

Stanford Memorial Church
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LIVING IN HOPE
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Psalter Lesson: Psalm 47
New Testament Lesson: Acts 1.1-11

For many of us this is usually one of the most delightful times of the year. Traditionally, this has been the time when the curtain rises on summer, the season for vacations, enjoying the wonderful weather, planning picnics, cranking up the barbeque, taking trips to the beach as well as the mountains (in California, we have it all) family camps along with a host of specialty camps that enable us to focus on athletic, academic or artistic interests. For the fashion conscious, it's ok to wear white socks now. Nor do we have to experience pressures associated with many holidays, such as finding the right present for each recipient, and decorating the house and yard. Joyful graduation ceremonies are occurring at every level: grammar school, junior high school, high school, colleges and universities. Most of the speakers have mastered the essentials of a graduation speech: keep it short, include some humor as well as a self-deprecating mark or two, and send them off inspired--with variations on the theme to make this world a better place than you found it. Moreover, the month of June will once again experience a significant increase in the number of weddings.

Paradoxically, and surprisingly, another indication of the specialness this time of year is the spike in the suicide rate. This usually comes as a surprise to most people, as it would seem more intuitive for a depressed person to attempt to end their life during the dark and dreary days of winter. But in study after study it has been found that the suicide rate peaks in the month of June. The explanation for this phenomenon is that a depressed person finds his or her feelings of sadness and low-self-worth accentuated by the happy feelings and joyful activities –graduations, weddings, etc.—seeming occurring all about them.

Last weekend I was in Boston celebrating the graduation of my granddaughter, Amber, from Boston University. Of course Amber's proud parents (my son and his wife), along with her two brothers, were fully celebrating this very special time. One of the brother's, Steven, had graduated from Georgia Tech two years earlier and, to the surprise—or perhaps I should say “shock and astonishment” of the family—he proceeded to enlist in the Army. While I had several relatives serving in World War II and can trace my family genealogy back to participants in the Revolutionary War, we do not have a strong tradition of military service in our family. No general or admiral Fitzgerald. As I flew home from Boston last Sunday, I begin to think of the somewhat intriguing symbolism represented by Amber and Steven. On the one hand, Amber's graduation celebration was a reminder of what a joyful and inspiring time of year this is. Each graduate stands on the threshold of his or her life, and we send them forth with all good wishes and hopes for success and fulfilment in the years to come. Yet a week after Amber's graduation our entire nation will be observing Memorial Day. Never before had I been so struck by the irony of this juxtaposition. What a striking contrast in high expectations and devastating tragedy. So close together and yet so incongruent. Both stand on

the threshold of life. We heartily congratulate the graduates and send them forth with all good wishes. But their counterparts never make it past the threshold of life and they comprise a significant number of the veterans we remember and honor on Memorial Day.

Many believe that the first well-known observance of a Memorial Day type occurred in Charleston, South Carolina on May 1, 1865. In relation to the Civil War or “War Between the States,” as it is still called by many in the South. In the first 100 years of the history of America, 683,000 lives were lost in military action. However, 91.2% of those deaths, 623,006, occurred during the Civil War. Charleston is well remembered for housing Union soldiers, young men who were prisoners of war at the Charleston Race course. At least 257 Union prisoners died there and were hastily buried in unmarked graves. The Black community, together with teachers and missionaries, organized a May Day celebration. The recently freed Black men and women cleaned up and landscaped the burial ground, building an enclosure and an arch with the label describing the deceased as “Martyrs of the Race Course.” Approximately ten thousand individuals gathered to affirm and celebrate their recently granted freedom, as they joined together to commemorate the prisoners who died there.

David Blight, an American History Professor at Yale, described this gathering as “the First Memorial Day. African Americans invented Memorial Day in Charleston, South Carolina. What you have there is black Americans recently freed from slavery announcing to the world with their flowers, their feet, and their songs what the War had been about. What they basically were creating was the Independence Day of a second American Revolution.”

In 1868, three years after the May Day celebration in Charleston, General John A. Logan, in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, which was composed of Union Civil War Veterans, issued a proclamation stating that “Decoration Day should be observed nation wide and annually. This first “Decoration Day’ celebration was observed on May 30, and several theories exist as to why this date was selected, including the view

that it was chosen because it was NOT the anniversary of any battle, thereby avoiding the connotations of there being either “a winner” or “a loser.” In 2010, president Obama suggested that the May 30 date was chosen as “the optimal date for flowers to be in bloom.”

But on a deeper level, I believe the selection and placement of Memorial Day in close proximity to marriage and graduation ceremonies reflects something much deeper and more significant than blooming flowers—lovely as they may be. This deeper level on understanding of the intrinsic nature of life is well-represented by the 6th century BCE theater masks of the ancient Greeks. Two heads placed back to back: one with a shocked expression, representing tragedy and pain, and the other smiling and laughing representing joy and happiness. These are the essential polarities of life within which we move and have our existence. Regardless of how it came about--with Memorial Day placed for all time in close proximity with weddings and graduations—this reminder of the fundamental, existential ebb and flow of life has become an annual event of a deeper significance than we often realize.

These fundamental themes are also woven into the fabric of the New Testament passage for today, beautifully delineated in the first eleven verses from the Book of Acts. From one perspective, this could be thought of as something of a graduation ceremony, he reminds the reader of how Jesus, for a period of three years educated and prepared his disciples, by healing actions and teachings, enabling them to be the ones to carry on his

ministry. There are many wonderful memories and much to celebrate. And he also reminds his readers of the painful and tragic death of Jesus: betrayed by one of his own followers, handed over to cruel and vengeful authorities, and finally subjected to an incredibly painful execution on a wooden cross. But that is not the last word, the hopes of the followers of Jesus are realized--beyond anything could conceive of or thought possible—in the resurrection and return of Jesus. But that is not the last word. The followers of Jesus cannot simply stand there, mesmerized and immobilized by the return of Jesus and the promise of his continuing presence. Rather they are called to action by the words, “Men (and women) of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven. (Acts 1.11)” Essentially we are called to do two closely related things: to live in hope and to discern the many ways in which Jesus comes to us.

Living in hope is to live with the fundamental belief and conviction that God is somehow in charge of life and in spite of difficulties, set backs, betrayals and disappointments, God is somehow in charge; and God, not death, will have the last word. A century ago, Orison S. Marden, founder of the Legal Aid Society, would frequently remind his listeners, “There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great, no tonic so powerful as the expectation of something tomorrow.” It sounds a bit like Annie, in the musical, singing “Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love tomorrow, you’re only just a day away.” But it is much deeper than that. It is parents who tragically lose a child—perhaps in a tragic accident, or to a terrible disease, or as the result of a child abuser—who are beyond consolation. Yet somehow they manage to keep going, and their sense of hope may find expression in the establishment of a foundation to cure cancer, or to prevent drunk driving, or to prevent child abusers. Or hope may find expression in Abraham Lincoln suffering through the pain of conducting a civil war, and he emerges with the magnificent Second Inaugural address.

Living in hope is often sustained by intimations of the return of Jesus. One of the problems with trying to be sensitive to Jesus’ return is that we tend to project what we have experienced on to the future. But can be a great mistake, as Malcolm Gladwell points out in his recent best seller, “David and Goliath.” Goliath assumed that his forthcoming confrontation with David would be just like all the earlier confrontations he had experienced: He would simply slay David, who was no more than a teenager, with one blow and that would be the end of the matter. We all know of course that did not happen as David failed to fulfill Goliath’s expectations—standing at a distance and fatally striking him down with one well-aimed stone. So too, God appears to constantly surprise us, reminding us that God is not limited or confined to our expectations. For example, before Jesus was born the readers of the Hebrew scriptures, which we refer to as the Old Testament, were convinced that the messiah would come as a conquering hero, striking down any form of opposition and evil, ruling as a kind of super king, and having a kingdom that would rule over all the others. Of course this is not what happened. Rather than being a messiah who would strike down all opposition and rule over the greatest kingdom on earth, he came as a servant—to serving others, to demonstrate what it means to be God’s messiah.

I cannot help but wonder if the writer of our New Testament lesson for today is not also running a risk of projecting on to the future what he has just experienced when he writes, “This Jesus, who has been taken up from into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” This certainly has been the theme of a good many Christian leaders over

the centuries. They all seem to assume an invasion led by Jesus in a heavenly chariot, or maybe a helicopter, or perhaps a drone, and establishing a nation of his followers who will rule over everyone else.

Given the model given by Jesus, I suspect that as we live in hope we will experience Jesus coming into our life in a number of unexpected ways. That could well have been the experience of Hellen Keller, and who can forget that miraculous scene by the water well in the 1962 movie

The Miracle Worker, when Anne Sullivan, the dedicated teacher, and young Hellen, finally make the miraculous connection of sounds to words. In her autobiography Hellen gives a remarkable description of that spiritual moment: “As the cool stream gushed over one hand (my teacher) spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.”

Go forth living in hope, knowing there are many ways Jesus returns to love and sustain us. Amen