

Ascent and Assent

Proper 16, Year A, RCL, Track 2. Matthew 16:13-20 (Peter's Confession). The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost. August 27, 2017. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

To confess the lordship of Jesus Christ in your life...

To declare yourself converted to his fellowship as you live and move and have your being in the world...

It takes a shift in your point of view. A shift that alters your whole way of paying attention. It takes enough presence of mind to identify some landmarks in territory you had thought, before the shift, was utterly familiar. It's like what happens in a balloon ascent.

Two days ago, in the golden hour approaching sundown, I was drifting with my wife and six other people in the gondola of a hot air balloon. Our direction was south, parallel and just to the east of Route 44. We had lifted off behind Ravenna High School and never got above eleven hundred feet. It was serene, calm and quiet except for the occasional *fwoosh* of the propane burners that kept us aloft. The utterly competent pilot (or aeronaut, to use the proper balloonist's term) was pleasant and companionable, as were the other passengers, who were couples celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversaries as Julie and I were celebrating our thirty-fifth. (One couple even had the same wedding date as ours: August 14th.)

Julie says I was very a very intent observer of the environment, conversing much less than the others. Of course anyone who knew me would expect me to be wrapped up in such an experience; I'd wanted to make a balloon ascent since the age of about six. But that wasn't the whole of it. The deepest fascination was that I was observing from above—high enough to see many miles around, low enough to see abundant detail—a tract of land I knew well from my routine activities: the route of my country drive, as I call it: the 82-mile circuit I travel in the course of serving as rector in the Episcopal Shared Ministry of Salem and Alliance.

This correspondence between my typical drive and the drift of the balloon was, as we say in Middle Earth, an accident. When Julie arranged for us to participate the route could not be predicted for certain. Even the date of the ascent was subject to fluctuation; so much depends on weather and other factors in ballooning. We would see what we would see, wherever the wind took us. But, if I may make so bold as to bow to Divine Providence (which I just did in quoting Tolkien's reference to the fact that nothing that happens under Heaven is utterly accidental), I think it was important to Someone that I see what I thought I knew in a fuller way. A richer and more complete way.

It was important that I find all the landmarks I knew from my drive. And I did, mostly, from the Portage County fairgrounds to the Atwater church to Alliance and (just barely) Salem. And many others. That I was unable to spot the famous New Baltimore ice cream shop, though we must have passed close to it indeed, is perhaps a message in itself, given my present call to assiduous weight management.

We touched down—all right, we bounced down—a few hundred yards south of the Marlboro Chapel. By then I could say to everyone, "I know where we are." And mean it in a way I had never meant it before.

There comes a time when God expects each one of us to say, "I know where I am," and mean it in a way we have never meant it before. There comes a moment when God expects us to assert that we know the territory well enough to have a comprehensive view of our situation. In the lingo of our spiritual tradition this is called conversion, and the sign that it has happened is that we declare it. It means we know where we stand with God, his Son, and the world, and that we are ready to say so. In today's Gospel reading, Peter had been on the road with Jesus and the rest of the entourage for a while, and he'd been immersed in the religious, economic, political and geographical world of the ancient Middle East his whole life. But at a certain point he came to be able to declare that he knew the most important thing about Jesus, which was (as it still is) the most important thing of all: that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, the one sent to heal, restore and reconfigure everything.

At some point, all the landmarks we know show up in a pattern revealed by a perspective we could not have arrived at by accident or by our own contrivance. At some point, we are shown a diorama of reality in which the meaning of the world and our movement through it takes on a certainty, a significance, an energy and a wonder that supplies us with assent to the Son of the Living God. This assent—this saying *Yes!*—may involve an ascent—a rising up—but it may equally involve a bumpy landing and the companionship of people in competent and convivial conversation.

Yes. Sooner or later, like Peter, we must acknowledge the Son of God for who he is. And that acknowledgement reconfigures our map of the whole of creation, a creation in which, from that moment forward, we know where we are, who is in charge, and what it means to navigate the terrain.

What has changed, or could change, *your* map of reality? Who do *you* say Jesus is?