

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 1:6-11

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and **you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**" ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING: John 17:1, 6-19

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you..."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. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹**And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.** Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by[c] that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. ¹³"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶**They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.** ¹⁷Sanctify them by^[d] the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

This is the word of the Lord **Thanks be to God**

“In but not of the World”

I recall sympathizing with Barbara Brown Taylor’s feelings when I first read her comment in her book, *“An Altar in the World”*, the one wherein she stated that she joined a church at the age of 16, unaware of the vast differences in them, to learn about God but instead learned that *her love of the WORLD had been “misplaced”*. *“She learned,”* she said, *“to fear or at least suspect the world”*.¹ What she was referring to when she said this was real the tendency for Christians to feel that we are not to be a part of a world that is so ungodly with its evils, dangers, its lusts, chaos and unholiness. She was referring to the tendency for Christians to feel that we must be focused only the spiritual, the world ahead of us, our time eternal in glory with Christ.

Rev. John Buchanan affirms having had the same kind of experience in his life, and adds to the discussion a reminder of the children’s song that so many of US have also probably learned which reflects the sentiment, the words to which are: *“O Be Care Little Eyes what you see, O be careful little eyes what you see, for the Father up above is looking down in love, O be careful little eyes what you see.* The next verses are: *“O be careful little ears what you hear, O be careful little hands what you touch, O be careful little feet where you go, ...”*²

While it’s very proper to identify sinfulness in the world and turn from it, this thinking that Christians must withdraw from or transcend the evil world, itself, is nothing new. It can be found in the ancient writings of the Gnostics, who not only emphasized that the material world is bad and the spiritual, good, they believed that the goal of the human was to rise above their bad material (body), to experience the real, good life in the spiritual realm. The very first “religious hermits”, who sought God among the caves and the deserts, and the original monastics, who retreated from the world and all its distractions and negative influences, were also in a way, continuing this thinking. H. Richard Niebuhr classified one of four methods that the church uses to respond to culture as this too in his classic book, *“Christ and Culture”*.³ He called it the “Anti-Cultural” way wherein the mandate is taken that we are not to live in the hostile world.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *“An Altar in the World”* (New York: Harper One; 2009),11,12

² John Buchanan. *“Into the World”* <https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2009/052409.html> (accessed 5-19-20)

³ H. Richard Niebuhr. *“Christ and Culture”* (New York: Harper & Row; 1951)53.

Tertullian was, he said, the classic proponent of the approach. The Amish might be considered a current example of its living out, to the extent that the culture they embrace is not the one they are living in.⁴

Yes, there has been and continues to be a very established tendency for Christians to feel that we are not to be a part of this world. However, in both the texts that we read today, that is the Prayer for Disciples in John and the Ascension story in Acts, Jesus made it very clear that he wants his disciples, and us by extension, not to try to transcend the world but to live in it, to not spend our lives looking for an escape hatch but to work in our world, always trying to make it a better place, bringing Christ's light and life and love to it. He wants us to engage it, to be up to our eyeballs IN it, to serve, honor and respect the world that he served, honored and respected, that he took on flesh and came to be part of and that indeed, in the end, will redeem fully.

In the Prayer for his Disciples, the prayer said in the presence of them such that they could overhear, Jesus asked the Father to protect them and unify them because he was leaving them to be IN the world! And in the Ascension story, 40 days later, after his resurrection, after he'd spent time with them teaching and preparing them, right before he went to the Father, Jesus told them that they would be his witnesses IN Jerusalem, IN Judea, IN Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The disciples were told they were going to have to get to work, to quit staring up into the sky and get busy. They could not retreat into the desert to ponder eternity or withdraw from the world to consider themselves. They were to carry on the divine work which Jesus had been doing IN the world for others.

Now, Jesus made it also clear that they were at the same time not to be OF the world. They were not to be influenced by the unbelief and hostility towards God so prevalent in their culture. They were not to lose their distinguishing particularity as his followers, unable to articulate a genuine truth of the faith or witness a moral absolute. They were not to blow with the wind and spout "a flavor of the week theology".⁵ They were to maintain their purpose as ambassadors for

⁴ Anon. "The Real Lord's Prayer" https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=2813. (accessed 5-20-20)

⁵ Ibid.

the way, the truth and the life of Jesus Christ. *It reminds me a bit of when my kids once had a little blow-up boat when we were on vacation in a place with a pool. As I recall it had some kind of animal head on it. But the first couple of days, it was great fun for them. They paddled and paddled around the pool in it. However, the boat soon developed a small hole. Initially, the little bit of water which came in didn't cause much concern, however soon, a good bit of water accumulated in the bottom and the size of the hole increased. Other holes developed. Pretty soon the boat was barely afloat and no more fun. It had lost its purpose and we had to throw it out. I think we can conclude that the boat was supposed to be IN the water but not OF the water.*⁶

The disciples were sent to be in but not of the world alright, but they were not sent to be alone into the world. They were told, they would receive the Holy Spirit for the job. And that was all the information they really needed to have. That's all the information we need to have. We've been given the same mission and equipped with the same resource, the Holy Spirit to empower and strengthen us. It seems that all that we need is to know is where specifically is our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and how specifically will we witness to Jesus Christ when we get there.⁷

In the last two months, our church, most churches, have been forced by the circumstances of the COVID crisis to take our services online. And although it has been difficult for some of us who were not extremely technologically savvy to learn new skills, techniques and programs, we have managed to conquer them and are still doing so. Our vocabularies have increased to include new words like "livestreaming, video-conferencing, screen-sharing, and of course, zooming". We've been kicked out of our buildings and forced to take to heart the fact that a church really IS the people not the place of gathering. And in the process, we have learned to create community in new ways. We've become adept at making "just checking on you" phone calls, to-go meals and care packages complete with grocery and Wal-Mart gift cards. We've learned to think carefully about who among us is most impacted and vulnerable, and we've become very creative about how best to alleviate their suffering. We have even expanded our congregation,

⁶This memory was spurred by Kathy Howard's example in. "*What Does it mean to be in but not of the world*" <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/what-does-it-mean-to-be-in-the-world-but-not-of-it.html>. (accessed 5-20-20).

⁷Jill Duffield. "*Are We Asking Jesus the Wrong Question?*" <https://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/looking-into-the-lectionary/> (accessed 5-20-20).

reaching many others, an online community, so to speak, people who have never entered our sanctuaries and never will, people who may be homebound, who are away from family in other parts of the world or simply folks who've discovered a place to hear the Word of God and meet a family of faith or another family of faith. "Much of the expectations of what church should look like have been upended and yet we have found that the gift and power of the Holy Spirit is bearing witness through us still".⁸

We still wonder when will be able to worship all together again and what will it really feel and look like when we do? But regardless, this very difficult and strange time has affirmed for us that no matter what, no matter whether we are gathered or scattered, we are disciples of Jesus Christ and we WILL witness to him by engaging the sacredly-blessed world with our eyes and ears and hands and feet. We know we will witness to Jesus Christ by showing his love and grace and mercy and hope and compassion and care and joy to others in person or virtually.⁹ We know we will witness to Jesus by serving that world which he came not to condemn but to save, deeply and passionately and preciousy in his name.

In her book that I referred to earlier, Barbara Brown Taylor concludes that "*there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experience of life on earth...engaging in the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention we can give them.*" "*My life,*" she says, "*depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life IN the real world.*"¹⁰

Friends, let's go...let's go forward....let's go forward to live our real lives in but not of the world. Let's go considering what new Jerusalem, Judea or Samaria we are being called to and how we will witness when we get there. And let's go remembering that we do not travel alone. We are accompanied, guided and empowered by his spirit, the Holy one. *Jesus said, "And now I am no longer in the world, but you are in the world, and I am coming to you."* Amen.

⁸ Jill Duffield.

⁹ Jill Duffield.

¹⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, pg 15.