

The Rev. Brandon Ashcraft
The Seventh Sunday of Easter: The Sunday after Ascension Day (Year B)
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
May 12, 2024

A Life-Changing Left Turn

Good morning, Trinity Church! I've waited a long time to say that, and it feels really good. The body of Christ gathered for worship is always a beautiful sight, but the view from up here is spectacular! My husband Bob and I have been moved by your gracious welcome. We are excited to call Boston home and can't wait to get to know you. We look forward to spending time with you at the reception following the service.

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The road to this pulpit has been a long and winding one for me. And it began years before Morgan and I ever had a conversation about ministry at Trinity. I wouldn't be here today had I not taken a life-changing left turn on March 18, 2012. That sunny Sunday morning in New York City, I elected not to walk my usual path down Fifth Avenue. Instead, on a whim, I made a left turn that took me to St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church at the corner of Park Avenue & East 50th Street. And on that Fourth Sunday in Lent, I heard a sermon that altered the course of my life.

In a way I had never experienced, the preacher that morning breathed new life into the ancient words of scripture. He affirmed the brokenness of the world while at once inspiring confidence in the redemptive power of the gospel. And he did it all with a perfect dash of self-deprecating humor. *I was transfixed.* The church was full that morning, but it felt like that sermon was preached directly to me. It was as if I'd been stumbling through a black-and-white world that suddenly shone with technicolor brilliance. I left St. Bart's convinced that, if there was any remote possibility that I could do "that," there was nothing else in the world I would rather do. And thus began my journey into ordained ministry.

Fast forward two-and-a-half years, and I'm waiting to board a train bound for New Haven, Connecticut, to begin my seminary studies. While New Haven was only two hours away on a commuter train line, it might as well have been halfway across the world. I loved New York and had long been convinced I would never live anywhere else. (Yes, I was one of *those* insufferable New Yorkers!) You see, I had grown up in a small Mississippi town. I'd gone to college in rural Tennessee. So 14 years prior I had arrived in New York City, as many small-town folks do, with big city dreams. But as I surveyed those 14 years in mind, one prevailing theme came into view: things had not gone at all as I had planned. In the rear-view mirror, I could see how much of myself I had devoted to chasing worldly emblems of success: money, material possessions, fancy corporate titles. Running on a cosmic hamster wheel, as the prize I was chasing remained perpetually out of reach.

As I sat there pondering my life amid the swirling chaos of Grand Central Station, I did something I normally try to resist. I posted an emotional reflection on Facebook. Many months later, a friend sent me a keepsake etched with 12 words from my reflection that distilled it to its essence: *I came seeking fame and fortune. What I found instead was grace.*

Friends, rest assured, this is more self-revelation than I typically offer from the pulpit.

But as we begin our relationship today as priest and people, I want you to know something of the journey that brought me here, just as I want to hear your stories in the weeks and months ahead. I share my story also because underneath the particularities, I believe there is something universal. Something I believe we all experience as we walk the Way of Jesus. I'm not talking about the part where I quit my job and go to seminary. I'm talking about the tension we inevitably discover between the values of our culture and the values of the Gospel. A tension Jesus highlights for us in this morning's passage from John.

This passage we just heard is commonly referred to as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer." And it is a scriptural gem. The writers of the gospels tell us over and over that Jesus prays, but rarely do we hear the content of his prayers. Yet, today we are invited to eavesdrop as Jesus prays to God the Father for his disciples. As he prays for them to have knowledge: "the words of truth." As he prays for their protection. As he prays for them to be "sanctified" – set apart and made holy for his mission. And in this prayer, no fewer than 13 times, Jesus speaks of "the world" in unmistakably harsh terms. "[My disciples] do not belong to the world," he says, "just as I do not belong to the world."

This condemnation of the world can be confusing without the proper context. After all, in the Genesis story of creation, we are told that God created the world and called it "good." Why would Jesus disavow the world in such stark terms? For the writer of John, "the world" is shorthand for the forces of sin and evil that mar the goodness of creation. The "world" encompasses the powers, principalities, and values that conflict with God's kingdom values of perfect peace, justice and love. For example, "the world" measures blessing in wealth and material prosperity: "fame and fortune." But in Jesus's Kingdom, "Blessed are the poor." "The world" wields power with the destructive weapons of war. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, demonstrates power in a sacrificial death. "The world" views systems of oppression with indifference. Jesus, and those who minister in his name, strive to dismantle these systems so the oppressed can go free. So as followers of Jesus, we do not ultimately belong "to the world." *And yet*, "the world" is exactly where Jesus sends us. "The world" is our mission field.

Today marks a new chapter in our life together at Trinity because it is the first day of our shared ministry. You have called me to serve as your Priest for Outreach. And in our ministry, we will participate in God's mission of reconciling this broken world. It is a ministry that calls us to speak truth that is at odds with the wisdom of the world. A ministry that calls us to strive for justice that confronts worldly systems of oppression and power. A ministry that calls us to the edges of society – to the very places "the world" ignores. And as we navigate the tension of being *in* the world but not *of* the world, I trust that we will find that God's grace is more than enough to sustain us.

I am delighted that, in a sacred coincidence, this transitional moment – this beginning of our shared ministry – coincides with a transitional moment in the Easter story. This past Thursday marked the Feast of the Ascension, which always falls 40 days after Easter – on a Thursday – so it's often overlooked, which is why you'll see it reflected in our prayers, hymns, and anthems for today. We also see the Ascension beautifully depicted in the stained-glass windows here in the South Transept. These magnificent windows depict the three biblical events associated with the three great feasts of Eastertide: Easter Day, the Ascension, and Pentecost. The Ascension, depicted in the middle window, doesn't occupy the same prominence in our theological imaginations as the resurrection we commemorate on Easter Day, or the sending of the Holy Spirit we'll commemorate

next Sunday on Pentecost. And I suspect that has something to do with this image of floating Jesus. An image that feels to many of us like a relic of an ancient cosmology: when the earth was thought to be flat, and heaven was a place “up there.” But as one wise bishop has said, “the Ascension is a reminder that the way of Jesus is not a set of logical concepts we understand, but a mystery we encounter.”¹

And in the Ascension, the mystery we encounter is this: the same Jesus who humbled himself to take on our humanity has exalted our humanity to the presence of God. In his Ascension, Jesus takes the entirety of our human existence into the very heart of God: which is our true, eternal home. In the Ascension, Jesus unites “the world” to heaven – tethering us in an unshakable bond of love *so that* we can pursue his mission here in the world: building the kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.”

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Looking in the rear-view mirror from here, I give thanks that things did not go as I had planned. Today, I give thanks for that life-changing left turn that led me to this place. And I pray that God will sustain me from the wellspring of his grace for the holy ministry of being one of your priests. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Facebook, the Rt. Rev. Craig Loya, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota, https://www.facebook.com/100064812815735/posts/pfbid0NjkuFADt2Uc15pwDNVYJKgcvBs8u9m3g91obw2GBrUfjur2M59enxhk_e31UbmLzPl/?mibextid=cr9u03