

From this morning's Epistle, from the First Letter of St. Peter:

*And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves...* 1 St. Peter 4:8a

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They're stories that we all know well. Stories that we likely first heard years ago read from a children's bible; or in a Sunday School lesson; or maybe sitting on our grandmother's lap. And they all have one thing in common. The first is a story of destruction; the story of God's plan to rid the world of sin and disobedience, following in the steps of the sin and disobedience of Adam and Eve; the story of that time when Noah and his family and two of all living creatures were saved from the waters of the Flood when they entered into the ark.<sup>1</sup> The second is a story of restoration: the story of God's plan to establish a new covenant, a whole new relationship with his people Israel as they journeyed from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land; a covenant marked by obedience to the Law; the story of that time when Moses went up on the top of the mountain to receive the two tables of stone.<sup>2</sup> The third is a story of renewal: the story of Christ entering into the wilderness at the very beginning of his ministry; taking upon himself the role of Israel wandering the wilderness; identifying himself with the brokenness and sin of God's People that he might, on the Cross, redeem them from sin and death; the story of that time when Christ battled Satan in the wilderness.

And what you've likely already realised is that all of these stories have one thing in common: they all take place over 40 days. The forty days and forty nights that the rains fell. The forty days and forty nights that Moses stayed on the top of the mountain speaking with God. The forty days and forty nights that Christ spent in the wilderness wrestling with the temptations of Satan. Forty days and forty nights, as we are told in all three accounts. Which is surely not coincidence. But the other thing that all three of these stories have in common, which you may not have noticed, is that they all take place in a particular landscape: a landscape marked by devastation. The first is landscape of devastation - the devastation of the flood: a harsh, destructive landscape where human life would not have endured had God not provided the safety of the ark. The second is the harsh landscape of the desert: where Israel would not have survived had God not nourished his people with water from the rock and bread from heaven. And the third is the equally harsh landscape of the wilderness: where, as we are told, angels came and ministered to Christ.

Each of these is an image of the brokenness of creation; the brokenness that human disobedience and sin always bring: the broken relationships that we have with each other and with creation itself when we choose to ignore and disregard the image of God which has been planted within each one of us; when we, like Adam and Eve in their day and the People of Israel in their day, give in to the temptation to live as our own gods. Those are the landscapes that I want you to have in mind as we think this week of what the Resurrection and the Ascension mean to us. Because, of course, this past Thursday the Church celebrated the end of another 40-day period: that 40-day period in which the Risen Christ appeared to his disciples; that 40-day period of Christ's resurrected life. And I want us to try to see how this story also takes place within a particular landscape; a landscape very different from the landscape of devastation and destruction and division in which all of those other stories are set; a landscape which is not so much physical as it is hopeful; a landscape that tells us what Christ's Resurrection stories are all about.

The stories of Christ's Resurrection all speak of that whole new world, that new

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 7:4ff.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 9:9ff.

landscape, which Christ has won for us: a world no longer defined by the devastation and destruction and division of our fallen, broken, nature; and they speak of how Christ's Resurrection offers us an entirely new way of living: no longer fearfully sheltering ourselves from each other; no longer grasping and grabbing that we might have and others not. That's what Christ was talking about last Sunday when he reminded his disciples that he had overcome the world; that even though devastation and destruction and division continue in all of their unrelenting horror, they no longer have the eternal power over us that they once did because Jesus has defeated death once and for all time. That's what I mean by a whole new landscape; a whole new world; and a whole new way of living: seeing all of life through the lens of Christ's new life; through the lens of Christ's risen life.

And that's what Peter is getting at in this week's Epistle when he calls us to love fervently, both friend and stranger alike. He speaks of our need to practice hospitality<sup>3</sup>, literally, our need to practice *love to strangers*<sup>4</sup>, to outsiders, to all those who are different from us, which he tells us we are called to share ungrudgingly<sup>5</sup>; without grumbling or complaining. And he speaks of ἀγάπην ἐκτενή; literally 'love fully stretched out'<sup>6</sup>; the kind of love that can only be formed in the give and take of everyday life; a love that grows stronger because it's been tested in the push and pull of human relationships: both good and bad; a love that grows stronger because it's built on forgiveness and patience just as much as it is on care and compassion. All of which sounds great, until you actually have to try to do it; in the middle of the everyday landscape of devastation and destruction and division that surrounds us. Which is why we hear this week the story of Elijah and Elisha; and of that moment when the power of the great prophet Elijah, the mantle of his office as the greatest of all God's prophets, is passed onto his successor, onto Elisha, even as Elijah ascends to heaven; that Elisha might carry on in his place and walk in his steps.

That's what we're anticipating next Sunday – when it comes time to celebrate once again the Feast of Pentecost; to celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples in Jerusalem; whom Christ speaks of in this week's Gospel as the Comforter; literally, as the one who gives us strength; the Paraclete;<sup>7</sup> the helper, the counselor; the one who comes along side us speaking words of hope in our hearts. Maybe even speaking words of hope this day in the hearts of the people of Mariupol or the people of Uvalde, who at this moment understand the unrelenting landscape of devastation and destruction and division all too well.

That's where we stand now; in this in-between time after Christ's Resurrection, waiting for his coming again in glory. Seeking the Spirit of the Risen Christ to come along side us that we might not just **see** but **be** the Body of the Risen Christ; that we might speak words of hope into the hearts of fallen, broken, fearful humanity; that we might live out the love that is the only answer to the unrelenting landscape of devastation and destruction and division that surrounds us; that we might start living right now the resurrected life of love that we hope to live one day in the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 4:9: φιλόξενοι εἰς ἀλλήλους ἄνευ γογγυσμῶν

<sup>4</sup> Φιλόξενοι; φιλόξενος, φιλόξενον from φίλος - a friend; someone *dearly* loved (prized) in a personal, intimate way; a trusted *confidant*, held dear in a close bond of personal affection; and ξένος - alien, new, novel; noun: a guest, stranger, foreigner), from Homer down, hospitable, generous to guests (given to hospitality)

<sup>5</sup> γογγυσμοῦ (from γογγύζω, (an onomatopoeic term imitating the sound of cooing doves) – to murmur or mutter (grumble) with muffled undertones; (figuratively) murmur, grumble; to show "smoldering discontent" (Souter), droning on in a low, constant murmur.

<sup>6</sup> ἐκτενής, ἐς *ektenēs* (an adjective, derived from *ek*, "wholly *out*" which intensifies *teinō*, "to stretch" which is also the root of English terms, "tension" and "tense") – properly, stretch *out*, i.e. fully because completely taut; (figuratively) at *maximum potential*, without slack because fully extended to its necessary *outcome*. <http://biblehub.com/greek/1618.htm>

<sup>7</sup> παράκλητος, ου, ὁ called to one's aid; (a) an advocate, intercessor, (b) a consoler, comforter, helper, (c) Paraclete. (from *pará*, "from close-beside" and *kaléō*, "make a call") – properly, a *legal advocate* who makes the right judgment-*call* because *close* enough to the situation. *paráklētos* ("advocate, advisor-helper") is the regular term in NT times of an *attorney* (lawyer) – i.e. someone *giving evidence that stands up in court*.