



Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
7 July 2024

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

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

Last Wednesday, Pastor Tony and I disappeared for the day to gain a little grounding before we leave for New Orleans and the final preparations for the youth gathering. Pastor Tony said, “let’s go hiking.” “Of course!” I said. We made our way to a state park and began the hike. WE checked the map at the trailhead and then headed out. The trail map told us the trail was exactly 2.7 miles in a loop. “No problem.” I thought. We began the hike. It was a beautiful day, but the mountain was wet – water ran like little rivers down the mountain, across the hiking trail. It was beautiful on the edge of Lake Winnebago. We stopped at a bench and rested, taking in the scenery. And then we headed onto the next part of the trail. The trail became narrower and more wet and muddy, but Pastor Tony led on. The vegetation increased. Wild parsnip as far as the eye could see, but still we headed farther down the trail. The path became even more narrow, so narrow that we could only kinda see the mud of the path and still we headed forward. Then Pastor Tony let me lead. So, I lead. The trail was almost impossible to see, but there was a path, so I kept going. Until, until I could no longer see the mud. “Hey Tony,” I said. “What happened to the trail?” We stopped. Pastor Tony checked the map on his iPhone but the iPhone could not catch a signal. So, what does Pastor Tony do? He turns left and heads up the mountain. Except, except there is no trail up the mountain and now we are far enough away from the original trail that now, all we can see, in every direction is wild parsnip. We can hear the water, but we can no longer see the water. What to do? Well Pastor Tony checks his cell phone and this time he gets a signal. And then announces that we are more than a half mile off the trail. A half mile in the wilderness. And I think to myself, “This is where I am going to die. Wild parsnip will blister my skin and Pastor Tony will do his best to drag me out of the forest. This is where life will break me.” Never fear, Pastor Tony will be with us a long time – his skills as a hiking trail leader need some work. “Life breaks all of us,” writes Ernest Hemingway, “but some of us are strong in the broken places.”

We pick up the story of Jesus today during a homecoming. And although, most of us look forward to homecomings – Jesus arrives in Nazareth and as might be expected – come the time for worship – we find Jesus teaching. It makes sense – he was known in the village. He is remembered by his neighbors. His mother has told everyone he is coming home. And here we are... *6:2 On the sabbath Jesus 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? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 6:3 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 if the story stopped there – we would all go home content that the Son of God was honored and the world as it should be – ACTUALLY IS! Except! Well, we already know the story does not end how we believe it should. Instead, the neighbors and well-wishers and members of the synagogue and classmates from elementary school and elders of the community become offended! They took offense at him. *6:4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." 6:5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6:6 And he was amazed at their unbelief.* Not the homecoming we were expecting this morning as Jesus came home to be among his own.

And then Jesus does a new thing. He calls the disciples together and then he begins to send them out two by two giving them authority over unclean spirits. It is a strange place to begin. Jesus, almost dismissed and disabled from his divinity and the power to heal – this, is when he gathers his disciples and sends them out to share the good news that the Kingdom of heaven has come near. Really Jesus? It turns out, my friends, that life breaks all of us, even Jesus, but some of us are strong in the broken places. I imagine Jesus looking forward to coming home. He has been away for a while. Traveled, recruited, ministered, healed, taught, and tended without a place to call his own. So going home is about knowing and being known – going home is about the familiar – going home is about love and safety – going home is about finding a moment of peace. Or so Jesus believes. The Bible tells us nothing of his arrival in Nazareth – we pick-up the story in the synagogue. Mark writes that



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first, the community was astounded and then they were offended. And we hear Jesus speak these words, “prophets are not without honor except in their hometown, among their own kin, and in their own house.”

One of the authors I follow, offered these words, “We are prophets by being who we are.” We are prophets pointing to the future – speaking on behalf of God. Claim the title or not – by your presence in worship this day – you are a prophet. Long before you speak the name of God or tell someone of God’s love for them – your presence in worship sets you apart from the rest of the world. By your worship of God, you point those around you toward a future of hope – a promise of God’s kingdom come near. It is who you are. We are prophets by being who we are. Tomorrow, Pastor Tony and I leave for New Orleans to prepare for the upcoming youth gathering. We are just nine days away from opening night when everything I have planned with my team will either come to life or fall apart, you can tune into the livestream on Tuesday the 16th to find out how it begins. For everything that is planned for opening night, one of the things I am most excited about is our very own Jhonson Aparicio. He is speaking, on the main stage, in front of all 16,000 participants, but don’t tell him – I keep changing the number, so he stays less nervous. But the story Jhonson will tell is a reminder of the story we can all tell – a story of remembering that you are never alone.

“I left my home in El Salvador when I was seven,” Jhonson begins. “It was not really my choice. My dad had left for the United States when I was five. My mom was doing her best to keep my younger sister, my older brother and me safe from the gang members in our town. They seemed to be everywhere. I noticed that as my brother got closer to 13, the gang members spent more time trying to talk him into joining their gang. My mom spent a lot of time worrying about my brother Fabricio. She was afraid the gang would either get him to join or, if he kept saying no, they would kill him. It had happened before. Other boys my brother’s age followed home by gang members or stopped after school. And when my brother’s friends said no, well, someone usually did not come home that night. The morning, we left, it was so early my grandma wasn’t even awake. When we arrived at the border, my mother made the request for “asilo” - asylum. I did not know what “asylum” was, but if it included good food and a roof over our heads, I wanted it.” As Jhonson finishes, he will end it this way: “The day I left my home in El Salvador seems like a long time ago. So much has happened in my life. I have had to be brave so many times...yet, through it all I have never been alone. God has given me strength and courage, hands to hold and friends to lean on. It is amazing to look back and remember ... that even when I have had to be brave, I am never alone.” Strength in the broken places. That in the life Jesus offers there is strength to be found in the broken places. What that means for each of us is that we are “prophets by being who we are.” We are people, who like all people, find ourselves in the broken places. And in those broken places – God finds us. In the broken places – God gives us strength.

Where is your broken place today? Deny if you must. Lie to yourself if it is easier – at least for a little while longer. Or let today be the day – let today be the day that you finally let God into the broken place you have been hiding. My friends, God is already there – giving you strength. If we are prophets – each of us prophets – pointing to a future that is not our own - than we must be opened to what God has done, is doing, and will do in and through us to God’s glory. Today is your opportunity to step into the day of the Lord in new ways: to be brave enough to break the chains of injustice, to be honest enough to get rid of exploitation, to be free enough to free the oppressed, to be disruptive enough to cancel the debts you hold against others, to be disciples who follow in the footsteps of the one who makes all things new. Are those not dreams to dream? Promises of God worthy of our hope and hunger that we might hold on to them with all our might? “What I am interested in seeing you do,” says the Lord, “is this: share your food with the hungry, invite the homeless poor into your homes, put clothes on the shivering, be available to your families.” And then God goes one step farther – “here is what I promise to you my children: “I will always show you where to go. I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—firm muscles, strong bones. You’ll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry. You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build a new, rebuild the foundations from



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out of your past. You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again."

People of God – I think Jesus must have inspired Hemingway to write the words: Life breaks all of us, but some of us are strong in the broken places." And yes, some of us are strong in the broken places, but the good news is that God is strong in all the broken places. Be at peace. God is with you. I know this to be true. I hear the words of Jesus this day – I speak them to you. "I have told you these things," says Jesus, "so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Thanks be to God. Amen.