

John 17:1-11

Psalm 13

Acts 1:6-14

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

May 29, 2022

Do Things Scared

This past Tuesday morning, on May 24th, I woke up as I do almost every morning... to the sound of both of my children squealing and talking to each other while climbing up on our bed, then jumping and playing around us as I try and sneak in a few more minutes of sleep. So far, getting those few extra minutes has never been successful but you have to credit me for trying every day. We got the kids ready for school and Marion dropped off Eden at daycare and I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and morning with Ezra before our regular Tuesday staff meeting. I was chatting with Pastor Evie about the week ahead and then our office manager, Jennifer, interrupted our meeting to let us know that she got a phone call from Sheri that her mother, our beloved 98-year-old and long-time member of Stone Church, Hazel James, was in the hospital and that death might be imminent. Both daughters were on their way, but that it might be a while before they got there because they were both out of town, and so, of course, Evie and I put that meeting on pause and I immediately drove over to Good Samaritan Hospital to be with Hazel.

She did not die that day. Instead, I was able to spend about six hours chatting with her, learning even more about her life, reciting scripture together and singing some of her favorite hymns. Both daughters were able to get there and be with her-grandchildren were calling her...only love filled that room-and then Hazel herself told me to go home because I had been there a long time and that I should go and be with my kids.

As soon as I got to my car, I saw all the news alerts on my phone indicating what would end up being the tragic news of 19 children murdered along with two teachers by yet another mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas at Robb Elementary School. I moved from a space that was incredibly holy to a space that felt like hell. I could barely absorb what I was reading, but I knew I needed to take Hazel's advice and go home and be with my kids. I called Marion and told him to keep Eden up a little bit longer as it was almost her bedtime because I just needed to hold both of my children.

And so, I'm sure many of you joined me this week in the waves of grief, of anger, of feeling overwhelmed ... and I know I was not the only one holding my children close that night and the days to come while weeping for those who would no longer be able to do so. It was supposed to just be a normal Tuesday.

I would end up going back every day to see Hazel as she was put into hospice care at the hospital. And as many of you know, by Friday, she took her last breath with her daughters by her side. Every moment I got with Hazel and her family this past week felt holy, all the way to the end.

At some point in the week as I was sharing this juxtaposition of the tragedy of the shooting and the holy of being with Hazel, Mary Jo said to me, “Irene, there’s death and then there’s death.” There’s death and then there’s death. It took me a second to absorb what she was saying, but she’s right. There is death that can be holy and there is death that is hell. I experienced both this week and I won’t lie, friends, it was a lot.

The disciples in our scripture reading today also understood grief and the multi-faceted feelings that comes with death. Because only about forty days prior, they had lost their beloved friend, their teacher and leader, the savior, to a humiliating and tragic death on a cross. Each of them experienced different things-ranging from guilt, shame, and deep sorrow-wishing they had said or done things differently. And so when three days later, they found an empty tomb and Jesus appeared to them saying “Peace be with you” and showed him his hands and his side and came back to them, you can imagine their reticence to ever let him out of their sight and their eagerness to know all the things....and they were still waiting for the grand act of salvation by Jesus-freedom from their oppressors, justice and liberation from a corrupt empire...I mean, this is why he came back, right? To make things right? And so the disciples are understandably eager to know. When will be the time, Jesus, when you will RESTORE all things? Is it now? Is this the time? What’s happening? When? When are you going to act in the ways in which we expect you to act?

In light of the tragic events of the past couple of weeks and especially this past week, I’m sure we all find ourselves also wanting to ask the question as well, “Jesus, when will you RESTORE all things? Is it now? Is this the time? What is happening? When? We want answers.”

And then Jesus tells them and is telling us again that the time piece is not for us to know. But, but, he says, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus promises us that come what may, we will not be alone, will not do it alone, but that we will receive a Spirit that will allow us the ability to continue the next phase of his ministry as witnesses right where we are. If that had been all that had happened, maybe the disciples would have heard it and been encouraged.

Instead, what happens next distracts them from the promise they have just heard. Scripture says, “When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

You all. Wait, what??

Now friends, I’m not going to go into a theological discussion in a sermon about the legitimacy of the ascension and I know I’m taking a chance even preaching on it today because most preachers will skip this part of the story-but what I will say about the ascension is that although we cannot know the time when all things will be restored, this story does look forward in time. I read that it is the departure that makes possible this next new phase of ministry where the Spirit will come and the ministry will move from the embodied Christ to each of the disciples...to each one of us.

The Pentecost story is yet to come. Stay tuned, everyone. Next week. But waiting is hard. Grief is hard. I’m sure it was unbelievable that just as quickly as he had returned to them, he was gone again. No wonder they stood there staring up at the sky. They would then return back to the upper room, enclosing themselves again, this time not in fear but in prayer ... and probably a lot of confusion and wondering what to do next as they waited.

A pastor told the story of a 7th grader in her youth group, Steve, who reflected on this part of the story saying: “I mean: to see Jesus die on the cross, come back and then just randomly go to heaven. That must have been hard for the disciples. If I were one of the disciples at that time I would have felt as though Jesus was playing tricks with me the whole time, and to be honest, I would have probably felt that he abandoned me.” Friends, throughout our own lives of faith, I am sure each of us have also felt this feeling of God abandoning us. The parents and families who were waiting to hear or see that their child was alive at Robb Elementary School on Tuesday and coming home to unimaginable loss and grief, like those early disciples might have been left looking up toward the sky in their darkest moment asking “Where in the world are you, God?! Why have you abandoned me?!” I’ll be the first to confess that I do not know how much faith I would or could have in that moment.

And yet, in the Ascension, in the distraction of a man being lifted into the sky, we quickly forget that he promises that we will not be left abandoned and alone and hopeless. “You WILL receive power and you WILL be my witnesses...” there is a promise coming but staying tuned for what’s next is hard. But the promise of the Holy Spirit is coming-a comforter, a presence to abide with us, to help us make God in Christ known to us in the depths of our despair and the one who gives us the words to pray when we do not have any...

So I know I said to stay tuned for Pentecost next week, but Church, for those of you who need a word of some kind of hope today, here is what I was reminded of this past week through my own back and forth of death that felt holy and death that felt like hell. And that is, the Spirit is **here**. The Holy Spirit has already been given to each one of us, that promise is here. And no where does Jesus tell us that having the gift of the Spirit will make us unafraid or super human or suddenly all faithful. But he does say it will give us power to witness to those around us. We just have to trust it.

Elyse Myers, a funny and honest social media personality said this week in one of her posts, “When I’m asked how I manage my nerves, I say, ‘I don’t ... I don’t ... I just do things scared.’ I just do thing scared.

And you know, this resonated with me deeply because I think a lot of times when we are called to action for something we care about or when we want to share something important or speak truth to power, we are a lot of times afraid. We are afraid we will say the wrong things, that we will offend someone, that someone might not like us anymore or reject us. A lot of times we do not feel ready when we are called upon to do justly, love mercy and to walk humbly-we look at those who are doing these things and they seem so unafraid, but friends, I think the truth is that they probably are but that just do things scared. And so I really appreciated that simple post because she’s naming that very few of us manage our nerves before or in order to do the right thing or say the right thing. Most of the time, when we are called in a specific moment to do what is right, we are afraid and we do things scared.

This Ascension story is where Jesus passes his great work to all of us. It is when Jesus shares that although he will not be present physically that this work of ministry will continue in and through each one of us. And you know what, those disciples weren’t one hundred percent ready. But they would do it because they trusted the Spirit that would give them the power to be those witnesses and as a result of their faithful witness, we are all sitting here today seeking to continue what it means to be faithful witnesses for our time, here and now.

As Hazel entered into hospice care and became weaker, in one of my final visits with her where she could still speak, she turned to me and simply said, “Pray.” Now listen, up to that point, I had said several prayers with her that week. But knowing this might be the last time she could make that request of me, I immediately felt insecure about my ability to say the right and comforting things she might need to hear in a prayer. So, I took a deep breath, paused for a second, and I did it scared. And honestly, I have no idea what came out of my mouth and my heart, but when I

was done, her body told me it brought her the comfort she needed, and for the last time, we said “Amen” together.

Church, the Spirit is already here. Today, may you not be distracted by what you cannot understand and stand only looking to the sky. Instead, may what we do in here fill the streets and the world out there-go and look for the helpers-be the witness that Christ is calling you to be because of your faith, not in spite of it. And when someone asks you how you manage your nerves to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly even in the face of the world’s grief, tell them that you usually don’t. You just do things scared. You do things scared because you hold the promise that you will never be alone and you are held by the presence of an almighty, merciful and all-loving God.

May you believe that again this day.

And let the church say together, Amen.