

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Sixth Sunday of Easter, John 14:15-21
21 May 2017
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

No doubt like many of you, I learned to love reading very early in life. I've continued this love of reading as an adult, and I'm usually reading at least three different of books—an academic text on some subject that interests me; a book that strengthens or challenges my spiritual life; and a novel that, ideally, takes me out of my own time and place and, by doing so, helps me imagine our own world differently. It's a novel I want to tell you about this morning.

Currently, I am now about 2/3 of the way through a series of what are actually three novels by an African-American author, N K Jemisin (The Inheritance Trilogy). She is a new author for me, and I mention her because, in her novels, heaven and earth are united in much the way I discussed last week, that is, as early Christians believed they will be united in the future when God creates the new heaven and the new earth and joins them together. However, in her story, there are a couple of twists. First, there are multiple gods and, second, while humans and gods freely and even intimately interact, her gods are not at all like our understanding of God—they are more like the Greek gods, namely, selfish, petty, capricious, and prone to be very dangerous for the humans who get close to them and, sometimes, even for those who don't. In short, these gods are not good and, what's more, they hold a great deal of power which they often wield without regard to the consequences for humans. But here's my point: whatever the faults of these gods, they are very present to, interacting with, and living close to humans in ways that I, at least, have never imagined before.

Where I am going with all this? I'm trying to set up a contrast. Last week, we saw that Jesus was preparing his disciples for life after his resurrection, and we see this preparation continuing in today's reading. While last week we discussed the new heaven and the new earth in which God will be present to us like God was present to our first parents, today we see Jesus preparing the disciples for the fact that he is going to go away, that rather than being present with him as he was before his death he will, in fact, be in some real sense *absent* from them. This is part of the message of the Ascension coming up on the 25th, and I don't want us to miss its significance just because we often don't celebrate it in our rush toward Pentecost.

Imagine with me that you are an early disciple of Jesus. You've just seen your beloved friend and teacher executed in a most vicious and hideous way. Your hopes for him, for your suffering people, and for yourself are dashed to pieces. And then, against your wildest dreams, he has returned in a glorious, if somewhat mysterious, resurrected body and presented himself to you. If you weren't convinced before this time that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord of the entire world, you soon are convinced. And you're ready to march out and take over the world in his name. "Where do we start? What's the next step?" you ask in your eagerness. But, again, contrary to every expectation you've ever had as a Jew, Jesus says, "Well, yes, I'm going to send you forth, but not to take over the world. I'm going to send you forth to *serve* it. Oh, and by the way, I won't be with you." Imagine you are that disciple—you have just come to believe the world is about to be full of your Lord's presence, that you will be ruling beside him as he sits at beside the divine king, and suddenly he says, "Ah...remember guys, I've

tried to tell you...the kingdom I'm ruling is not going to be like the one you imagine. And, again, I won't be there with you."

Perhaps, in our own day, this scenario is not as hard for us to imagine as it would have been for the early disciples. With our largely secular, scientific, post-Enlightenment world-view, it seems God is indeed largely absent from our world. Even if Westerners still believe there *is* a God, this God is thought to be very far away, not involved in our day to day cares or concerns, and certainly not—as God is portrayed in the Bible—certainly not involved in human history. Sociologists of religion tell us we live in a disenchanted world, a world of nature and not of creation, a world brought into existence by cosmic accidents and not by a God who loves us, a world without ultimate purpose or meaning. But here's my question: Is it possible that, in some way, our own Christian story, our story about an absent Lord, has contributed to this disenchantment? On a certain view of the resurrection and ascension, sadly the answer to this question may be, Yes.

In the Christian story, Jesus is said to have ascended to heaven as the resurrected Messiah to be enthroned at the right hand of God. From there he would and, Christians believe, he does rule the world. If we imagine heaven, as I discussed last week, as someplace else, someplace far away at the edges of our ever-expanding universe, then, yes, that Jesus is truly absent and it is easier to see how the world became disenchanted. But if, instead, we understand heaven as another dimension of time and space, a place that permits Jesus to be present everywhere and anywhere in our own time and space, then, No, *this* view of heaven does not contribute to a disenchanted view of the world. In this view, Jesus is not visible—he is indeed absent to our time and space—but he *is* present to us from heaven in his own dimension of time and space.

I know, I'm going into the weeds these last few weeks, but I'm doing so because I want us to understand, in its fullness, both the story that Christians tell and how that story is often misheard in our day. Regardless of whether we personally find this story hard to believe, we need to understand it. I don't imagine that, by itself, understanding leads to faith, but I'm hoping understanding might remove or lower some of barriers to faith. Week by week, we typically get bits and pieces of the story, and too often we fill in the blanks with what we hear from our culture, and our culture is a notoriously unreliable source for our faith.

Recall again that last week I discussed heaven as a place where God lives and reigns, and I compared the future recreated, and rejoined, new heaven and new earth that we are promised with our Lord as something like the casual intimacy of God walking with our first parents in the Garden of Eden. An analogy of how heaven relates to earth in the *meantime*, before this future recreation, might be found in a series of other novels, this time by C S Lewis. He imagines how Aslan, in Narnia, is both present to and absent from our own space and time, and this is a one way to imagine how Jesus is currently both present to and absent from our own world now.

So, even in our current world, Jesus has not left us completely alone. We'll have more to say about this in coming weeks, but we can see his promise in today's Gospel reading from John, a promise to send "another Advocate" from the Father in heaven. This Advocate, also called the Comforter and later the Holy Spirit, is the spirit of Jesus of present with us in his seeming-absence. This Spirit is Jesus' way of keeping both God's presence and his presence alive for the disciples in this world, while he is alive and well in another dimension that we call heaven, doing the work of the messianic king to help us bring the kingdom of God to earth

in all its fullness. We are not, he promises us, left as orphans. We have a Father in God and a brother in Jesus who are watching over the world and guiding our work for the kingdom from heaven—a heaven, it turns out, that is very close-by. If we love him, we will “see” him at work in us and in our world, and we will be loved by him. For now, that is enough. Amen.