

“In Transit Gloria”
May 12, 2024

Epiphany 2:1-10
Acts 1:1-11

In all the churches I’ve served, sooner or later I mention my friend, Craig, in a sermon. Today is such a day, although I’ve probably talked of him before this.

Craig is my dear friend whom I’ve known since grade school. He was reading Paul Tillich in high school. He’s now a retired architect. And his humor and way with words are outstanding.

Decades ago, when people still wrote letters, he sent one while he was traveling somewhere—maybe just on his way to or from college. The return address read only: “In Transit Gloria.” That’s where he could be found.

It was, of course a play on the Latin warning: *Sic transit gloria mundi*—“Thus passes the glory of the world,” or “fame is fleeting.”

“In transit gloria”—that playful phrase from my friend has been lodged in my brain for over 40 years.

“In transit” simply means traveling or being taken from one place to another, as Craig was at the time.

“In transit *gloria*” takes things to a whole other level. Perhaps it refers to the joy, the *glory* of being in motion, of getting out of one place and heading someplace better—or at least *possibly* better.

There’s also the sense of traveling *to* glory, being taken *to* glory—and all that might suggest. It evokes the words of the old hymn about our being “changed from glory into glory”—whatever *that* might mean.

In all its silliness and obscurity, that phrase seemed to be the best title for this Ascension Sunday sermon. This day the scriptures speak of travel and transformation; they speak of glory. And they speak to our lives in these days.

In Transit Gloria.

In the timetable of the Book of Acts, the Ascension occurs forty days after Easter. Forty days. We’ve heard that number before. Noah and his floating zoo waiting out forty days and nights of rain. Moses and the Hebrew people in the wilderness for forty years. Jesus in the wilderness for forty days. It’s the way the Bible speaks of a long period of time.

Enough time for it to sink in that death wasn’t the end.

Enough time for those frightened followers to see that God was doing something new and that they were going to be a part of it.

Enough time to be convinced that the Jesus who was crucified was alive and at work among them.

Then, at the end of those forty days, while the disciples are watching, Jesus is lifted up and a cloud takes him out of their sight. In transit gloria.

As it is forty days after Easter, Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday. But, as I've said before, even in the best of circumstances, Congregationalists aren't going to get together in the middle of the week to mark this event. So, if we remember it at all, we recognize it today.

And we do so with some, what—reluctance, embarrassment?

Yes, we still talk about the sun “rising” and “setting,” even though we know that's not what's happening. Even so, accounts of going “up to heaven” can make us squirm. Maybe you agree with Paul Tillich when he said of the Ascension: “If taken literally, its spatial symbolism would become absurd.”

Turning from an easy, if troubling, literalism, then, we discover the surprising ways in which this story can help us in these days.

We can begin with its sense of that things are changing.

We are currently in a season of change—of endings and new beginnings.

The school year comes to its conclusion. The dorm rooms are cleared out and the students who have been worshipping with us are noticeably absent. There's a wistfulness that we feel as we look for them in their now empty pews.

At the same time, new things are happening: summer jobs, new full-time employment, all that comes with graduation—or as it is perhaps better called, *commencement*, a setting out on new paths.

S. prepares to move away—and my guess is that there are a lot of mixed feelings, as there are when anyone leaves. Others are preparing for vacation travel, going to new places or returning to familiar spots.

In transit...

It is also Mother's Day today, and I generally don't make much of that in my sermons. But here's the thing: motherhood is all about change, about transformation. Fatherhood, too, I think. There are those daily changes, great and small, that we see in our children—and that they see in us. In the daily business we might not notice, but, again, this is one of those times in the year when we look around and see all those changes in our children.

People in Great Britain observe what is called “Mothering Sunday.” And for a long time, I just assumed that it was kind of their equivalent of Mother's Day. Robin and I were talking about that this week and, being the kind of person who isn't content with easy thinking, she did a little research and told me that, no, it is not equivalent. It is the day, on the fourth Sunday of Lent, when people often *travel* to the church in which they were baptized, the church that, as it were, gave them birth. Many of us have traveled far from those initial congregations and we have changed since we left them. Our lives change and our faith changes. But still there is a connection with those places that gave us birth.

We change, we travel, we return.

In transit...

In this season of travel and change, perhaps we can better appreciate that strange story of the Ascension.

It, too, is a story of changes.

In this Easter season, we affirm by faith that resurrection changes everything: how we look at death, and, because of that, how we look at life as well. It's a strange business, this life of faith.

The poet, Louise Gluck wrote:

I have a friend who still believes in heaven.
 Not a stupid person, yet with all she knows, she literally talks to God.
 She thinks someone listens in heaven.
 On earth she's unusually competent.
 Brave too, able to face unpleasantness....

My friend says I shut my eyes to God, that nothing else explains
 My aversion to reality. She says I'm like the child who
 Buries her head in the pillow
 So as not to see, the child who tells herself
 That light causes sadness-
 My friend is like the mother. Patient, urging me
 To wake up an adult like herself, a courageous person-

It may indeed be that resurrection eases our "aversion to reality." We, too, are not stupid people, many of us unusually competent in earthly ways. But we have been caught by this story of the crucified Jesus, changed by resurrection, ascending into heavenly glory. It speaks to us of something more wonderful than we would ever have come up with on our own. It makes us more courageous than we would ever be on our own.

Yes, we know how difficult it can be to let go of what has been—in our lives and in our church. We grasp our old, worn-out expectations. We understand when the followers of Jesus drag out their old hopes like some tattered garment: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

We can hear their wistfulness.

Maybe now. Maybe now they will experience restoration. Maybe now their nation will be made great again.

You know how this is.

If you don't do it yourself, you know of people who just keep looking back. With no vision for the future, their only hope is in recovering the past. Maybe now things will be like they used to be.

This is the hope of too many people these days.

This is the hope of too many congregations these days.

How does Jesus respond to such hopes?

“It’s not for you to know. . .”

All hopes for a revival of the past are put aside. The new task is to find a vision for a future that is unknown and uncertain—a vision for a future that is also filled with hope.

And this is what these days, this season of travel and transformation offer us: a chance to look around, to see what is changing and what remains the same; a chance to see what needs to be changed and what doesn’t. These are days to find a new perspective, to look at our lives and this world from new vantage points.

In all of this, we are “in transit gloria.”

The letter to the Ephesians suggests that this is our human condition—that the ascension of the risen Jesus points to our own. In that very vivid image, we hear the good news that out of love, God has made us alive in Christ and raised us up with him into the heavenly places. Ascension is for all of us. Again, let’s not get too caught up in the spatial symbolism. What we hear in these words is something of the wide grace and deep love of God who has created us for good and who is, even now, changing us from glory into glory.

By faith we might imagine ourselves looking at the world and one another from such a position— from the place where God is that we call “heaven.” And what might we see if we were to look on this world in such a way?

God still cares for this world that God created and called good.

God cares about our incredibly difficult and surprisingly joyful lives.

God cares about these incredibly hard and stress-filled lives that we live.

God notices these lives of pain and joy all tumbled together in ways we could never have imagined.

And we are invited to join in that care, that noticing, that love. We are invited not to look up into some imagined “heaven” but to look around at the heaven, the presence of God, where we are.

The longing and the absence of Jesus that we encounter in the story of the ascension gives way to a new sense of presence. And the presence of God is greater and more real than we might often think.

In *My Bright Abyss*, the poet, Christian Wiman, who has been living with an incurable cancer for many years now, says that:

There are definitely times when we must suffer God’s absence...But this is very rare, and for the most part our dark nights of the soul are, in a way that is more pathetic than tragic, wishful thinking.

God is not absent. He is everywhere in the world we are too dispirited to love. To feel him—to *find* him—does not usually require that we renounce all worldly possessions and enter a monastery...All too often the task to which we are called is simply to show a

kindness to the irritating person in the cubicle next to us, say, or touch the face of a spouse from whom we ourselves have been long absent, letting grace wake love from our intense, self-enclosed sleep.

Christ is risen.

Christ is ascended.

And we are ascending—living here in the presence of the living God.

In these days—and in all days—we are in transit gloria.