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June 19, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Pentecost 5/Proper 7/Year C/I Kings 19:1-15a; Psalms 42-43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

### An Exalted Vision

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

The story is told in both Jewish tradition and Indian folklore of a patriarch who was about to die and did not know which of his four sons should receive his inheritance and be elevated to the leadership of the community. And so he said, “Go forth, my sons, pioneer into the unknown, and bring me back some tangible sign of how far you have progressed.”

The first son started out and came to a seemingly impenetrable forest. He could not go on, and so he picked a bramble bush and returned with it to his father. The second son came to the forest and went through it until he came to a turbulent stream. He picked some moss from the bank and returned with it to his father. The third son traversed the forest, and, by persistent effort crossed the turbulent stream, but was stopped by a towering mountain. He picked up a flower that grew at the base of the mountain and returned with it to his father.

The fourth son, even more persistent, went through the forest, crossed the turbulent stream, and confronted by the mountain, determined to make the steep ascent. He fell, but scrambled to his feet and persisted upward until, bruised and bleeding, he stood on the mountaintop. He looked up and he looked down, and then he returned to his father.

This fourth son said to his father, “I have climbed to the very top of the mountain, and O my father, I looked up and felt so close to God that I wanted to reach up and to touch God. And then I looked down and saw little specks below, and I realized that they were more than specks—

they were men and women. And, even more than men and women, they were my brothers and my sisters. I have brought you back nothing tangible except an exalted vision of the parenthood of God and the fraternity of all people.” (Wm. B. Silverman, Rabbinic Stories for Christian Ministers and Teachers, 202-3)

We are here today because we have been blessed with at least a glimpse of an “exalted vision,” and this particular week we have truly needed that vision. After the events of the wee hours of last Sunday morning—events that some of us were unaware of when we came to church that day—the mass shooting at the bar in Orlando—we and many are left with never-ending questions and complex emotional responses. We want to be able to understand and to do something to prevent, or at least reduce the magnitude, of further such events. We want to do something to begin the healing of the brokenness of our world, but the problems are so massive that it is hard to even see starting points for intervening in a meaningful way. What difference can we make? Maybe even prayer seems futile. I was reminded this week of the opening lines of the book of Habakkuk—“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.” We want to believe that God could surely do something to stop the destruction and bring peace on Earth.

How are we to ever get more than a glimpse of God’s intention for us? What will it take for us to see the “exalted vision” full-on and full-force—so that we will never be able to wonder if our minds are simply playing tricks on us when the glimpse occurs? How are we ever to make the kingdom of God a reality on this planet—while there is still time?

An ongoing subject of interest among human development researchers and experts has been that of observing the stages that individuals progress through as we mature, and life experiences and education push us forward to grow and change. As young children, we live in a “magical” world. It’s all about “me, me, me.” Nothing else matters as long as individual needs are met, and they must be met “right now.” The idea of sharing makes no sense. This is the egocentric stage, and it is very normal for small children.

Then we move to the “mythical membership” stage—the ethnocentric stage. It’s all about “us, us, us” and “us versus them.” It’s about nation and tribe and how “we are right and they are wrong” and “we are stronger and smarter and obviously superior to them.” There is exclusionary behavior and frequent conflict—gang aggression, even sectarian violence. This behavior is normal for older children and younger teens.

Hopefully we move beyond “mythical membership” and into the “rational” stage, where we become secure enough to see that all are to be valued. Egocentrism and ethnocentrism fall away, and we become, instead, world-centric. There still, however, can be a sense that there should be one system that will fit all and one way of life that is “most right.” We can see that in the political opinion that says that everyone should live in a democracy—not fully taking into account the world view and preparation necessary for that.

The next stage is called the “pluralistic” stage—the expanded world-centric stage. In the pluralistic stage, diversity and tolerance and equality are valued. There is a recognition that there are many legitimate paths of life. There doesn’t have to be one right, or even “most right” way.

And, finally, the “integral” stage that sees that we all have the capacity to continually evolve and be transformed. That “integral” stage was the “exalted vision” of the young man who

went through the forest, crossed the turbulent stream, and completed the ascent up the mountain in order to see the complete unity that God intends for us.

Father Thomas Keating, Trappist monk and spiritual teacher, has observed the ways in which Christianity functions in relation to these stages of human development; for example, how we often get stuck at the “mythical” stage and let our religion be something that divides us rather than unites us—even into the afterlife. We all know how that line goes—“Only members of the Church of Christ, or some other church, are going to have an eternal reward!” In contrast to that, we can hope that more and more Christians are seeing that God is always calling us to grow and change and expand our boundaries—to move beyond that level of mythic membership where we are right and everyone else is wrong—where the boundaries between us are rigid and always serving to separate. We can hope that more and more Christians are seeing that God is always calling us to higher levels of perception—where we can see the stranger, not only with tolerance and acceptance, but with appreciation and true respect and full valuing. We can hope that more and more Christians are seeing that God is always calling us to live our oneness—our complete unity, which does not depend on “sameness” or “likeness” in any respect—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, ability or disability, marital status, education, financial status, political affiliation—the possibilities go on and on.

We cannot walk this path toward “integral conscious” through our own power of will. For us, it’s a “Christ-consciousness” thing. We can only walk it by realizing the full truth of what Paul says—“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

The Church is called to be the body of Christ and a sign of the kingdom of God. Catholic priest and prolific writer, Henri Nouwen, writes, “Community has little to do with mutual compatibility. Similarities in educational background, psychological make-up, or social status can bring us together, but they can never be the basis for community. Community is grounded in God, who calls us together, and not in the attractiveness of people to each other. There are many groups that have been formed to protect their own interests, to defend their own status, or to promote their own causes, but none of these is a Christian community. Instead of breaking through the walls of fear and creating new space for God, they close themselves to real or imaginary intruders. The mystery of community is precisely that it embraces all people, whatever their individual differences may be, and allows them to live together as brothers and sisters of Christ and sons and daughters of his heavenly father” (Making All Things New, 82-3).

It is Christ in us--Christ with us--that enables us to be more than “only human,” that enables us to stretch our limits and be one with those whom we perceive as being so different—so wrong—so frightening. The Holy Spirit enables us to continually become the body of Christ—to be the bearer of miracles—to create “signs of the kingdom”—to be witnesses of healing, reconciliation, and unity in a world desperately in need. May God give us the strength and the courage and the will to go through the seemingly impenetrable forest, to cross the turbulent stream, and to ascend to the top of the mountain in order to see the exalted vision and allow it to transform us into all that we were created to be. Amen.