



Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
29 January 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

I was so excited for the book study last Monday that I arrived at the church at 5:30. Expecting everyone to show up at 6pm. And at 5:55 I started to get concerned that no one was coming. At 6:05pm I was feeling pretty low about my teaching abilities. I walked back to my office, sat down at my computer, and decided to look at my schedule for the next day. It was only then, that I realized that the book study was really scheduled to begin at 6:30. Thank God!

If you have ever scheduled a time to have coffee with me, I tend to skirt the timeline between prompt/on-time and fashionably late by about 5 minutes. Pastor Tony will tell you it is better to have me in the car with him so that we might be on time. Our story as the people of Ascension feels a little like my arrival at the coffee shop fashionably late. Many of us have known the journey of Ascension through our time in membership. For some of us, the journey has covered more than 40 years, for others, 4 or 5 weeks. For Pastor Tony, almost ten years as of February 2024; for “almost” Pastor Edwin, it will be ten years since his arrival in the United States and the birth of his first child Marta; and for myself, I began my 14<sup>th</sup> year with you in December. If we honor the journeys each of us have travelled as a part of the community of Ascension, we have a most revealing glimpse of the story of Ascension – what has been written, what we are writing, and what will be written in the years ahead.

We chose the words of the prophet Micah today for more than just the final familiar verse at the end of the chapter – summarized in the words: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

The prophet Micah begins with this word from the Lord: “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

Shittim was the final place where Israel stayed on the long journey through the wilderness after they left Egypt. Gilgal is the first place Israel stayed after they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. What happened in Shittim and Gilgal and the journey from one to the other is a demonstration of the disobedience and unfaithfulness of Israel compared with the faithfulness of God, who blesses Israel and fulfils God’s covenant promises.

“What happened from Shittim to Gilgal?” The simple answer is “LIFE HAPPENED.” The Jordan is at flood stage. God tells the priests to lead the way and stand in the river holding the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God’s promise and presence. God promises that, again, they shall cross on dry land. As the priests step into the river, the flow of water ceases – and the deliverance from Egypt is lived anew as the people enter in to the fulfillment of God’s ancient promise. Slaves are free. The homeless receive a home. The landless receive a land of milk and honey. But there is a wound in this story. For at Shittim the Israelites were seduced into worshipping the god of Moab, the Ba’al of Peor. After all God had done, after the 40 years wandering due to their faithlessness, in sight of the fulfillment of God’s promise, they are led astray to bow to other gods. They are faithless – but God is faithful. “What happened from Shittim to Gilgal?” Life happened.”

“What happened from Shittim to Gilgal?” In my life, I would say, “What happened from Sacramento to Waukesha?” Edwin might say: “What happened from Usulután, El Salvador to Waukesha?” And Pastor Tony might say, “What happened from Milwaukee to Waukesha?” Not all of us travel so far. And at least one of us in this room would say, “what happened from Waukesha to Waukesha, from Grandview Road to Saylesville Road?” We do not need to travel too far on our journey to trust that God has gone before us and travelled with us to remind us of the saving acts of God in our own lives. To know that life happened and happens along



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the way. We learn, we live, we love. We welcome, we say goodbye. We are broken. We forgive. We let go. We rise again. Through it all God is faithful, even if we are not. We sin. We ignore. We rebel. We walk away. Through it all God loves. God forgives. God welcomes back. God honors us with a place at the table.

I sat at a synod gathering yesterday morning. The pews were hard and uncomfortable. The synod is presenting work done on an authentic diversity audit of our practices in the Greater Milwaukee Synod. Much of what I hear, I had heard before. And during the 90-minute presentation, I pulled out my laptop to work on my sermon. Not long after I started typing, a colleague in the synod looked at me and yelled my name. Chris! Chris! What are you doing? I told her I was working on my sermon, but I was paying attention. She responded with, “you should be paying attention.” Now I have lots of words going through my head right now. None of them are appropriate for this pulpit today or probably any pulpit ever. However, I had two options – get even louder than her and stop the presentation to call her out on her holier than thou, self-righteous, judgmental chastisement. (BELIEVE ME – those are the nicest words I have.) Or let it go. I chose the latter. And then realized as we were listening to the presenters explain the acronym for LGBTQIA+ - all of which I already know – it occurred to me that this woman did not remember the very first part of the presentation. Where the presenters spoke of having empathy for the other. How was the uninformed colleague to know that I stayed with Jerry’s family late into the evening in the ICU to return him to God after life support was removed this past Thursday? How was this colleague to know that my day off on Friday became a full day of ministry instead? How was this woman to know that I found myself in the ER on Friday evening? How was this colleague to know that I needed to be with my son at his tournament in the afternoon on Saturday but had somehow fit in the morning of the synod event? How was this woman to know that I jumped on a three-day Latino ministry class that started on Thursday night, continued on Friday night, and wrapped up Saturday morning? Truthfully, I wanted to “fill her in.” It would have felt soooooooooooooo good. But, it would not have been reflective of what I was supposed to be paying attention to and learning about inclusivity and equity at the table. This is life. In the midst of my journey from Waukesha to Menomonee Falls to Milwaukee to Waukesha – I had planned to be disobedient to my master and my teacher – to choose the same path my pastoral colleague chose with me. I decided to follow Jesus instead. Though I do wonder at what point this colleague became my mother.

So much happened between Shittim and Gilgal and still God brought the Israelites into the promised land. So too does God bring us in spite of what happens between Sacramento and Waukesha and Usulután and Waukesha and Menomonee Falls and Milwaukee and Waukesha. God still brings us to the promised land.

And how do we repay...“With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high. Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

It turns out God’s promise is not dependent on our offerings. What God really wants...is you.

Which brings me back to this place, this community of faith, this gathering of the body of Christ? Many of you have travelled so far – from Shittim to Gilgal, from the home of your birth to this city, from child to adult, from single to married, from sinner to saint, from life to death, from freedom to prison, from love to hate, from pain to healing, from death to life -so often, these travels have left you feeling alone and yet God has been faithful and brought you again and again to the promised land of God’s mercy, God’s love, God’s healing, God’s resurrection promise, God’s peace that passes all understanding – when you cannot put into words your journey – God already knows.



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We install a new church council this day. We finished 2022 in the black for the second year in a row in the 13 years I have completed here – that has never happened. We are celebrating our Director of Care Ministries as she retires from 10 years of ministry tending us in our spiritual health and wellness while walking with us in our suffering – what a beautiful legacy Brenda leaves with us as her ministry comes to a close. I am currently celebrating that there are too many visitors to keep track of from one Sunday to another. The Holy Spirit is at work here revealing wondrous opportunities. We continue to watch our worship attendance move up from one Sunday to another. Our junior high and senior high ministries of JOLT and CRASH continue to draw new faces to this place. Our musicians make a joyful noise in ways we dared not imagine during the pandemic. Ascension is truly learning to live out its mission: *Juntos nos levantamos* – together we rise. Our Spanish speaking members continue to surprise us by the work of the Spirit – they invite, they welcome, and that service continues to grow with an average of 55-60 on a Sunday. The staff has begun Spanish lessons each week to help us communicate and relate in more meaningful ways with those we minister to who walk through our doors with little to no English. We are preparing to gather a call committee in March to interview Edwin for a third ordained pastor position to serve among us in two languages.

It is a joy to be pastor in this place. It is a joy to be one of your pastors in this place. If Pastor Tony was here – another Sunday off already – he would tell you the same thing. God is indeed good. All the time. And all the time. God is good. From Shittim to Gilgal. From the painful valleys of this life to the joyful mountaintop vistas. From the broken promises to the story of redemption and salvation that never changes. God is faithful.

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. Yes, yes, of course – but what the Lord truly requires of you – is you. Thanks be to God! Amen.