

There is, it seems to me, a happy coincidence that on this day – which, every Easter season, is always “The Sunday after the Ascension” – there is a happy coincidence that (later today) we also celebrate a baptism, and that this day is – on the secular calendar if not the sacred one – Mothers’ Day.

This is only true, of course, if we all understand that while the story of Jesus’ ascension is not only wonderful theater and born of an accurate 1<sup>st</sup> Century world view of a three-tiered universe (which is not our world-view anymore), it is not the record of a literal event. There’s no rift in the space-time continuum through which a superman-esque Jesus pops into heaven above us.

The story of the Ascension is a transcendent metaphor, a way of saying that while Jesus was no longer physically present with his disciples he nevertheless was – and is – present for them and for us in very tangible, life-transforming ways.

Now there’s a distinction to be made here. While I’m not saying that the Ascension story is the record of a historical event I’m not saying that it’s fantasy, either. I encountered fantasy last week, summed up by my two favorite, overheard phrases: ““Would you like to wear your ears or shall I wrap them for you?” And “Look! That’s the real Captain Hook!”

Fantasy has a role in all of our lives – we don’t leave fantasy behind when we depart our childhood. But – and it’s a bit “but” – fantasy requires of us the ability and honesty to acknowledge that fantasy disconnects us from the everyday world and takes us to places that are either unaccessible to us, or simply do not exist, except in our heads (and, perhaps, hearts). It is, by it’s very nature, an escapist pursuit and ultimately we have to set it aside and return to the everyday world we usually inhabit.

When Rachel and I were walking through the stunning “World of Harry Potter” at Universal Studios we overheard a conversation that reflects that view and transition – a group of five young friends were headed toward the park’s main gate when one stopped and said “I’m not ready to leave yet, I want to drink this in before I go back to boring.”

The distinction between fantasy and the transformative reality of metaphor is what lies at the heart of all three events I mentioned at the beginning, and the most marked difference is this: fantasy takes us out of the real, everyday world; the story of the Ascension, of baptism, and of Mother’s Day place us squarely in that world, and offer us reminders of how to live there.

1. The Ascension story is a way of saying that it’s time to move on from the earthly life of Jesus and make room for the Spirit of God, who will not only be with us but in us. As the Lukan account reminds us, we are not to be air-heads about this story: “Why are you standing here gazing into heaven?” the angelic voice asks, leaving the remainder of the sentence unspoken but clearly implied: “because there’s work to do, and now you’ll have to do it.”

2. Baptism, likewise, is marking a transition, recognizing a change in status, AND reminding us that “there’s work to do.” Amid all the trappings of infant baptism there’s some really clear messages: that family is important and baptism connects to that family: both the biological and

the family of faith, both present and gone before; that while we might use symbols from within our family of origin – such as a flowing baptismal robe – we’re also using much more powerful symbols tying us to our new role and identity within the family of faith – water and oil, which mark out not only the cleansing and the sealing but remind us we are different people committed to a different – but no less real – vision of and presence in the everyday world we all share, and that we are these things as part of the Body of Christ.

3. And Mothers Day does some of this too. Mother’s day doesn’t appear on any religious calendar, which is, in many ways, a good thing – neither worshipping one’s mother – nor wanting to crucify her! – are positive ways of living in relationship!

But the way that Mothers’ Day appears on the secular calendar – or, at least, how it now has come to do so – isn’t a good thing either. Our current celebration is driven by a “Hallmark” paradigm; one that so often proposes a fantasy as if it were reality when focusing on Mothers Day – much like every other secular, card-giving holiday.

The origin of Mothers Day lies – as I mentioned in my E-pistle column – with Julia Ward Howe – who was a prominent American abolitionist, social activist, poet, advocate for women’s suffrage, and author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic – who founded Mothers Day as a way of uniting mothers against violence and war in the face of the most violent and murderous war this nation has ever fought – the Civil War. The last thing she wanted was for mothers to be put on a pedestal and treated as fragile. Her interest was, rather, to invite mothers into the heart of life, into the struggle for peace, and, too, the struggle to have women’s human dignity respected and honored in the same way that men’s human dignity should be respected and honored. Again, the message is the same: “there’s work to do.”

The linking theme for each of these three events is the same: engagement not escapism; an enlightened reality not a hollow fantasy; a call to focus, because there’s work to do. It is the invitation to dive right into the every day world where people struggle and die – and succeed and live – to be present to that world through actions and words, proclaiming with both that there is a way to live life which is more wholesome and meaningful, and that way is with God and the Community of God.

This isn’t as easy as it might appear. One of the stories that’s told of this continent and the people who came after Columbus is that we are rugged individualists. “I”, not so much “We”.

But for us as people of faith that’s really not true – or shouldn’t be! So we constantly need to remind ourselves be present through actions and words as part of a like-minded community not simply as individuals. We do what we do, we are what we are, we say what we say, out of our Christian identity – or, at least, that is the invitation to us: to do and to be and to say, by choice, with intention, out of our Christian identity.

So celebrate this day and the three stories that come together.

And see all of them as preparation for what we will celebrate next week o the Day of Pentecost!