

Sermon May 24, 2020  
“Jesus’ Photo Album”  
Pastor Joshua Graber  
First Lutheran—West Allis, WI

Grace and Peace to you in the name of God our loving Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Just a reminder that next week our service will be shared with leaders and congregations throughout the Greater Milwaukee Synod and the following week Presiding Bishop Eaton is providing a sermon for ELCA congregations so you I’m going to pack a bunch into this one, in case I don’t have a virtual pulpit for awhile! But I do think it’s great to connect and hear from the larger church. I need those reminders that we are connected and not alone, especially in these unprecedented times as we are navigating many challenges. I hope you value that too, even if I also hope you’ll miss me and my sermonizing!

As I read the Scriptures for this week, I couldn’t help remembering a previous time I’d preached on these texts. After driving around the country for several months, meeting people and exploring the possibilities of a new ministry for young adults and other mission ideas for the church, I ended up serving the church in my hometown while the pastor took a sabbatical in the summer of 2011. It’s hard for me to not associate these texts with that experience and I started remembering what was happening in the world at the time and of all the people I met on that journey, especially because it’s been so long since we’ve been able to travel and met new people like I was able to do back then. So if you will indulge me, please let me take you on a journey through time and space back to simpler time...nine years ago!

Our text from Acts this morning when Jesus tells his disciples “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his authority,” reminds me that while I was driving around the country talking about my hopes for the future of the church, there was another group driving around the country proclaiming that the end of the

world was near. They were from the Family Radio station based in Oakland, California. One of their leaders had interpreted scripture and found that the end of the world was going to be on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011. Followers of this interpretation sold their worldly goods bought RVs and drove around the country handing out flyers and letting people know the coming cataclysm. When the end did not come as predicted, people on facebook were sharing a picture of a billboard in North Carolina that had gone up on May 22<sup>nd</sup> that said “That was awkward” along with a quote from the Gospel of Matthew 24:36 “No one knows the day or the hour.”

Of course, the end of the world theories were not silenced on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011. 2012 was right around the corner with all its connections to the end of the Mayan Calendar and I’m pretty sure the Family Radio leader went right back to scripture to find out where he got the math wrong and came forward with a new improved announcement about the end of the world. But we are still here and I’m grateful for that. These are certainly hard times we are going through now... but they aren’t the end times.

Our text in First Peter, reminds me of a conversation I had with a woman at a store in Wallace, Idaho. She was a store owner who was curious about what I believed as a Lutheran pastor and I saw many connections between Lutheran theology and the things that concerned her. But for her an understanding of positive and negative energy in people and the universe was the key to understanding life and the world. She asked me whether I thought all the earthquakes and tragedies recently could be caused by the negative energy coming from people and their growing anxiety about the world and the future. I thought that was an interesting take on what the cause of the end of the world would be, not God’s judgment or the environment being destroyed, but our own anxiety. But I let her know that when it came to earthquakes, I was more of a believer in plate tectonics as the root cause.

But when I read the beginning of our lesson from First Peter, I thought of that woman in Wallace, Idaho. <sup>12</sup> “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. “

We are surrounded by strange happenings, and sometimes literally fiery ordeals, but God brings us to solid footing. We have the promise that the reality of God's love is more sure than anything of this world, but it is with us in this world. We celebrate Jesus' ascension this week, 40 days after his resurrection, but even if Jesus' physical body is no longer with us, his love is still with us and the Spirit is still at work to calm our anxieties and fears about this world with the same word of peace Jesus gave, and the promise that we were now his body on earth.

In Louisiana, I stayed with a young couple and their two kids who had to cast their anxieties out pretty far, after their home in the Saint Bernard Parish of New Orleans was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. I didn't know them that well. They were friends of friends. It was one of those, "I hope I don't need to sleep in the car" nights and never would have worked in our current circumstance. But this family ended up being my favorite hosts. And some of that may have come from the fact that they had been environmental refugees after Hurricane Katrina and had moved (I believe it was) seven times in the months immediately after the storm, so they wanted to give back the hospitality they received during that time.

When they found out I was from Wisconsin, they became even more hospitable and excited, because they had finally settled near Madison, where the husband had worked as a youth director at a Lutheran church. They were planning to stay there, but in order to be reimbursed for the damage from Katrina, the state told them they had to move back to Louisiana to a location where a house had been built. So they uprooted one more time and moved not back in the city but in a house an hour North of New Orleans. They missed the city and actually missed the snow of Wisconsin! Crazy people, right? That's why I liked them!

But when I read the end of First Peter about casting anxieties I think of them: 5: 6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. 8 Discipline

yourselves, keep alert... 10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

That line “cast our anxieties on him” are attributed to Peter, a fisherman, and yet we don’t always think about the term “casting” in fishing terms. One of the commentators I read this week made a great connection that would work for Peter and the nets he cast in the Sea of Galilee, or people sitting in boats on a lake near here (or wishing they could be) this Memorial Day weekend, or even all the fly fishers near Wallace, Idaho could have come up with!

Jennifer Kaalund, advises all of us who fish for people, to “‘throw’ our worries and concerns far away from ourselves to God anticipating that God’s care and concern will address them. One does not cast their line out with the bait and hope to pull it back in with the same bait. You cast out something you do not want in exchange for something that you do want. God’s care for God’s people is expressed in God’s response to our prayers if we humbly ask for help when we need it.” (Working Preacher for 5/24/20)

Because a decade ago, I cast my anxieties for a time and travelled the country in my barely functional Geo Prism, I was able to pull in a catch full of treasures. I collected so many stories, met so many fascinating people, found out about new places, and now I remember those conversations, that are now part of me and a part of my story. These experiences and relationships affect how I understand my life and this world...and how I think theologically. The Word of God is now connected to those faces and voices. I was looking forward to stopping for a bit during this pandemic and reflecting on those experiences, but it’s been so busy even if I am in a bit of an upper room right now. But I still feel very connected to those people, the people of First, and the issues of the world, and so often sermons are where they connect for me.

In a way my experience on the road and my time thinking about it is a reflection of what Jesus does in our gospel this week. In the first chapters of the Gospel of John, Jesus is traveling all the time, and then for five chapters Jesus is in one place, in the

upper room talking to his disciples. Our text today is the culmination of this long discourse. For many, even theologians and Bible scholars, this is the “boring” part of the gospel.

Suddenly, a story that is so full of life and characters and powerful images sinks into a discourse on theology and trinitarian relationships that seems distant and complicated compared to the rest of the story. But as I think back on my big trip around the country and other trips I’ve taken, it seems to me that Jesus is thinking back on his ministry in a similar way. I can almost imagine Jesus with a slide projector showing pictures of the past months as he reviews his ministry. It has been a ministry that had been constantly on the road, moving from town to town and region to region. For our service next week we will see photos of communities and bodies of water from congregations throughout the synod. As Jesus talks in the Upper Room I imagine what it would be like if there were photos of the people he met.

As Jesus has traveled, he has met people across lines of culture, faith, and social standing. In Cana, he worked with the servants and turned water into wine. In Samaria, he met the woman at the well. At Bethany, he talked with Mary and Martha, and then came back to raise their brother Lazarus. He healed the blind man at the pool of Siloam. Everywhere he went he met more people and they became a part of his story. And then in this place, and in this one long upper room monologue Jesus sums up what that means to him.

He is speaking to God and the disciples at the same time. But he’s also talking about those people he’s met on the road... and he’s talking about us, too! Those that are to come are included in this intimate connection he is sharing with the Father. When we think of the people we have met in our life when we hear these words, it gives them more of a heartbeat. We need to remember that even though this may sound like a very general theological prayer, Jesus is talking about real people. People he cares

about and he know God cares about too. Imagine the people you have known in your life as you hear these words...

6 "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9 I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

Jesus seems to be saying, "Hey Dad, they're with us now. You created them and now they've been with me. I've promised to be with them, and that means you are with them too." Jesus seems to be inviting God into a deeper relationship with us. And Jesus, at the same time, invites us into an intimate relationship with this community of God in three persons. It may be too hard for us to grasp fully what that means, but what's important to understand is that Jesus claims us as his own and tells God that we're with him and therefore we're with God too.

And it's not like this isn't what God wanted...Jesus says that the message he shared with us is the one that God wanted to be shared. God and our relationship with God is not easily described. But what God wants us to know is what we know in Jesus. Jesus carried a message of love and mercy to those he met on the road. And for us, we know he was the Word who died for us...who was resurrected and came back to the disciples bringing peace. Jesus brought us into promises of who God is, that we can trust. And we are so in need of trust right now. Imagine the trust Jesus had for others and they had in him on the road even though he was a stranger! We are just remembering how to leave our house and it's hard to trust others with our health.

Even though we are sinners, even though we wander, and are full of anxieties and fears, even though we may not have it all figured out. We are in with Jesus. What we've done and what we've left undone is all wrapped together in this grace. Jesus,

thinking of all the people he has revealed this Word to, and looking at his friends, who would deny and betray him, says:

"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. "

Jesus says eternal life comes in knowing God. That knowledge of God is offered to us in Jesus. No matter whether we travel the world or stay in one place, God's presence can be found in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus in all his mystery, in his intimate connection with the Father and the Spirit, is not lost in the *ether* of a spiritualism without a physical anchor. All of God's grace, the Fullness of God is offered for you, today. This Word is not just a message you can be detached from, as this section of John is often read. This is about real people, it's about love, and adoption. It's about how when we remember people, the relationship doesn't end when a physical presence does. And the Word is meant to live inside of you like that.

Jesus speaks to God of those he knew in Galilee and Samaria, and to all of us who he has met along the way and called a friend. What Jesus says in that Upper Room, is what he says to us, today, right now. It's like he says, "Father, the story you told me to tell, is now all wrapped up in these people, and now I can't separate them from the message, and that means I can't separate them from us." Jesus says this to God but he's saying it to us too.

The Word now has human faces to go with it. And that Word is the story we tell as we travel the way Jesus gives to us today. A living Word that is in us and for all.

May the peace that passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ  
Jesus our Lord. Amen.