

SERMON 936

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 17, 2015

998th Week as Priest

825th Week at St Dunstan's

90th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

A SEAMLESS ROBE

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

We have come to the seventh and final Sunday of the Easter season. And what I would like to do this day is to paint a large canvas for you with words and stories, a picture of the life of Christ that will stay with you throughout the year and perhaps even for years to come.

I know that's a tall order, but this is, after all, the greatest story ever told. You could say it begins in a stable in the village of Bethlehem, where a child was born—but that's not entirely accurate. That birth was foretold centuries earlier, in the words of the prophet Micah. Not only that, the place, Bethlehem, was also named. There have been disagreements and interpretations regarding the boy's lineage, but the claim is that the child's mother was Mary and his father was

God the Father. Yes, I know that ‘young woman’ didn’t necessarily mean ‘virgin,’ and that there was never any kind of assertion that the Messiah, the Anointed One, the King over Israel, would actually be the Son of God. But in my limited experience, and in my reading of the sacred stories, this is precisely the way God acts—doing the unexpected, choosing the unlikely, giving us more than we could ask for or imagine. So we have a birth, and it is miraculous, attended by angels and wise men—and it is ‘satisfactory,’ as T.S. Eliot said, which is to say true, sufficient, and utterly real.

The next major piece of the story picks up where Jesus of Nazareth, now a grown man, arrives from Galilee preaching about the fullness of time and the coming of God’s Kingdom. Moreover, he does signs and wonders, he heals people, and he teaches with an authority heretofore unknown and without comparison. His message is love—for God and neighbor—and it is dramatic and life-changing, though not entirely new. Once again he is reshaping an ancient story. The king is not a warrior. He is more, much more. He is the lamb of God, the word, the true vine, the bread of life. And he intends nothing less than a new way to live, a truth that is based on love and mercy, a life of sacrifice and of complete and unqualified commitment.

But Jesus and his message are hated by those in power, by the religious establishment, those who have the most to lose. They scheme and devise strategies for his downfall. They have him arrested on false charges, paraded before the Roman governor—and he is condemned, beaten, made a mockery, and put to death. All this was prophesied as well. Isaiah portrayed him as the Suffering Servant seven hundred years earlier, and it came to pass with astonishing accuracy.

So he was buried in a borrowed grave, again as foretold, and miracle of miracles, he was raised from that death by God. Only Jesus had said this would happen—and nobody believed him. Many don't believe it to this day, but it was all part of the plan, absolutely necessary, and true down to the finest of details.

Then we come to the latest and last detail of Christ's life. And what a life it is! Jesus of Nazareth has lived a life so perfectly, so passionately, that he is for us the very example of the life of love. His words, his actions, every sign and wonder and miracle, all serve to teach us how to live and why to live.

But now has come the time for him to leave us. He takes his followers out of the city on the road to Bethany, and there he bids them farewell and ascends into heaven.

It is a striking and astounding experience, no doubt about it. The two angels attempt to explain what has happened without any hint of why. But again, it is necessary, a necessary part of the plan. He must go away—for their own good, and for ours. If he stayed then we would not have to become responsible. If he continued to appear as the Risen One, healing and doing signs and wonders, then we would forget the reason he came in the first place. We would forget to love God and our neighbor. We could just let Jesus handle that.

But there is more, as there always is with God. Jesus left his followers and ascended into heaven—not as some disembodied spirit, not as a ghost or apparition—but as the Son of God—fully human and fully divine. He returned to the Father and stands before him pleading our case, with love and mercy, to this very moment. He brought our humanity to heaven, and by this we know that we will truly be raised with him.

So the story comes full circle. God made man returns to the Father. We are reconciled with God. We are assured of his love and mercy. Now we are to live our lives as a direct reflection of Christ's life. And we need one more thing. We are all waiting on the coming of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.