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Trinity A – Scholarship Sunday
Peace, Seattle
June 19, 2011 epk
Gen 1, Matthew 28

AT THE PASS

There are times in our lives when, like trekkers in the mountains, we arrive at the top of a pass and are afforded a view that allows us to look clearly in two directions: where we've come from, and where we're going.

And that's the frame I'm suggesting we use this morning as we take in the view we're given by the first lesson from Genesis, the final verses of Matthew's gospel, and Scholarship Sunday.

When we find ourselves at such a place, we often become aware of how deeply indebted we are to those who have walked this same path before us, marking the way, and to those who've journeyed beside us, supporting and encouraging us along the way.

I have to mention Don Hillier's name right now, who joined the saints in glory two years ago…
As I was working on today's service and this Genesis text—a text which was important enough to Don that he insisted it be part of his memorial service—and saw that his granddaughter Elizabeth would be our lector on this Scholarship Sunday, I thought, HOW GREAT IS THAT?
…So, even though Don isn't present with us in the flesh, still, he is with us, as part of that great cloud of witnesses throughout the generations who, through the mercy of God, have obtained a vantage point infinitely broader than our own.

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Two vistas, then, afforded by our texts this morning:

- **One vista**, in which we're given a GOD'S EYE PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE'S LONG JOURNEY, as Genesis traces the story back through countless eons; back before human existence; before collision of continents raised mountains up from ocean floors; back before life first emerged on this green garden planet; back through what some have call "deep time," to the very origin of the universe—to when Creation was just a glint in the Creator's eye.

- **And the other vista**, standing on the mountain of our gospel text with the risen Jesus and his remnant community, filled with a mixture of faith and doubt, hope and uncertainty; pointed toward the future and wondering what our journey there will hold.

What informs the whole long saga that brought us to this pass, of course, is the testimony of Scripture that we are not alone on this venture but are accompanied by the very One whose breath put life in us, and whose Spirit has guided and will guide our feet.

In the first chapter of his gospel, Matthew tells how Joseph, after learning his fiancée is pregnant, determines he must call off their engagement. But just then, at this crossroads, Joseph learns in a dream that the Holy Spirit is mixed up in all that's unfolding. Matthew then writes:

> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoke by the Lord through the prophet:
> "THE VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE AND BEAR A SON AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM EMMANUEL" which means "GOD IS WITH US." [Mt. 1:22-23]

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At the tail end of Matthew's gospel, which we heard today, the one who showed the world what God's companionship in the flesh looks like, speaks his final word and it is a promise: GO IN THE NAME OF THE TRIUNE GOD, AND REMEMBER: I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, TO THE END OF THE AGE.

So as we stand here on this pass, with one view showing us where we've been and the other where we're going, we're led to the profound conclusion that all along the way we have been companioned—and will be yet again—by the God whose name is Emmanuel—the one who journeys with us.

Now it's a sad fact that in the 2,000 years since Jesus commissioned his first followers, the church has left some stunning examples of what mission in Christ's name ought NOT to look like.

We all have our favorites—the Crusades, the Inquisition, internecine wars and pogroms; the conquering of the New World with the cross in one hand and the sword in the other; not to mention the wars and genocidal conflicts that have attended our own time.

A history such as this invites us to a place of humility at this place where we stand. Yet, we ought not let it paralyze us. We ought not allow it to keep our feet cemented here out of fear for what new mistakes await us as we make our way forward (…and we will make mistakes!)

In his book REASONS FOR HOPE,[1] Jose´ Luis Martin Descalzo shares the story of a doctor friend.

> This friend, he says, "has a wonderful job: she carries out preventive analysis of various illnesses in newly born babies, illnesses that if detected early enough can be cured, thus saving many lives and sparing a good deal of suffering… Several years ago, on a day when she and her colleagues were overwhelmed with work, someone in her laboratory …made a mistake labeling test results. As a consequence some children were given treatments they did not need, and what is worse, one child who had every chance of developing a number of illnesses was pronounced healthy.
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> "Months later the supposedly impossible happened. The child fell ill, and the treatment, because it was late, was much more painful and a good deal more dangerous. All because of a mistake in labeling. The doctors who worked in the laboratory suffered over that mistake as much, or almost as much, as the parents. But fortune was kind, and the little one survived.
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> "A year later," writes Descalzo, "the parents came to visit my friend." Did they come "to complain about the mistake that had endangered the life of their baby boy? No, they came to let [her] see how well the child was so that she would not keep on suffering for the mistake she had made."

Those parents knew something about grace, about forgiveness, and how it can open the path toward the future.

Matthew tells us that as Jesus stands there on the mountain with what remains of his core group of followers, some are ready to bow down to him but others have doubts. **Does he sift out the skeptical ones and send them packing? No.**

He commissions them all, knowing, perhaps, that it will be in the going and in the doing, in the sharing and in the living, that his presence as Emmanuel, will lead them to a place of greater faith.

[1] Martin Descalzo, *Reasons for Hope.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), page 89.

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Ours is an increasingly pluralistic world, where religious traditions of every kind and category—and none at all—rub against each other; each staking their claim on what qualifies for "Sacred" and what does not.

But what seems to be emerging in our own day is a sense that living in a sacred manner, is less a matter of words and more a matter of deeds; is less a matter of profession and more a matter of action.

When Red Jacket, a member of the Seneca tribe and a great orator, was asked to respond to the Evangelical Missionary Society's offer to bring the Christian religion to the Six Nations Confederacy, he politely and eloquently turned down the offer. But he left the door open with these final words to the young missionary:

> "Brother!" he told Reverend Crum. "We are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while, and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good and makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again what you have said."[2]

Christ's great commission is not a grandiose program for converting the world to a singular "Christian" point of view—as if such a thing existed—but a summons to a way of living that proclaims God's abundance and Christ's compassionate presence wherever futures are bright or endangered, wherever mistakes need forgiving; and wherever the last, the least, and the lost need serving.

Whether your own future seems open and rich, with college and career beckoning beyond the horizon; or whether it seems questionable—even frightening, the view from this mountain pass confirms this much: God will not leave us—will not leave you alone. I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS – EVEN TO THE END OF THE AGE.

When all is said and done, we have a Lord who promises to go with us, to be our companion, through whatever circumstances life throws our way. In good times and in bad, in loss and in joy, our Lord promises to stick around. Amen.

[2] *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by noted Indian Chieftains.* Compiled by W. C. Vanderwerth. University of Oklahoma Press, 1971. Pp. 43-47.