

Navigating Two Worlds

Acts 1: 6-14 John 17: 1-11

A story is told of a shipwrecked crew who had been drifting for days in a small boat off the coast of Brazil. They were suffering the horrors of thirst, but they dared not drink the seawater because the salt would make it even worse.

They saw a vessel coming towards them, and called out, "Water, water!"

"Dip your bucket over the side," they were told. They thought they were being mocked. But no, the water was fresh. They had drifted into the flow of the mighty Amazon River, pushing its plume of fresh water far out to sea. Two worlds apart came together, and the men in the life boat didn't realize how one world could intrude on another and disrupt their whole sense of reality.

A man accompanied his friend home for dinner one night. He was impressed by the way his friend entered his house, asked his wife how her day went, and told her she looked pretty. Then, after they embraced, she served dinner. After they ate, the husband complimented his wife on the meal, thanked her for it, and washed the dishes.

When the two fellows were alone, the visitor asked, "Why do you treat your wife so well?"

"Because she deserves it, and it makes our marriage happier," replied the host.

Impressed, the visitor decided to adopt the idea. Arriving home, he embraced his wife and said, "You look wonderful!" For good measure he added, "Sweetheart, I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

His wife burst into tears. Bewildered, he asked her, "What in the world's the matter?"

She wept, "What a day! Billy fought at school. The refrigerator quit and everything is spoiled. And now you've come home drunk!"

Again, two worlds try to share the same space. Yes, the result seems quite disruptive again, but this time with a negative consequence.

Navigating between two worlds is tricky as we see in today's scriptures.

We had Ascension Day this week. It was Thursday. I know you probably wish you had marked your calendar so that you wouldn't miss all of the Ascension Day celebrations. Ascension Day comes just before Pentecost. I don't know why it comes when it does. If it's following some biblical timeline, I have no idea what Jesus was doing all these many weeks in his resurrection. Hanging with the disciples? Assuming

the calendar tradition and scripture are two separate items – two worlds apart, as it were – we can simply turn to Acts 1 and see what happens.

Jesus is giving his disciples his parting words before his ascension. First, he gets an impertinent question from some disciple whose name might be “Duh” because he still doesn’t quite get it about the Kingdom that Jesus has been speaking about.

Jesus gets asked if the revolution is now going to happen, when the Davidic king and royal kingdom will be restored to Israel, recapturing the days of long ago when all was right with the world for God’s people as imagined nostalgically in 20/20 hindsight. But of course, this is not what Jesus is there to discuss.

Jesus’ reply betrays his impatience at this question that he thought he wouldn’t hear any longer. This stupid question draws a sharp rebuke. *It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.* The disciples are told to avoid worrying about **God’s** future plans and are urged then to **pay attention to God’s will** by awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit, after which they’re to be witnesses to the good news of Jesus and his Kingdom throughout the world.

Then Jesus pushes the “up” button and ascends *before their very eyes* into a cloud.

The verbal imagery is perfect; Jesus ascends *before their eyes* in vs. 9, with the visual cue continuing in the next verse which explains how the disciples were *looking up intently into the sky*, quite oblivious to the appearance of two (apparent) angels. (Why in twos, I really don’t know.)

Now the gospels are all pretty hard on the disciples, regularly showing them to be utter dolts, petty buffoons, and weak-kneed jellyfish. Here, Luke continues the theme as they look like total jerks, staring, gaping into the sky. Two angels come by. Maybe these are the same two angels who met the women at the tomb, like it’s their beat. As they approach the disciples, the angels see heads looking upward with mouths agape. Great. They look totally goofy and they’re **meant** to look totally goofy. The storyteller is clearly poking fun at those who, like some people today, are waiting for Jesus to return, blankly staring heavenward like the answer to all life is to be found up there in the clouds and sky. They really aren’t doing anything worthwhile, having become quickly obsessed with Jesus’ return. Rather than doing the work of Jesus like they were told, they’re staring up into the sky and doing nothing.

The angels ask, ‘Folks, what are you doing?’ They could only say something lame in response. It’s omitted. We get it. They’re clowns. It doesn’t matter. The angels continue, ‘Jesus suddenly went up into heaven, right? And he’ll come back in the same sudden, unexpected way. Get it?’

Whether they get it or not, it seems their stupor has been diverted at least and they head back to the upper room in Jerusalem, forming a community of prayer. It’s the

first smart thing they've done in a long time, and they seem to have figured it out all by themselves.

Most importantly, they sense that they are in a new situation now. Jesus would no longer be telling that what to do. They now served a Lord and Savior who was **not** with them, nor was he likely to return anytime soon. They needed to be serving a purpose and a promise that transcended the routine boundaries of earthly existence, a world apart while still within this one. They would be servants of the Lord of the Kingdom, yet while situated within the common, profane, and sinful world ruled by the world's powers.

They would be navigating a new way of being faithful, and none of it was clear to them. But the Holy Spirit was promised, and that will help them and all future disciples to navigate and reconcile the two worlds they encounter and experience.

These two worlds collide, and the result can be rather confusing. Jesus did warn his disciples. That's loud and clear in the passage from John 17. This closes his final discourse; it's his final prayer, a long and rambling dissertation running the entirety of chapter 17, certainly a creation of the John-gospel editor that reflects concern for the disciples doing ministry sometime in the late first century. At best, it broadly amplifies some remembered sayings of Jesus. No one should believe that there was a stenographer recording Jesus' words.

Like the final discourse, Jesus' final prayer highlights the ambiguity in which the disciples find themselves. Our passage goes to considerable lengths to detail the gap between the two worlds, the sacred and the profane, the Kingdom and the powers-that-be. The disciples' mission is to close the distance between them as Jesus had been doing. It's an interesting dance. For Jesus, it won't end well; he knows what's coming.

The prayer starts as Jesus explains to God: *I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world*, and continues with concerns about the protection of the disciples. It also cites a unity between God, Jesus, and the disciples, reflecting their empowerment to navigate and reconcile the two worlds they occupy.

In vs. 14(-16), we have proof of their empowerment as the world has reacted to their witnessing to the good news of the Kingdom as Jesus says: *I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not **belong to** the world, just as I do not **belong to** the world.*

The disciples do not *belong to* the world; the world does not "own" them or keep them, for they are freed from the worldly powers' grip and given new life. They are now the "possessions" of God, **not** the world. Still, while the disciples may not *belong to* the world, they do *live in* the world nonetheless.

Straddling two worlds, Jesus admits that his disciples are no longer of this world any more than he is, and they are sure to suffer by reflecting the values, the way, and the promise of the Kingdom of God. Set within the world of sinfulness, its greed, selfishness, injustice, arrogant power, indifference to life, and its deadly violence, the disciples bring challenges with God's word of love, compassion, forgiveness, justice, and peace. The power of the world is set against the power of the Kingdom. The power of the world in its brute force, its wielding of power, its systemic bondage for those not-on-top gets confronted by its opposite which is Kingdom peace, love, compassion, and liberation. Like revolutionaries, they pose a threat and face the consequences for being in the world, but not of the world.

Clearly there are two worlds on different paths, heading on a collision course where it looks quite likely the disciples are the ones who are going to go "splat." Like revolutionaries, they pose a threat and face the consequences for being in the world, but not of the world. Violence, imprisonment, and death await the truly faithful disciple.

Jesus knows. After this prayer, Jesus expects to get arrested, and has every expectation that he'll be executed. His own conflict with the world and worldly powers are going to bring Jesus to a kind of "splat," too, at least in worldly terms. Jesus' faith in God trusts completely that God will fulfill the promise and bring Jesus home, out of this world, thus voiding the world's attempt to "splat" yet another dissenter from the authority of worldly powers.

The disciples' ministry in Jesus' name may bring the two worlds to collision, but the faithful know that the promise that was there for Jesus is also there for them through Jesus. God will provide for them, fulfilling the promise of life.

The prayer reflects how the disciples' job is to navigate bringing the two worlds together, leading folks from the known world into the Kingdom, a world unknown to them *and* sacred. There is a lot of room for "splat" as the worlds collide, but that's part of the idea.

The wrong idea is to avoid the conflict, to dodge the "splat," and keep the worlds separate. Jesus wants his disciples to bring them together, to let the conflict show, contrast the world's ways with the Kingdom ways of a resurrection faith. If the Kingdom looks radical compared to the world's typical corruptions, let it be so. There is absolutely no command – here or anywhere else – either to keep the worlds apart, or to intermix them like scrambled eggs, confusing and corrupting the values, agendas, and meanings. This is the call for the disciples, to be in the world, but not of the world.

May we be blessed by the Lord, and empowered to act faithfully as those who bring good news, but not necessarily welcome news, to a world rife with violence, permeated with greed, and crushed with injustice. May our faith be strong and our witness be true to the blessed way of our Savior and the resurrection faith, conforming ourselves to the Kingdom, **not** being conformed to the ways of the world.