***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

Acts 1:1-11 Rev. Tyler Amundson May 24, 2020

***Jesus Is Just Outside the Frame***

Please join me in prayer:

God of all of us, may the words I share,

May the meditations I have focused on,

Share your glory,

And be acceptable in your sight.

Oh Jesus, my rock and most definitely my redeemer.

Amen

Over the past few months at home I have seen a lot of the world, each day through a screen. A screen that is framed in.

My children have seen their school year framed in by a screen too. Assignments and teachers inside the frame.

I have seen my father and family members during much of this time, in a frame.

God didn’t design us to see the world in a frame, and so I find myself many times wondering what is just beyond the frame I have been able to see.

This view is our frame for the day of preaching, you can see me and the background but(snap).

This is what is really going on here…our frames can be limited at times…unless we rest in the knowledge there is more going on than we sometimes can see.

This scripture today is probably my favorite account of the ascension of Jesus. Buried in the book of Acts, where most of us don’t look for it. The ascension of Jesus in the Christian calendar actually happened last Thursday, but this was the Sunday closest. So, we recognize this story in scripture, today. The acts version is nice, cause it includes this foretaste of the Holy Spirit, the anticipation of the part of God that will inspire the disciples to go share the gospel message of Jesus.

I also love this version in Acts, because of where it leaves the disciples.

Here they are with the resurrected Jesus, in the flesh for 40 days they get to listen to their teacher, savior, and hear the answers of God. Then they finally get to the questions they are dying to know. “Jesus, you have told us all about the kingdom of God. Now we are just guessing, but is that is what is happening next? Like God will be bringing this thing into effect tomorrow. No more pain, no more loss, God’s glory will be here? Tomorrow, right?”

Jesus pulls out one of those teacher answers, one of those answers we all didn’t want our parents to share when we asked that dying question we wanted answered. Jesus says, “God has got God’s time figured out. It will be in God’s time.”

Well if that isn’t a parent’s answer to impatient children, then I don’t know what is.

Jesus then goes up into heaven, gets lifted up. The Greek word for heaven is Ouranos, οὐρανόν. It is the vanishing act every preacher dreads explaining to children. Did he ride up on a UFO? Ooh, that’s like Star Trek beaming up right? To which preachers answer, “No, child, it is not that easy, you will understand in God’s time.”

After Jesus goes up, the disciples are sitting there. I am sure they are thinking, “Now what…he went up there and he said we gotta wait for God’s time. He said something about the Holy Spirit and sharing the Good News. But I am too scared to move, I don't know how to do God’s work without Jesus by my side!”

The disciples are terrified of change! They do not know what is next!

Then like the two old men in the balcony at The Muppet Show, appears these white clad figures who nearly heckle the disciples. “What are you doing here you Galileans? You saw Jesus go up into the Ouranos, heaven. He will return in the same way he just left, don’t spend your time staring into the Ouranos, or heaven. Jesus has just stepped out of the frame for now.”

On Easter I shared pictures of empty churches to remind you all that our worst nightmare had come true. On one of the most important days in our understanding of Christ, our facilities, our houses built to God’s glory, were tombs. Since then we have heard messages of hope about what the resurrected Christ has done to share a message with the disciples, of the hope of God’s new day.

However, like those disciples who even saw Jesus get lifted up into heaven, I sometimes doubt the reality of what is happening in our world. In Montana where I serve alongside people I love, sharing the gospel, the deaths from COVID-19 have been minimal. Sometimes I doubt the need for us to have locked down, stolen away into our homes, left our churches empty on Easter. Sometimes I think to myself God didn’t will us to withdraw to save lives, we have just gone into isolation because someone told us to.

Then I look at the numbers of deaths in our country…and I am reminded of the realities we face. And I tremble like the disciples at Jesus leaving me here…in this place without a promise of God’s kingdom right now.

To date in the United States there have been 92,258 deaths at the proverbial hands of COVID-19. That is a 5.9% death rate compared to the number of confirmed cases. Seasonal flu throughout an entire season kills at a rate of less than 1%. In the next few weeks we will be approaching the total number of deaths in the Korean and Vietnam War combined.

This is a picture of the Rose Bowl stadium, it sits just slightly more people than have died of COVID-19 as of last Tuesday. By the time we get to Sunday, today, the stadium will be full.

Every time I don’t think this is yet personal enough in Montana, I remember this stadium image and why we take the precautions we do. We are saving lives, we are biding time, so that the global community can respond to a pandemic.

And don’t get me started on how this has killed the less fortunate, those of racial minorities, and those on our reservations at an increased rate. Because then we might actually have to change the way we respond even more.

There are nights in this chaotic reality when I feel sad for those of us banished from the house they built to worship a God that calls them to remember that not all have yet received the blessing of God. Like those disciples on the hillside.

Then I start to dream about what the return to church will be like.

When the saints come to worship again.

Then like a thief in the night it is taken again from me.

Like the disciples are concerned about Jesus stepping out of their frame, I am concerned that without the churches being filled up again Christ will not be shared.

Concerned like the disciples about Jesus being gone that there will be:

No more….miracles

No more Women in leadership, who went to serve away from Jesus right away.

No more Men by seas and drop nets, to preach peace and healing

No more feeding 5000, or more

No more healing the blind, the sick, and the less fortunate

No more….you name what we fear the church being empty means.

The disciples feel strapped, and small…”What can we do? How can we move ahead?”

Then like those two white clad figures, God nudges me and says. Even without worship the churches have done food drives, made masks for people who need them, prayed deeply for one another, worshipped together in a way they haven’t done for a long time, and more.

As we have gone through this crazy time I have been ridiculously proud of Billing Clinic. Did you know Billings clinic was started by one outrageously annoying and aggressive circuit rider name Brother Van and some Jesus loving women, known as Methodist Deaconesses? Here in this time of COVID-19 the institution that was dreamed of by church going, Christ loving, people over a century ago has served the Billings community our region, advised our leaders, and worked their tails off to make sure our young people can have a graduation that is meaningful at the Metra in Billings.

We started a college too, well that Brother Van guy did with Deaconesses again, the women can really get things going. A college that is part of Rocky Mountain College today who provided Physicians Assistants in our community that are filling the gaps between care throughout Montana. Church people came up with that idea.

Methodists in every region have dreamed this big with God.

And we are worried, I am worried about getting back in a church building. That somehow if we don’t get back in the building Jesus won’t work through us…well you and I are like the disciples who wanted to get back to a room with people who were comfortable. But, here is the reminder of what is next in the story, God didn’t let them stay there.

The disciples will leave our scripture spot today and hide in a room with each other. Their sacred space is where they would wait, hoping Jesus would come back out of heaven the way he went away.

I don't want to spoil it too much for next week, but let me just say Jesus didn’t come back. He stepped out of the frame for now. But God’s people didn’t get to stay in their sacred room.

They were driven out by God, the rush of wind, the Holy Spirit.

I don’t think God is done with Methodists yet, in Montana, in Billings or beyond. God shared a vision with Methodists in this town I serve in over 100 years ago. A vision that has helped an institution the churches started to serve and lead our community in this crisis.

We have work to do if we are to dream this big with God again.

However, we should not think this is just active get out there and get it done work.

We should not shy away from taking this time to study scripture, to pray, and to withdraw knowing that when we gather together next…God is going to drive us out to change the world. Be like the disciples for a little while and withdraw, God will be pushing us out.

In the meantime…I want you to know something.

Like the disciples we have too failed to sit in true lament. We want answers of what is next, and we want God here right now. We cannot handle the blues of not knowing, of possibly being changed.

It reminds me of a story I heard once where a student once asked, “Rabbi, why does God allow our hearts to break?”

The Rabbi thinks deeply, then responds, “He allows the cracks, so he can fill them with his light.”

Like Leonard Cohen once said, “There are cracks in everything, that is how the light gets in.”

Or as a wise Bishop once said, “God allows cracks, so the light can get out of us.”

Friends, don't hear me wrong. I know we are desperate for our spaces and places…for a new frame, for wider frames.

We need a companion…we need someone to speak with when we are going through something. This is how we were built, this is why we seek Jesus in our lives.

We are zoomed out, facebooked out, phoned out, facetimed out….

Rona hair style…we all have one

Then I am reminded that we have to push through this time and we will have to transition how we do church a few more times.

Just like I have had to burn more CDs and DVDs to connect to some people, others will have to endure one more connection through some fangled electronic device. We will push on together though, because Christ calls us to do just that.

Christ calls us to trust that others are walking in this time with us.

I have had some strange fights during this time with my kids, my wife being in such close quarters, but we have learned a deep love for each other again. We have done more quality connection than we heave been able to do in years.

I have talked on the phone more with friends, chatted more deeply with people just outside my normal frame of life, even prayed more. In many ways I have seen more connection to the people of the church I serve because we have had to ask new questions to be in touch with them.

And the Good News of this all, is Christ will step back into our frame someday in the mysterious way in which he left. A way we cannot explain. So stop staring into Ouranos, the heavens looking for Christ, and stop seeking him in the tomb. We are past Easter now.

Jesus is outside our frame, and we have to trust that for now.

Christ will return in the mysterious way he has left. He came in a mysterious way at Christmas time, we should be used to it. And we need to get used to the idea that he is just beyond our frame.

This is a new Advent for us as the church, and like Moses we may be reluctant to lead, but the world wants to feel the Holy Spirit with us. The people want to know God is calling them to be part of the transformation of this world into God’s kingdom.

In fact, I think this time is the advent of the church’s Holy Spirit. Jesus stepped out of the frame to allow us to see this, he is still there, but we are being asked to step out of our walled up rooms like the disciples on Pentecost will be asked, to do church in new ways and languages, and mediums.

And when you are scared on a hillside, or in a room, remember God is present with you just outside of the frame…