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St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

YEAR B, EASTER 7 SUNDAY 11AM MASS<sup>L</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

ACTS 1: 15–26  
PSALM 47  
JOHN 17:11B–19

I find this Sunday to be a strange place to be in our liturgical year.

We're still in Eastertide, celebrating the resurrection of our Lord. But, three days ago, on Thursday, we remembered his Ascension into heaven. And now that he's ascended, there's still a little bit more time before next Sunday, when we commemorate the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

In other words, here on the seventh Sunday of Easter, we find ourselves in a bit of an in between place, especially if we put ourselves in the shoes of those early followers of Jesus who were gathering in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Our reading from Acts is at the end of chapter one. Pentecost isn't until we turn the page to the beginning of chapter two. Christ has returned to heaven, but the Spirit has not yet come.

The collect of the day summarizes this moment in time well: "Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, it is not as though we are ever without God's presence in the Holy Spirit. But, sometimes it can feel like that. Sometimes, something can seem amiss. And, this in between place in our liturgical cycle helps to both acknowledge and bless the reality of this feeling that we sometimes can have from time to time.

In our Acts reading, an issue has arisen that just can't wait for Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit. They need a replacement for Judas. God's guidance is needed now. So, they cast lots and Matthias is chosen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, 226.

While we don't know for sure exactly what casting lots entailed, it probably involved small stones or sticks that were tossed to determine God's will.<sup>2</sup>

Even though that might sound like flipping a coin between Matthias and Barsab'bas, this was a legitimate and serious means for determining God's will in biblical times. That is, Luke, the author of Acts, is telling us that God was very much involved in this period between the Ascension and Pentecost.

The reason it couldn't wait until Pentecost is because Luke sees the symbolism of twelve as critical. The Church, through the leadership of the twelve apostles, represents a restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel: God's people. What had fallen away was being put back together. And so, Judas had to be replaced first, before the fullness of God's promise could then be realized in sending the Holy Spirit to this restored Israel.<sup>3</sup>

The early Church's understanding of itself as the restored Israel, however, was not one bounded geographically, all in the same place, but rather seen as existing spiritually in different places throughout the pagan world. Remember, the apostles will next set out in different directions to continue Christ's teachings.

Earlier this past week, the Daily Office readings included the Letter of James, which is addressed to the "twelve tribes of the dispersion."<sup>4</sup> In some of the other letters that have survived from the late first and early second centuries, local churches also use similar language to describe themselves as dispersed, isolated pockets of holiness, awaiting their return to their true and proper home with God.

For example, a letter traditionally said to have been written in the late first century by Clement,<sup>5</sup> an early bishop of Rome, begins like this:

"The Church of God *estranged* in Rome, to the Church of God *estranged* in Corinth, to those who have been called and made holy by the will of God through our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 825.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 38-39.

<sup>4</sup> James 1:1.

<sup>5</sup> The tradition that *1 Clement* was written by Clement the 3<sup>rd</sup> bishop of Rome (not counting Peter) in the 90s is debated.

<sup>6</sup> My translation, especially of "παροικοῦσα Ἰώμην," from the prologue of *1 Clement*.

Estranged -- not quite belonging in this world -- not in our true home yet -- somewhere in between -- awaiting -- hoping.

Similarly, in today's Gospel lesson from John, Jesus refers to his followers as being in the world, but "not of the world". We are "not of the world", but of God.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, here we are within the world. And, Jesus makes it clear that he is not asking the Father to take us out of this world, but he is specifically asking for him to keep us from the evil one; to keep us separated and protected.

Jesus prays to the Father, "for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth."<sup>8</sup>

It is in part a sacrificial take on Jesus words about consecrating himself that has led this prayer to be sometimes dubbed his "high priestly prayer."<sup>9</sup> There is a logic to this as John's text is about to transition to the Passion narrative. Jesus will be heading to the Cross. But, there is more to this passage and the prayer than previewing his sacrifice on the Cross.

In our translation, Jesus asks the father to "sanctify" us as well as "consecrate" us. The Greek verb here for "sanctify" and "consecrate" is the same. It is also the same verb that Clement uses to speak of "those who have been...made holy by...God".<sup>10</sup> It is all the same verb which can be translated as "to sanctify" or "to consecrate" or "to make holy." Yet, perhaps the most straightforward way to render this word into English is as "to set apart" or "to set aside" for God.<sup>11</sup>

In this prayer, Jesus is asking the Father to "set us apart" from the evil one, from the world, yet for us to still remain in the world for God. It's a holy request.

There is something holy about our feeling that we don't quite fit in -- holy, because we are meant to be set apart for God -- being in the world, but not belonging to the world -- knowing that we are here only temporarily and allowing ourselves to feel the holiness of that tension.

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<sup>7</sup> John 17:14.

<sup>8</sup> John 17:19.

<sup>9</sup> Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9:787.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Clement, prologue.

<sup>11</sup> ἁγιάζω: Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9-10.

It seems to me to be analogous to the tension that the disciples must have felt after the Risen Jesus left and ascended into heaven.

We want to go there too. That is where we belong. But, in the meantime, God has set us apart for something. And for this, he sends the Holy Spirit, who is always present with us, even when it doesn't seem like it.

And so we pray today in this short period between Ascension and Pentecost: "Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us."

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.