

St Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska
Message by the Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp
Scripture: 2 Cor 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

Sunday, July 4, 2021
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Caught up to Heaven



Conversion of St Paul by Peter Koenig¹

“I know a person in Christ who... was caught up to the third heaven.” (2 Cor 12:2)

What a way to begin a testimony! Paul, writing to the community at Corinth about the moment of his transformation, is speaking of himself, as a “person in Christ” who falls into a totally new way of seeing and being. It is one of the most dramatic conversions in the Christian witness. An experience that was either out-of-the-body or in-the-body or both. Paul does not know, except that the risen Jesus was speaking to him from within a great light, asking, why are you persecuting me? And Paul, totally overwhelmed, thrown from his horse, hearing things that cannot be told, and unable to see until his awakening as the great Christian visionary, missionary and witness (Acts 22:6–11; Acts 26:9–20).

It was a boundary-breaking moment.

From his tightly controlled reality to the extravagant abundance in which he found his existence. From personal oblivion into the expansive embrace of God's love.

Paul was *inspired* across boundaries, overcoming his assumptions, drawn into a deeper truth, discovering humility and reverence, and strength in his weakness.

Amos Wilder, the pastor and scholar, refers to a kind of "zero hour" within the Judeo-Christian journey that occurs in moments of defeat, exile and despair, beyond comprehension.² And, yet, there is in these moments an emergence, something new and wonderful. It invokes a wonder that defies our usual explanations and controls. As Walter Brueggemann describes, "What we get is a new world of reality that does not answer to our old certitudes."³ It is the wonder of discovering that God is not contained by us; a wonder in which we are invited to see "beyond our own calculations."⁴ A wonder that there is a hidden emergence of "new life that is impelled we know not how."⁵

Perhaps we are in a boundary-breaking moment, a kind of zero hour, right now, something we can feel but not describe. A moment of pause in the human soul, in the church, our nation, and the world, when we recognize what it is to be human. As we realize the cultural assumptions and static boundaries within which we see ourselves. Alan Roxburgh writes of the church, "we need to have our worlds turned upside down" before we can serve as God's witnessing communities.⁶

It does feel like our worlds are being turned upside down. The past year has revealed so much of what we could not see or control. We have discovered new ways in which we are vulnerable and fallen into greater humility.⁷ And there is so much revelation around what constricts the expression of the human spirit: vast interlocking systems that privilege or oppress, legacies of enslavement, centuries of land taking and oppression, and widespread ignorance in a culture of individualism of the ways we are connected and responsible to one another, woven together.

And so Jesus asks, why are you persecuting me? (Acts 22:7)

And we discover in the Gospel story our limited worldview as Jesus returns to his home; the home as the source of primal relationships, first friends, first community, first moments of self-expression. He finds only rejection by those who think they know him and who ask only, "Is not this the carpenter...?"

Jesus exposes our limited worldview.⁸ Jesus offers us a reality so expansive that it breaks and exceeds the boundaries that we project onto ourselves and others. This larger ever-present reality breaks through our false assumptions about what and who we are supposed to be. It overwhelms our prejudices, ignorance, and division.

And it draws us with grace and forgiveness into the work we are called to do.

We look to the future waiting, hoping and looking, but the future is looking at *us* waiting and hoping and watching.⁹ Jesus teaches us to live, as Ilia Delio writes, on the edge of a new tomorrow.¹⁰

And Paul offers us an imagination so powerful in his tale of being caught up in heaven, that we are drawn in. If he said, I know a person in Christ caught up in heaven, then I wonder, can we say to one another, “I know a *community* in Christ that was caught up in heaven...?” Caught up into something that dissolves our limitations, that compels us to speak and be and act in new ways. Can we be so bold to be a community caught in heaven, overcoming the divisions between the vision of a land of opportunity and the reality of oppression and dispossession for those outside the dominant culture.

Can we be so bold, knowing that we really cannot flinch from the fullness of this work. It is vital, as Howard Thurman wrote, “To feel the fear of the panic-stricken in our world, to feel the hunger of the hungry, the loneliness of the lonely, the sickness of the sick, and to wish with all our hearts that we might live our lives dedicated to ends more worthy than those by which we have lived up to this waiting moment.”¹¹

And so let us fall into the wonder that breaks us down and opens us to truth. Let us declare independence from oppressive structures, systemic racism, and injustice in all forms. Independence from the habits that limit the freedom of expression and freedom of becoming. Let us liberate ourselves from all that keeps us from the full expression of being, acknowledging our part and our complicity. Let us discover the hidden beauty of our humanity as we birth a world that is ever more just. And then let us one day look and back and say, with wonder and reverence, I know a community that was once caught up in heaven.

Amen.

READINGS

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Mark 6:1-13

Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Acts 22:6-16

“While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Then he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.’ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. I asked, ‘What am I to do, Lord?’ The Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.’ Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.

“A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there, came to me; and standing beside me, he said, ‘Brother Saul, regain your sight!’ In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. Then he said, ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.’

¹ Peter Koenig. “Conversion of St Paul,” from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58543> [retrieved June 14, 2021]. Original source: <https://www.pwkoenig.co.uk/>.

² “The zero hour is the moment when we reach the nadir of possibility and have no reason to anticipate any good prospect. The zero hour is devoid of capacity and brings us into the depth of despair. In ancient Israel, the zero hour was the exile of defeat, destruction, and displacement when the holy city and its temple were destroyed and God’s promises had run out. Israel had no possible future.” Walter Brueggemann, “Do the Numbers!”, *Journal for Preachers*, vol. XLIV, number 4, Pentecost 2021, p. 61.

³ Walter Brueggemann, “Do the Numbers!”, *Journal for Preachers*, vol. XLIV, number 4, Pentecost 2021, p. 62.

-
- ⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Do the Numbers!", *Journal for Preachers*, vol. XLIV, number 4, Pentecost 2021, p. 64.
- ⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "Do the Numbers!", *Journal for Preachers*, vol. XLIV, number 4, Pentecost 2021, p. 62.
- ⁶ "The argument I am making is that we have shaped the gospel in our churches around a whole set of cultural assumptions that we don't even recognize anymore - we need to have our worlds turned upside down before we'll become any good again as God's witnessing communities." Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God In The Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2011); p. 90.
- ⁷ "The divine paradox is that to be strong in Christ we must give up self-reliance and seem weak to the world. To be wise, we must become fools who forsake human "craftiness" and rely on "the message of the cross," the power of God." Zaida Maldonado Pérez, *Connections: Year B, Volume 3 (Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship)*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition; p. 136.
- ⁸ "The reality of who Jesus is has exceeded communal expectations. Jesus' teaching and healing ministries have exposed their assumptions about him: he could not and should not be more than what they have known." Richard W. Voelz, *Connections: Year B, Volume 3 (Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship)*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition; p. 143.
- ⁹ "In this truth, in this faith we trust, for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us." Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb," <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/20/amanda-gormans-inaugural-poem-the-hill-we-climb-full-text.html>
- ¹⁰ "God is doing new things, Jesus proclaimed, but only those with new minds and hearts can see a new world breaking through the cracks of the old. Jesus offered a new set of values, teaching us how to live on the edge of a new tomorrow." Ilia Delio. *The Hours of the Universe: Reflections on God, Science, and the Human Journey*. Orbis. Kindle Edition, Location 124.
- ¹¹ Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment*, 1st edition (Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 2007); p. 58.