

Seventh Sunday of Easter – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony  
Acts 1:6-14, Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36, 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11

Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, three great feasts of the Church knit together into one great event in the life of the world. Today we are in the heart of that event, between the joy of the Resurrection and the power of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Ascension is the feast in between and in many ways is an in-between chapter in the story of Jesus, fully human and fully divine.

There were few followers of Jesus left from the great crowds 5,000 who had been fed. Few who would admit to strewing palm branches in Jesus' path such a short time ago. The disciples must have been exhausted, physically and emotionally. They had been whipsawed between the utter despair and fear of the crucifixion and the joy of Easter. Whipsawed between the wonder of Jesus being with them for the last 40 days, and numb as they were led out to the Mount of Olives. Dazed as they went out to watch as Jesus left them. They had been told that it would be so. But, in the way of human beings, they did not believe what they did not want to believe. It had seemed that after the events of Holy Week, when they had thought they had lost Jesus forever, he had come back to them. They wanted to believe that this would continue, that he would stay with them as before. For much of his time with them, Jesus had told them he was only to be with them for a little while, and that he would return to God. Jesus had told them that when that happened he would send the Advocate, the Spirit who would never leave them. The Holy Spirit would transform their lives so that they would confidently go from Jerusalem to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. They were to spread the good news of what God had done for them and for everyone who believed. These men and women, most of whom were born in Galilee, and who had never been further from home than Jerusalem, these disciples heard that they would be sent to the ends of the earth. It was hard to comprehend, difficult to understand how this could be. Too much had happened, too much in too short a time.

On the day of the Ascension, they followed Jesus out to the Mount of Olives, followed him as they had done for weeks and months and years, to hear once again that they were being sent from their tight and familiar community to go in ones, and twos to wherever the Spirit led. It is no wonder that they were dazed and heard but did not really hear what Jesus had to say to them.

On that day, there was promise, and instruction. Promise and instruction were what Jesus had always offered them. The promise was that they would receive from God power, vision, energy and wisdom. They knew this was what they needed, but they could not imagine how it would come about. At the same time that Jesus gave them the promise of an advocate, Jesus told them what they were to do next. In that moment, they experienced relief, a quelling of the anxiety that had gripped them when they realized that he was leaving. And then, the instruction was not at all what they had hoped it would be. They were to wait. Not to act but to wait. To go back to Jerusalem and wait. It may have even seemed a bit like a cruel joke. They had waited in fear for three long days and then the resurrection and a seeming end to waiting. And now, once again they were told to wait.

And as the few who still followed, stood on that mountain near Jerusalem, watching as Jesus rose to heaven, they were suddenly aware of two men wearing white robes who were beside them. Though in the moment those gathered did not know it, these were angels. Angels sent from God to be with them in this time of transition from what was to what was to be, sent to be with them in this time of waiting.

Angels are very familiar beings in God's world. They are frequent visitors in scripture. The first mention of an angel is one who came to Hagar as she sat in the desert with her son Ishmael waiting and wanting to die. The angel's words gave Hagar strength to return to a difficult situation. This angel brought the message of hope that God was beside her and that things would change for the better. It was two angels who came to Abraham and Sarah and announced that they would become parents when that seemed impossible. It was these same two angels who went to Sodom to destroy the evil there. It was an angel who stayed the hand of Abraham when he was about to sacrifice Isaac. Hope, judgment, gift, message all are brought by angels. It was an angel, Gabriel who told Mary of the birth of Jesus. It was the same Gabriel who told Zechariah of the birth of John who would be known as Baptist. An angel brought the seemingly impossible news of birth in old age, and the knowledge that nothing is impossible for God. It was an angel who rolled away the stone from the tomb that thought to hold Jesus captive. It is an angel of whom Jesus says in the Book of Revelation: "It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you, with this testimony for the churches." The last mention of angels in scripture is the assurance that they have been sent and continue to be sent to us.

It isn't often that there is "homework" in a sermon. But, as we all know these are different times or at least that is my excuse. After we complete the prayers, and you have finished worship this morning, or sometime today take a bit of time to think of when you have experienced angels in your life. It may take a bit of thinking because we often don't recognize angels when they come to us. It is after the fact, in thinking things over that we may come to wonder if we have been visited by an angel of God. When has that happened to you? Make a list.

Now, the second list to be made is a bit harder for most of us. When have you been asked by God to be an angel in someone else's life, in some situation? When have you heard the quiet voice that lets you know that you are called to say a word or take an action on someone else's behalf. When have you been an angel?

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit and that happened in a powerful and unforgettable way at Pentecost. That Spirit resides in each of us, within our souls, waiting and available to guide us and to be that within us that allows us to be God's angels in the world. It is a fragile and delicate relationship, this mystery of angels. A mystery like all the mystery of God, mystery that can only be understood in the living of it, day by day.