

“Knocking on Heaven’s Door”

As Bob was reading the passage from John I was standing behind the camera looking at the Ascension window over the entryway to our church. Because the Feast of the Ascension is forty days after Easter Day it always lands on a Thursday. Many parishes allow the Day of the Ascension to slip by with hardly a nod. I have been guilty of just that. But I feel convicted by this window and want to focus on Jesus’ Ascension this morning.

First of all let’s take a long look at the window together. One of the first things I notice about Jesus is that he is not buff in a sort of Renaissance way nor is he an emaciated Jesus in the medieval manner of depiction. He is depicted neither as an ideal of form nor as an ideal of suffering. On the whole he appears to be an average man on the street in his physique. It would seem that the artist is trying to make Jesus more relatable to us.

Next I notice his face which is gazing up at heaven. I remember a number of the Ascension depictions where Jesus is looking down ward as if he is ascending in a balloon and wishing those earthbound a farewell. In this case he seems to be astounded by his ascension and is gazing skyward and wondering what is to come. This is not the Jesus of John’s Gospel as we heard Bob read. That Jesus was always in control. A Jesus that would say, “Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.” That Jesus would be looking downward beneficently, and his arms would be outstretched in blessing.

Looking at his arms they are instead stretched up toward heaven. It is almost as if he is climbing a ladder stretching up to the next rung, or reaching upward for something to hold onto. Again, there is less of a sense of control or certainty of what is happening and more of a sense of Jesus being unsure of what is happening.

If we look at his hair and clothing we are given a sense of speed. His hair is whipping back in the wind. His clothing is being pulled down by the speed of his ascent. There is a powerful rush of air around him as he is pulled upward to a new life and a new or renewed home beside the Father in heaven.

Compared to the more magisterial Ascension images this image is one of uncertainty, wonder, and humility. Given that we do not have photographs or YouTube videos; it is the artist’s prerogative to show us what he or she sees when reading the story. The artist is giving a sermon in color, light, and in this case, glass. The artist who made this window for our church was sharing an interpretation of the scripture for us to ponder.

As I look at the window I feel it is a great gift for our times. Like Jesus in this window we are experiencing something in this pandemic that is unknown. We may feel windblown by the changes that are happening and by the new revelations that science and the medical profession have for us as we are swept up into a new life and a new normal; a new home that will become our home away from home, because our old home is no longer available.

We can look at this window and take comfort in sensing that Jesus may not have always known what was happening or been in total control. We can remember that Jesus according to our theology was fully human and fully divine. We experience a very human Jesus in this image. As he is drawn to heaven he is wondering and

anxious about what it means for his human self. So are we during this time of pandemic.

Anxiety and uncertainty are difficult for us. I think that is why some people are eager to rush back to the old normal or reluctant to wear masks and gloves. If we ignore the realities that the pandemic calls for we can ignore that it exists. If we just go on doing things as if there were no pandemic it will go away. But viruses do not care what we think. Just because we cannot see it does not mean it is not present. Just because we do not know anyone who has died of coronavirus does it mean it has not killed tens of thousands of people.

We are vulnerable and we will not be swept up painlessly into the heaven as Jesus was. What's more, our actions or inactions affect others. If I wear a mask I reduce my chances of contracting the virus from an infected person by five percent. If the infected person wears a mask and I am wearing a mask each of us have reduced our chances of contracting the virus by ninety-five percent. When we wear a mask we are doing so to protect others and ourselves. When the time comes for us to regather in church, and that time is unknown but is certainly weeks away, we will all be expected to sanitize our hands, wear masks and perhaps gloves, and to keep at least six feet apart. We will not shake hands, sing or receive communion, because each of those acts are ones that have a high risk of spreading this virus. It is an act of love for one another that we do these things. The last thing anyone wants is to have someone get ill from coming to church to worship God. That is antithetical to God's command to love one another.

These are uncertain times and we are anxious. Like Jesus in our Ascension window we are not quite sure of what is happening. But also like Jesus in that window we can be looking in wonder to what is to come rather than looking back at what was and what we have left behind. God did not send this pandemic to punish us, but as we deal with the pandemic God is inviting us to away from our selfish, materialistic selves to a new life that values one another, the lives of others, and living in a community of love and mutual respect that transcends our old selfish lives and draws us closer to God in heaven. So that as we pray every week "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." If we can move into that and away from our old selfishness we will come closer to God's Kingdom of love on earth for all people.