

Living the Spirit Life

It's Pentecost again, time to celebrate and give thanks. We sometimes say that Pentecost is the birthday of the church. An argument can be made for that, certainly. But we could also say that the church was born in a manger in Bethlehem or dripping wet in the Jordan River when a voice declared, "You are my beloved Son, with you, I am well pleased." Or perhaps it was born in gatherings of the crowds on the Galilean hillsides listening to teaching that seemed ancient and new at the same time. Or it was born when eyes were opened and legs were straightened and bleeding was stopped and even death gave way to a power and a presence. The church was born in a dark garden of betrayal and denial on a lonely cross on Golgotha. Or from an empty tomb early one morning when the sun rose.

Is Pentecost the birthday of the church? Maybe, or maybe that's when the church learned to walk on its own. Maybe that's when, empowered by fire and wind, the church spoke on its own, but used words learned from the one who gave it life. On Pentecost, we celebrate the coming of the Spirit to raise the church out of hiding and out of despair and to give the church wind at the back and fire in the bones and to encourage the church to proclaim; no—to live the good news of Jesus Christ outwardly and invitationally.

Pentecost is also the beginning of the long season we sometimes call *Ordinary Time*. The word *ordinary* comes from *ordinal*, meaning we count the Sundays—first Sunday after Pentecost, second Sunday after Pentecost, and so on. We don't mean *ordinary* as in run of the mill and boring, same old, same old. No, in Ordinary Time, we are called; we are invited; we are equipped and empowered to live the Spirit life—a life first lived by the one we call Lord, Jesus of Nazareth. We take the reins, and we live for him, even as he lives in us. It's Pentecost again, time to celebrate and give thanks. And to live the Spirit life.

Pentecost – Overcoming Babel

June 5, 2022 – [Acts 2:1-21](#) & [Genesis 11:1-9](#)

Color: Red

PLANNING NOTES

It's Pentecost! Go all out. Use red everywhere, depictions of flame, varieties of wind catchers—kites and streamers and balloons. It's time for a celebration. That may feel over the top for many congregations, but there are ways to appropriately pull out the stops and enjoy worship this day. Of course, we believe worship should be a source of joy every time, even on difficult days—a quieter joy perhaps, a profound joy that undergirds even grief and overcomes shame.

But this day is exuberant joy. Look at the Acts text: Why do you think the skeptical passersby were questioning the people's sobriety? Because the disciples were loud; and they were unrestrained; and they were inviting any and all to join in. Let the sound of worship leak out of the doors and windows of the church today. Startle some passersby with the singing and laughter and loud amens of worship.

Yet, this exuberant joy isn't the only, or perhaps even the first, element that marks worship on Pentecost Sunday. The remarkable event of the story in the second chapter of Acts, after the brief depiction of the coming of the Spirit, is the connecting of languages and peoples in an act of worship and praise.

Multiculturalism isn't only for those ethnically diverse gatherings of worshipers on this day. It is a vital element of Pentecost worship for everyone. We need the reminder that the family that gathers week by week doesn't all look like us, doesn't all sound like us, doesn't all worship like us.

There are two ways any congregation can move toward multiculturalism. Well, perhaps better to say that there are two directions for this move. One direction is to look within. What varieties of culture and history and ethnicity are already contained in your worshipping congregation? How can we coax individuals and families to share their history, their experience and expression, their culture in worship for the benefit of all? You might be surprised at what already exists within the body and new avenues of disciple making might be launched by doing a little research within.

The other direction, of course, is to look outward. And you don't have to look far. Who surrounds the church building or the wider community where the church resides? Who has come into your neighborhood with rich and colorful languages and traditions that could bring depth to the relationships and unity in the place where the church works to make disciples? Invite another worshiping community, particularly one that worships in another language, to join with you on Pentecost Sunday for a true pouring out of the Spirit experience. And if there isn't another community nearby, then look for videos and songs and prayers that come from a different tradition and different culture and bring them into your worship. Lean into the proclamation that our prayer and hope is that one day what seems to divide us—language and culture and tradition—will be the means by which we all grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, enlarging our understanding of the church and the faith. And then maybe we can overcome Babel by becoming one in Christ on this Pentecost Sunday.

PREACHING NOTES

One moment you feel like maybe you are making some progress. One moment you have a big vision, a goal, and a plan. One moment everyone is on board and ready for the next steps. One moment you feel like maybe this thing will actually work—whatever this thing is. You feel as though you are on top of the world. But then the next moment comes, and it is all different. You've been there.

The plans fall apart; the hopes are crushed; it all seems like dead ends. The relationships crumble; those who were gung-ho and onboard are now abandoning ship as if you've hit an invisible iceberg and are going down fast.

And the worst part? You have absolutely no idea what happened. What seemed to be such a wonderful idea, what seemed to be just what everyone wanted, became a source of confusion and misunderstanding. You thought that you were telling the story well, but the looks of confusion on those who used to be close to you told a different tale. It was so clear and unifying before, before the clouds of uncertainty rolled back in, before the distractions of a complicated world jumbled the message. It was as if all of a sudden everyone started speaking a different language.

Well, let me tell you a story. It always seemed fanciful to some, one of those Old Testament stories that borders on the mythological. Too grand for us to comprehend. And besides, it was obviously there as an “explanation” story. Like many of the ancient myths, this story was there to explain the reasons behind the way the world was. “Why,” someone wondered, “are there so many different languages and cultures in the world?”

You know the story: the babbling story; the tower and the languages and the scattering and the sin. Except, it is sometimes hard to see the sin. It seems as if God picks a fight. I know, I’ve heard the explanations. They were thumbing their noses at God. Well, maybe. Though there isn’t a real clear taunt against the divine powers in this all too brief story.

One explanation that does make sense is that this story forms the end of the first section of Genesis. After a bit of genealogy, we launch into the story of Abraham and Sarah. So, this is a bookend to the first part of the Bible, which begins with creation and the command from God to fill the earth. But here we see people choosing not to fulfill that command. They want to stay in one place. They built their city to not do what God wanted them to do. The explanation for the building is “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

It is understandable, really. Safety is our number one priority, it seems. Fear of the unknown is a great motivator. Avoiding risk, avoiding change is our prime directive. Yet, God seems to want something else for us. God seems to imply that we were created for more than that—that we would be less than what we could be if we chose to live the way that makes the most sense to us.

Now in the story, God comes down to inspect the construction project. Upon inspection, God determines that something must be done. “Nothing that they propose will be impossible for them,” is the diagnosis. That doesn’t seem like a bad thing. In fact, you would think that God would be proud of the offspring who have so much potential. But instead, God decides it must be stopped. So, the language trick is done, and boom, the construction project is brought to a screeching halt; and the migration out into the unknown begins—because the unknown came too close to home.

It all fell apart, and they weren’t sure why; I have no doubt. Except that the folks they thought they knew, all of a sudden, they realized, they didn’t know at all.

They couldn't even understand them anymore. They were speaking a whole other language.

You probably remember the books by Dr. Gary Chapman, variously titled but all including "The Five Love Languages." The thesis of these books is that we don't all speak the same language when it comes to love. Our expectations and our needs are different, and one of the reasons that relationships fail—whether between spouses, parents and children, neighbors, and co-workers, or whomever—is that people don't always realize they are not speaking the same language.

All of which begs the question: Does the story of the Tower of Babel story really talk about punishment? Is God angry at us for going our own way and making our own choices? Or does God give us diversity to enhance the human experience and invite us to overcome our differences and find true unity, not based on fear or complacency but full of the richness of living in relationship with those who stretch us and challenge us to be more than we thought we could be?

Okay, that is not a simple question after all. But then nothing in this life is ever simple. I think this story is witness to the idea that God prefers it that way. And when we think about it, we do too. We often think, if only everyone thought the way I do, life would be so much easier. Maybe so; maybe it would be easier if everyone spoke the same language, had the same preferences, leaned in the same directions. It might be easier, but infinitely more boring. Don't you think?

Maybe God wasn't punishing us for getting too big for our britches in that story. Maybe God was reining us in before we got so far off track that nothing would stop us from total destruction. Maybe the community you have to work to preserve, to choose to commit, to stretch to enlarge is worth more than all the towers we could build to the heavens. Maybe our response to the Babel story ought to be, "thank you."

Or maybe, Pentecost is the response to Babel.

Some years ago, I was attending the Festival of Homiletics in Nashville, Tennessee. Sitting in Christ Church Cathedral for worship, but two rows up in front of me, I saw a woman whose name tag announced that she had come from my home state. I didn't know her, but it still had that small world feel to it when I spied her point of origin. I also ran into a former associate pastor and a couple I

had worked with at a choir camp and various other conference events, not to mention a fellow pastor from the town where I was serving.

But that familiarity was not the real eye-opener. No, I think it was the diversity. There were Lutherans and Presbyterians, Baptists and Disciples, Canadians and Europeans, Northerners and Southerners, Parthians, Medes, and Elamites.

There was a feeling of Pentecost about the place. Pentecost has been one of the big three festivals of the church from the beginning. Easter was the biggest, of course, and Epiphany and Pentecost were the signposts around which the Christian life oriented. But while Easter and Epiphany are self-explanatory in their importance, why Pentecost? If Jesus is the center of the faith, then his Resurrection and his Incarnation would be natural foci for us. But what is it about Pentecost that puts it in such a position of importance?

You can't help but notice that Luke struggles to describe this event. He uses words that come close but aren't quite it. "A sound like," he writes, "tongues as of fire." It was sort of like wind, but not quite; it was kind of like fire, but that wasn't it either. It is an event that goes beyond description, beyond experience almost.

But the something that happens has an effect. It leaks out into the street beyond. And passersby are caught up by the sound that they hear. Voices and words are wrapped in the language of home. That is what makes them stop. I imagine in a cosmopolitan city like Jerusalem that is difficult to keep the noise down at the best of times. So, overhearing would be a common experience. But this one was different. They were drawn by the familiar language that they heard. It made their hearts stop for a moment, as they tuned their ears more carefully to the words.

There is a story of an American tourist in Germany. The tourist had no knowledge of German whatsoever and had wandered off the tourist trail and found himself in a small village where he was having trouble making himself understood. He was about to panic when he was caught in a sneezing fit. A passerby smiled and nodded at him and said, "Gesundheit!" The American rushed after the man and declared, "O good, you speak English!"

We all long for a familiar sound, for the language of home. We long for a connection. That was what was heard on that Pentecost morning. That was what the languages offered the passersby. So, they stopped and listened. Some

wondered and, I suspect, hoped. Others scoffed, being of a cynical bent. “They must be drunk!” they shouted. If there is an alcoholic beverage that allows you to speak in foreign languages, I’m going to get me some.

You would have thought that Peter’s defense might have been that: “Drinking teaches you languages? Intelligible languages, that is. Nonsense. You’re the ones talking crazy!” But that wasn’t his defense. Instead, he went with the “It’s only 9 a.m.” defense. It’s too early to be drunk! Or as Bishop Will Willimon said in a sermon about the Pentecost event - “Peter said, we’re not drunk . . . yet.”

The tongues that were not quite like fire and not really like tongues either, but some visible manifestation of an invisible presence was making connections. It was one, divided and settling on each, says Luke in his struggle for words. It was one presence, one sound, and it was heard by each, who then echoed the sound, so that more heard. It wasn’t an experience to keep to oneself, that much is plain. It was meant to be shared. It was meant to be community building.

Pentecost is the building of community. It is overcoming the differences and making connections. It is building up the body. Pentecost is about the church being the church. Pentecost reminds us that this is a small world, and wherever you go, you are likely to find members of your family gathered around the living Word and the winds of the Spirit.

Trinity Sunday – Does Not Wisdom Call

June 12, 2022 – [John 16:12-15](#) & [Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31](#)

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

Every year on Trinity Sunday, a plea is made to the worship teams planning for this day that you avoid the inclination to try to explain the Trinity. The church has wrestled with the precise meaning of this theological concept from the very beginning. So, freed from the expectation of trying to make sense of the Trinity, worship can be engaged in experiencing the Trinity. That’s where the doctrine comes from anyway, from our experience of God and the experience of God’s people from the beginning.

So, how do we experience God the Creator in worship, and how do we address this aspect of God in our liturgy and music? At the same time, how do we address and/or experience the Redeemer and the Sustainer? What terminology can we use to describe each dimension of our experience of God? Certainly, there is the traditional, which still speaks to many: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But there is no need to be limited by those words. The Bible is full of ways of describing each “person” of the Trinity. Perhaps a good preparatory exercise would be for the worship planning team to dive into the Bible to discover some of those descriptions and then find ways to incorporate those images in liturgy or visual arts. This does not diminish the tradition but enhances it, even as it enhances our understanding of God, as much as any human community can comprehend the totality of God. But we come closer, if only closer to knowing what we don’t know with this exercise. And we provide new and broader means for others, particularly new believers, to draw closer to God.

The white color for this week stands in contrast to the bright red of Pentecost and points toward the purity and majesty of the God we worship. But we must also remember that white, when you are talking about light, is the blending of all the colors. So, this liturgical whiteness does not elevate some people over others, but instead invites all people to join together in the whole that is the people of God. We celebrate the multicolored palette that is the church, even if we don’t yet see it in our local context.

Like the God we worship, Trinity Sunday worship can be grand and majestic. But it can also be intimate and personal. Perhaps there is a way of blending the two, the transcendent and the immanent, in dialog as we worship together. A creed like the Nicene, for example, can be paired with a prayer written by a child. A hymn like “Holy, Holy, Holy,” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 64), a perfect Trinity Sunday hymn, can be followed by a simple chorus like “*Jesu, Tawa Pano*” (“Jesus, We Are Here,” *The Faith We Sing*, 2273) or “*Dios Esta Aqui*” (“God Is Here Today,” *The Faith We Sing*, 2049). Our purpose is to expand our experience and understanding of God as we worship together on this day.

PREACHING NOTES

“He will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13b). You say that life surprises you? That you are caught out from time to time? How many of us had all that has transpired over these past few years in our long-range plans? Maybe we just haven’t been in tune with the Holy Spirit all these years. Maybe we haven’t prayed enough or listened enough. Maybe the gift of knowing was right there, and we just didn’t avail ourselves of it and were therefore doomed to stumble around in the darkness, constantly being surprised by the turn of events that constitutes our lives.

But is that really what Jesus is saying here? “I’m sending your own personal oracle to let you in on the secrets of your own life. Just pay attention, and there will be no more surprises.” Really? I don’t think so. Let’s look again.

This passage is a small part of the farewell discourse in the Gospel of John. These are the final instructions of Jesus to his chosen followers. Some have called it cramming for the final exam. But I’m not sure that’s it. It is more like the parent passing on instructions to the adolescent going off on a date. Or to go a little further back, this speech in John sounds like parents giving instructions to the babysitter before leaving their precious treasures with some near stranger and wanting to make sure the sitter has the information to cover whatever contingency might arise.

Only in this case, the worried parent is Jesus; the precious treasure is the world that God so loved that he sent this Son into. And the sitters are this motley crew of incompetent bumbler bringing to mind those guys from the *Hangover* movies or some such. No wonder he seems nervous; no wonder he goes on for three chapters; no wonder he tries to leave and then launches into even more instruction (look at the end of chapter 14, for example). But before you smirk too much at the incompetent bumbler of the gospels, it isn’t too long until they morph into the incompetent bumbler we lovingly call the church—charged with the same task of caring for the baby that is the world sorely in need of changing!

But here in these verses, the speech seems to shift a little bit, from instruction to promise. Oh, there is more instruction needed. Witness verse twelve—there is more I need to tell you, but your eyes are already starting to glaze over. So,

instead of giving them more things to put on the list (you know “when he cries, try this” or “her favorite toys are over here” or “give them this to eat, but not too much, as it gives them gas”—that kind of stuff), Jesus says, “Here’s how you can reach me.”

“Uh, wait,” you’re saying, “that isn’t what it says there, is it?” Well, no. But then cell phones wouldn’t come on the scene for a millennium or two. So, he does the next best thing. A spokesperson. A spokes-presence, maybe, spokes-spirit. When the Spirit of Truth comes . . . Truth, and not too long ago (chapter fourteen to be precise), Jesus says, “I Am the Truth.” The Spirit that is me, that is of me, that speaks for me and speaks what I have spoken and would speak/will speak in the future.

“Here’s how you can reach me,” he says. “I am in touch; I am within reach.”

“Can you hear me now?” That’s the question of the era, the question to the church today: “can you hear him, hear the truth, hear his voice, and know that we are not alone?”

But more than that, more than just a comforting presence, this Spirit, this connection, this Christ within reach (or Christ in our contacts for the cell phone users) is a Spirit of Truth. Tell us what is and what will be. “Declare to you the things that are to come.” Wow, does that mean we can make our lottery picks based on hints from this Spirit? Can we make our Super Bowl picks? Or, more realistically, can we avoid those potholes on the road of life? Well, in a word, no.

This isn’t a promise of prophetic powers or a glimpse into the details of a worldly future. This truth that is shared is the truth about the kingdom of God. It is the truth about living in community. It is the truth about reconciliation and about forgiveness, about grace and judgment. That is far more important than lottery numbers or winners of Super Bowls yet to come. And while it may not give advance warning of circumstantial potholes on your individual and corporate roads of life, it can give you tools for climbing your way out of whatever holes you might find yourselves in; it can give you guidance for helping you to stop digging your own potholes and sabotaging yourself and those you love. The Spirit that declares to you the things that are to come is a Spirit that tells you the truth about yourself in such a way that you can, if you so choose, course correct to reduce the chances that you’ll lose control.

In other words, it's about wisdom. Someone said, "wisdom is knowledge applied" or something like that. I found such quotes attributed to Charles Spurgeon and Beth Moore (and that's a duo that is interesting to contemplate), but who knows where it really came from?

In Proverbs, however, Wisdom becomes an entity. There is some debate as to the nature of this entity—an aspect of God, an independent being, a creative force, a supportive presence—these verses have given commentators and biblical scholars plenty of scope for debate—much like the discussions of the nature of the Holy Spirit. I'm not brave enough to declare that the Wisdom of Proverbs is indeed a reference to the Holy Spirit of John's Gospel, but the lectionary preparers certainly saw a correlation; that is why they put these texts together. But even if we see wisdom here as what has come to be called common sense or learned knowledge to be applied, the passage suggests that there is help available.

Wisdom calls, the text declares, and she offers a way to life, the life that God intends for all of us—a life of community and of connection on one level. This is Trinity Sunday, a time when we celebrate the mystery that is the nature of God—God who is one and yet is experienced and approached in three aspects. These aspects have been given a variety of names, some to correlate to human experience—though God is not human; some correlate to functions—though none encompass all of the power of God; some correlate to relationship—to each of the other aspects and to we who worship and approach this ultimate Essence.

Both the Gospel text and Wisdom depicted in Proverbs describe a God who seeks us, who connects with us, who guides and calls and shapes us. Jesus reveals that God when he offers the disciples continuing contact, even once he is no longer present with them in the flesh. Wisdom cries out with the presence of God, if we would but have ears to hear. God desires contact with us; God reaches toward us; God speaks. "In the rustling grass, I hear him pass, God speaks to me everywhere" ("This Is My Father's World," UMH 144). We sing that; we believe that; we are sustained by that—by wisdom's cry.

Second Sunday after Pentecost – From Madness to Stillness

June 19, 2022 – [Luke 8:26-39](#) & [1 Kings 19:1-4, \(5-7\), 8-15a](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Let's start with a word about liturgical colors. You can see listed here that the official color of the long season of Ordinary Time is green. This makes sense for lots of reasons: Ordinary Time is about growing in our faith, about accepting the gifts that we've been given, and producing the fruit not just as individual Christians but as the body of Christ. Green is the color of growth and of fruitfulness. There are other reasons why the season claims the color green. Perhaps you and your team can come up with some more and use them to inform the congregation who may never have given thought to why the green paraments are used throughout this season.

We started here, however, because there are those who get bored with a single color in this long season that runs from Pentecost through Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday at the end of November. There are so many colors, so much beauty in worship art and God's creation, why use only one color for this long season? Isn't this the season after Pentecost? Why can't we use red for at least a part of the season?

The season of Ordinary Time (or the Sundays after Pentecost—there is no "Pentecost Season") calls for creativity and artistry. Even if you are using green as a foundational color, there is no reason why you can't bring in a host of other colors over the season. Green represents life, and life is colorful. So, use more colors; use both/and; use a whole palette of colors to bring to life the worship in Ordinary Time. Think ahead for changing series or themes and find ways to enhance the liturgy with visual expressions of color, not just in paraments, but in banners, worship centers, projected or posted images, and colors. There are ways to move beyond the plain green altar or pulpit fall. Call on artists of all sorts to enhance the space.

This week, the theme is redirection. Whether we feature the Gerasene demoniac or the prophet Elijah, there is an invitation to reorient or refocus—from the multi-

voiced madness to the single call of Christ, or from the wildness of nature and of personal despair to the silence or stillness of God at work in and through the prophet and through the church. Worship is about sorting through the noises of our world, noises out there and noises inside our own heads, so that we can learn to listen to the voice of God.

Find places to use silence as a way of helping the congregation hear God's voice. Walk through meditative practices, perhaps, or invite worshipers to come forward and kneel near the table of grace. Invite commitments to pray, to silence, to slow down, and engage in Bible study or personal and family devotions. Encourage the small groups in the church to make it a practice to sort through the madness of their own lives together in an accepting and loving environment.

Underneath all this, there needs to be the cultivation of the belief that God is indeed speaking—that the Spirit has something to say to us. Sometimes this happens to individuals, but other times, the Spirit comes to groups. We aren't that far from the Pentecost story to remember that they all heard together; they all felt together; they all experienced that grace together. Let's foster the hope, the assurance that the Spirit has a word for us today as we gather for worship. A word that might move us from madness to stillness.

PREACHING NOTES

Why is it that sometimes Jesus asks obvious questions (like to blind Bartimaeus "What do you want me to do for you?"—Mark 10) And sometimes he just acts? "What have you to do with me, Jesus?" This question was asked after Jesus started to work. That's kind of curious, don't you think? The demons knew who Jesus was and what he could do. Indeed, Jesus had already spoken and told them to come out. But they played dumb, it sounds like. "What have you to do with us?" "Are you talking to me?" They recognize Jesus, but they don't really want to obey him. They want to argue with him or negotiate. "You don't really want me to go, do you? You aren't really driving me out. This guy likes me. We get along well. Sure, he's naked and living in a cemetery, but it's a life, you know?" It makes some odd kind of sense.

No, it doesn't. Maybe to a demon, it makes sense. Living with brokenness, living with hatred, living in fear doesn't make any sense. Not to Jesus. He didn't ask any questions at first; he was just trying to get rid of the problem—until the negotiation started. It's almost as if Jesus was prepared to take care of it until the guy chimed in. Jesus knows what we need, but is always willing to let us self-determine, even if our choices make things worse. Jesus was going to send the demons out; they chose to ride the pigs.

I know, I don't want to go too far with this metaphor. Demons can be a slippery subject for any of us. But it is somewhat ironic that the legion asks for a ride on the pigs instead of being sent to the abyss. Except as soon as they get on the pigs, they end up in the abyss. The very thing they wanted to avoid becomes their fate—their self-determined fate. And Jesus lets them because they asked. Just like Jesus left because the villagers asked. He doesn't put up a fuss; he doesn't argue that he could do even more good, given the chance; he just goes.

How many times with anger or even with kindness have we said, "No thanks, Jesus, I've got this"? "I'll handle my own stuff. I'll ride my own pigs, wherever they may take me." It was fear that caused them to send Jesus away. Luke says coming and finding the one they knew to be crazy now clothed and in his right mind scared them. It was a change that unsettled them. If the crazy ones start sounding sane, then by what do I measure my own sanity? They'd grown used to him being there on the edge of town, shouting in the darkness. He was useful for keeping the children in line. "Behave, or we'll give you to the guy in the cemetery!" Now he was just like you and me. The enemy, the other, they are us. That's kind of scary. So, they got together and stirred up their fears and all went to Jesus and asked him to leave. So, they could be safe, be great again.

"What do you have to do with me, Jesus?" That's our question too. "What changes will you effect in our lives? What growth will you seek? What effort will you require?" Require? No, the effort we expend isn't the result of a demand. Jesus doesn't come and say, "Get to work, or else." No, he just loves us into wanting to work. "What have you to do with me" becomes a man who begged to be with him. Did you catch that? That fear that pushes away becomes a love that desires to move closer. He wanted to be with him, now clothed and in his right mind, all he could think to do was to stay with Jesus.

He didn't stay with Jesus—at least not in the way he probably imagined when he made his request. Instead, like us, he stayed with Jesus by telling his story to everyone he met. He chose, having been rescued from a life of despair, to live a life of hope and of joy, sharing the love of Jesus with all he encountered. Having faced his madness, he now found the stillness of contentment. He was now in his right mind, Luke says, clothed and in his right mind. And that mind was focused on the mind of Christ. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” writes Paul to the Philippians (Phil 2:5). But what was that mind? It was a right mind, surely. A mind of longing and of serving and of hoping and of following. It is a mind of discipleship. We are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. But that making process is one of transformation as well. We are being transformed, even as we seek to transform the world. And sometimes it feels like moving from madness to stillness, to sanity, to a right mind—but a mind that may seem like madness to a world bent on turning inward, to lifting up self above all other goods. To be a disciple is to be other-centered, outward-focused; it is to see all the people, even before seeing self.

To get there, we have to be quiet. We have to set ourselves aside and listen to a profound silence. Just ask Elijah. He had come to the end of himself—the end of his strength, the end of his wisdom. And it is only in the strength of God's presence that he could hope to continue his life's journey. He was ready to give up. You've been there, maybe not to the degree of wanting to die. Or maybe you have. Maybe someone you love has been there. It's a place of despair, of surrender. It is not a place for condemnation, or shame, but of silence.

God leads the prophet to the mountain and let him experience a rock-shattering wind, then a mountain-shaking earthquake, and then a fire. A fire? On the mountain? “What was burning?” we can't help but wonder. Are we talking volcano? Or a mountain forest burning? Except there aren't that many forests covering the mountains in Israel. Maybe there were back then; we've read about the cedars of Lebanon. Or maybe it is a vision, a manifestation of a world bereft of the presence of God, the way that Elijah felt in that moment: abandoned and alone, persecuted, hunted and hounded by his enemies and at the end of his strength.

But the text says God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. In the loudness of this terrifying world, God was not in the destructive forces that beset us when we're at our worst. So, where was God? The text says God was in the silence. We once translated this verse to read, "the still small voice." I always liked that. There is serenity there, an echo of a presence—like the voice you hear in the back of your mind when you are steeling yourself for a difficult task. It is the voice of encouragement, the voice of presence—the still small voice that is hope.

A beautiful translation. But perhaps a better one is the one the NRSV presents as "a sound of sheer silence." What is happening on that mountain? It's hard to be sure, to be honest. It sounds like God sends Elijah to the mountain; yet at the same time, it sounds like God doesn't want him there. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Maybe God is asking for the prophet to do an identity check, or to present his to-do list. But maybe we should read it as "Why are you still here?" Elijah's rebuttal is that he's doing his best. And sometimes it feels as if he is the only one doing any work here, the only one putting his life at risk, the only one who represents the true God of Israel. Does his complaint include God? "I alone am left," says Elijah, which might be another way of saying, "Where have you been?"

So, what's with the silence versus the madness of the destructive forces of nature? Could it be that God is announcing God's presence in ways that often get overlooked? We want the big show; we want lightning and thunder to announce God's presence. We want it to be so obvious that it would be hard to doubt. And there have been those moments, to be sure. But here in this moment, God announces that God works in quieter ways, obscure ways, ways that seem natural—like coincidence, like happenstance, like in the everyday decisions that we make all the time. God is at work in and through what happens around us, even when it doesn't seem like it. God is present, even when it feels like absence. God is acting, even when it feels like stillness.

The man in the cemetery in the country of the Gerasenes was a force of nature who became a stillness. He moved from the earthquake of his madness to the silence of his right mind, a mind set on following Christ. Elijah was running for his life, so afraid of being killed that he wanted to die; then he encountered the

silence and found the God he was longing for. He moved from despair to hope, fear to mission, and got back to work for the God he served.

Third Sunday after Pentecost – Brought Home in the Spirit

June 26, 2022 – [Luke 9:51-62](#) & [2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

Home is a recurring theme for worship. The call to come home, the desire to go home, feeling a sense of home all strike at the heart of who we are as human beings. This is why we return again and again to these themes. Plus, it seems to be prevalent in the scriptures. However, as with most things, Jesus is inviting us to think differently about home and what it means to be at home—not so much the warm and cozy hearth and home, but the relationships and commitments that we have within the human community.

Worship can be a place of celebrating the home we create within the body of Christ. We consider the connection we have, the support we have experienced, and the acceptance that comes from those we sometimes call “brother” or “sister” in Christ. At the same time, we also consider the openness of the community. Too much celebration of the relationships we already have can feel like insider language to someone who doesn’t yet feel a part of the faith community. How do we present the church as the home with open doors so that all are gathered up into the family from the moment they enter the space? Likewise, we consider our home to be among the people who don’t gather with us when we worship. We are in service to the whole world, and our slice of it in our neighborhoods. So, we avoid thinking of “us and them” and consider everyone we encounter to be a part of our sense of home.

We pray, then, for a sense of corporateness and connection within the body of Christ. We ask for eyes of inclusion and invitation, ways to offer the wider community a sense of home, particularly those on the margins who have felt disconnected and unwanted. We ask for strength to risk reaching out and carrying

the idea of home with us whenever we engage in conversation. We sing about the Christ who claimed us and made us feel at home and the Spirit that sustains our unity of mind and heart. We give God thanks for the sense of place and the relationships of mutual love and support that we too often take for granted.

Not just this week, but especially this week, we should find ways of posting pictures of the church being the church, the connections that we make with the wider community as well as the times of fellowship within. Make real the idea of home in as many ways and in as many places as possible throughout the building and even within the worship space. Project them on the screen or post them on the walls so that you can people see that there is a place that feels like home here.

PREACHING NOTES

Growing up in a “parsonage family” as the child of a United Methodist pastor, home was often a contentious subject. When you itinerate as a family, you often have a different view of home than your peers who seem more settled. Add to all of that, we then had those later in life questions of how to care for aging parents who shouldn’t be left on their own any longer. So, for a time, we moved parents into our home. They didn’t like it. My dad, the retired pastor especially. He put up with it for a while, but then began to grumble, almost daily. He wanted to go home. He wanted to get mom and take her home. He felt unmoored somehow, like he couldn’t figure out what to do with himself. He would stand in the middle of the kitchen, usually when my wife was trying to get a meal for us all; like he was trying to remember what he was going to do. Or maybe even who he used to be.

He just wanted to go home. Dad was a pastor and therefore moved around from place to place. But then he walked away from that itinerant life and settled down in a house that should have been bulldozed and rebuilt from scratch; instead, he worked on it piecemeal mostly on his own until it was almost livable. He was quite proud of it, to say the least. And he wanted to go home. He didn’t say it all the time, but it was there in the distant stare of his eyes, in the slump of his shoulders, in the inability to find anything to do.

Phillip Phillips has probably made a mint on the song called “Home.” It was the theme song for the USA women’s Olympic gymnastics team in 2012, and it had been used in every other commercial heard on TV for a while. They say he didn’t like it at first and didn’t want to sing it, mostly because it wasn’t his song. He prefers the ones he writes himself, supposedly. But I think he has made his peace with this one. It has become his signature song. He probably will never do a concert and not sing “Home”; fans would demand their money back.

It is a good song, but it became a phenomenon. In an uncertain age, singing about home captured everyone’s attention. It touched something deep within us—some longing, some hope that almost goes beyond words—home, family, roots, settling down, putting your feet up. Make yourself at home.

It’s funny how Jesus seems so against all those things. Wait. What? Really? You’d think that he’d be in favor of that—of helping us to get home, of finding where we belong; finding where we relate, fit in, are known. Isn’t he? Isn’t that what this faith thing is all about? Finding ourselves? Arriving at home, at last?

Well, you’d think so. And he does do all those things, will all those things for us. But his description of that is different from ours. His methodology of finding seems almost like losing. His depiction of arriving sounds more like journeying. We want to be settlers; he wants us to be pilgrims.

Sometimes even home isn’t home. The unreachable destination, the unrealized dream, the undiscovered country. Are we supposed to feel sorry for him with that “foxes and birds” thing? Are we really supposed to leave our parents to deal with their own end-of-life issues? Are we really just supposed to slip away, rudely, as though the people who know us best aren’t important enough to even bid farewell?

You know, this setting-the-face thing can be a real pain in the associations. The Samaritans didn’t want to deal with him because of it. It ticked off the disciples too; they wanted to call down fire to burn them all up. Everyone seems to be a bit on edge in chapter nine of the Gospel of Luke. It’s like everyone just needs to go home. Go home and settle down. Go home and calm yourself. Maybe if Jesus just lightened up a bit.

We don't like the edge Jesus puts on things at times. We don't like the demand part of the faith, the commitment part. We like the grace part, and we often interpret that as "anything goes, as long as your heart is in the right place." We like the "be like little children" command rather than the "be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." That must have been a bad day for Jesus. The folks who came alongside must have felt like they caught Jesus on a bad day. Understandable, really, since he was heading to Jerusalem to die a difficult death, after all. So, we can forgive his curt responses, his heavy-handed demands. He was a man without a home, so he was anxious to get back to where he belonged, back into the arms of the Father.

On the other hand, maybe he wasn't just short-tempered, caught in a bad moment. Maybe he knows something he desperately wants us to know. And that is that home is never found by standing still, or even less by going back. Who said that you can't go home again? It might as well have been Jesus. It is never back there. It is never found through nostalgia, through wishing that it was like the good old days that never were, except in our fractured memories.

The other thing he wants to tell us here is that home isn't a place as much as a relationship. The first eager follower would have been better to have simply said, "I will follow you." By adding in the "wherever you go," it became about the destination, not about the journey. I became about place and not about the commitment to follow the Word made flesh. The other two? They wanted a both/and. They wanted to follow but wanted to stay behind at the same time. They wanted to divide their focus, a little bit here and a little bit there. I want to follow, and will follow, but I've got responsibilities, so as soon as get my life under control, I'll be back. I've got lots of relationships; as soon as I get them in order, I'll be back.

I wonder if the second one had simply said, "Yes, I'll follow you," if Jesus would have sent him back to care for his father. Having made the commitment to be in relationship with Christ, then all our other relationships and responsibilities become even more vital, even more pressing. Because now it is in the light of Christ that we fulfill these other duties. It is in the light of Christ that we serve and love and create home.

Home has always been a moveable feast. Not this place or that place, but the accommodation created when followers journey together for a time. There's no place like it.

But where is it? That might be the question that Elisha and Elijah seem to be wrestling with in our text from the Hebrew Scriptures. There is something going on here—something about wandering and something about going home, but it isn't quite clear which is which.

Surely you agree that there is some significant wandering going on in these verses. We start in Gilgal, head to Bethel, then over to Jericho, and then to the Jordan. That's quite a hike for a guy on his last day on earth! I heard a sermon once that counted the miles. From Gilgal to Bethel was seven miles. From Bethel to Jericho was eleven miles, and from Jericho to the Jordan was a mere five miles. All of which means that on Elijah's last day on earth, he wandered twenty-three miles. That's almost a marathon. Wow, pretty amazing really. But why?

Maybe it was just wandering. Maybe he was looking for a little alone time, a little "Elijah time." He did keep telling Elisha to stay behind. Some commentators say Elijah was testing Elisha to see if he would really go through with it. But I don't know. It seemed like Elisha was making a pest of himself and wouldn't give Elijah space. So, maybe he kept moving trying to shake the kid.

Or maybe there was a destination in mind. Gilgal: while there are many places with that name, and we can't always be sure which is referred to here; it was a place of remembering. There were standing stones set up there as a reminder of what God has done in our midst. So, from a place of remembering, Elijah headed to Bethel, the "house of God." This is the place where Jacob wrestled with the angel to receive a blessing. Then Jacob named it Bethel, perhaps thinking that he wrestled in God's living room. But it was a place full of the presence of God.

So, from a reminder of the Presence to a place where one wrestled with that Presence. From there he went to Jericho. We know Jericho, a place of victory, or walls falling down, and battles won. So, is this a place of triumph? Well, yes, but whose triumph? Remember the story of Jericho? Before the march and the trumpets and the urban renewal? Joshua stands on the brink of war, not sure he can win, but dedicated to the fight anyway. When, in the dark of the night, a warrior appears to him. And Joshua asks what any of us would have asked:

“Friend or foe? Whose side are you on?” The warrior’s answer? “Neither! I’m here as the commander of the Lord’s army.” Or as one commentator has noted, the warrior said, “I’ve not come to fight on either side, I’ve come to take over”. And Joshua let him. Joshua falls on his face and says, “What does the Lord want from me?”

Jericho was a sign of triumph, but it was God’s triumph and not ours. So, while a scene of victory, it is a victory that comes from surrender. It is pledging allegiance not to any earthly power, but to the Word of the Lord. So, from victory out of surrender, what might be left? Where else should we wander on our last day on earth? Well, nowhere else but the Jordan.

The Jordan is the river down by which we lay down our sword and shield. The Jordan is that barrier across which we look and see a band of angels coming to carry us home. The Jordan is the symbol of death and Resurrection in baptism, and it is the entrance into the Promised Land. Elijah wandered the route of the people of God, from awareness to contention toward surrender and victory and then came to the end in the Presence of the Kingdom.

It is the journey of our own life in faith. And we may at times find ourselves retracing our steps, revisiting different stages on the journey. But by the grace of God, and the mantle of our mentors in the faith, we will find our way in the end. We may be all over the map, but we do indeed have a destination. We’re heading home, and home is where God is. Home is here and home is not here. Home is the relationships that we build with one another, but most important with God. We are brought home in the Spirit, the one who calls and the one who sends. Time to go home.