselves. Furthermore, he has graciously assumed the technical tasks essential for having matters properly formatted and posted.

The Parish of Holy Cross—St. John the Baptist longs for the opportunity to return to public worship. Current projections suggest that may happen within a month. We are prepared to join our voices in a mighty song of thanks, hope and resolve – to live into the vision of the reign of G-D revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, confessed as the Christ.

[www.christinthecity.nyc](http://www.christinthecity.nyc)

*Michael J. Marigliano, OFM Cap.*  
*Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist*  
*24 June 2020*