

Sojourning In Place to the New Jerusalem

Meta

Date: May 5, 2024 (Rogation Sunday)

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Romans 8.18-25

John 15.8-17

Opening

I'll begin with a question: what brought you here? Not to Apostles, though that question matters a great deal. What brought you to this city, Knoxville, or to its surrounding towns, this region of East Tennessee? We call this place 'home.' Your answer might recall the call of God to come to Knoxville. It might be 'I've always lived here. Momma and Daddy have always lived here.' Keep going then. What or who brought momma and daddy here?

I recently attended one of the Knox County Commission meetings about the Advance Knox plan which was recently approved for county development. I heard not fewer than a dozen farmers voice their concerns who lived on Century Farms—Tennessee farms that have been in families for at least a hundred years. And I've scarcely had a deeper sense of the sanctity of this place than when I heard those farmers speak with love and devotion for this land beneath our feet.

I learned anew the dignity of my neighbors, not only their work, not only they themselves, but their mothers and fathers before them.

Nearer to town you can find places and neighborhoods with memorials. In Old North Knoxville, select homes have entire histories of their inhabitants posted on signs along sidewalks; some who served in the University of Tennessee, judges, school teachers; and also a few shady characters and n'er do wells. We come by our name 'the Scruffy City' honestly.

For all that is lovely and unlovely, all that is sacred and has become desecrated, this is home. Or the place we call home until we reach our eternal home. Here is the place of our sojourn to the New Jerusalem that will come down from heaven to cover all peoples, all nations, all lands, all cities, and Knoxville, TN, too.

You have joined a *procession*. And not just on Rogation Days with a parish that pre-serving ancient traditions. That ever so brief walk beside our modest garden, shuffling our feet through dewy grass to the limit of our church boundary, returning to the doors of the parish—praying the Great Litany each step along our route; that procession is no shallow ritual.

Any procession led by the cross of Christ reveals both visible and invisible realities. The invisible reality of a procession is the truth that we process in worship with angels, archangels, and a great

cloud of witnesses, saints whom we love and see no longer. Three Sundays of the year the congregation processes together—Palm Sunday, Easter Vigil, and Rogation Sunday. Add a fourth occasion on the Feast of Candlemas. These parish procession days signify that we belong to a Kingdom that is both seen and unseen; that is both here and is coming; that is now and not yet.

You cannot see God the Holy Spirit, yet this Spirit leads us. It is **the Spirit of God** who summoned us, or our fathers or mothers, to sojourn in faith *here*, not somewhere else. It is **the Spirit of God** who gives us breath to pray this Great Litany to God the Father in the Name of his Son, Jesus Christ. You cannot see how great and mysterious is this procession, but you belong here. You are witnesses of realities, visible and invisible.

The visible reality is that we process here in Knoxville, TN. We may take pilgrimages to holy sites in distant places and lands. I highly commend it. (And welcome back, Fr. Rob!). But the procession here is a sign that our pilgrimage happens in Knoxville; for God's full glory and goodness to transfigure Knoxville. Our procession, our pilgrimage is not for our own spiritual growth alone. Our pilgrimage requires fidelity to our Lord in this place. So we pray that Knoxville would be sanctified wholly by the Holy Spirit, that our home would see new creation *now*.

In the ancient practice of procession, continued here in Knoxville, we pray the ancient words of the Great Litany. There are no better, more fitting words, to pray on Rogation Days, to pray over our city than the petitions, intercessions, and confessions of the Great Litany. Yes, we pray for all creation, all nations and our nation, because we are baptized into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. But we are witnesses of that global Church here. Those places and people we see each day; the conflicts, problems, and aches we know most intimately among our neighbors and our city; these are the locations and people we especially attach to each petition in the Great Litany. We pray the Great Litany in and for Knoxville for East Tennessee.

There's been a recent conversion to Christianity of a fairly well known author and scholar of mythology named Martin Shaw. Shaw said that one of most powerful revelations he had when reading the four Gospels is that the Gospel has a postal code. He's British so we have to adapt that to say, 'the Gospel has a Zip code!'

Not only does the Gospel have a ZIP code, it has a calendar. We walk in procession in 2024. Oh, Lord, have mercy; Christ have mercy.

I must repent of pining for calmer times of years gone by. // Now no era has complete peace. That's the illusion of nostalgia. But it's also true that recent times past have enjoyed greater stability and harmony than our own. The travails of the 80s and 90s were much milder than the aches of recent decades.

Yet Christ calls us to take up our cross and process with him as his Church in 2024. You and I were not born to process with the cross of Christ in calmer times. We do not have the great blessing of gathering, processing, worshipping, praying, receiving communion in days of national stability and civic harmony. We process with the cross of Christ, led by the Holy Spirit of God in 2024.

Thank God for the invisible realities of processions when you live in unstable times, invisible realities such as being accompanied by a great cloud of witnesses. In so many accounts of the lives of the church fathers, we hear examples of Christians who *desired* suffering to imitate Christ, even to the point of martyrdom. That is not a native desire, but I see the holiness of that desire. Our fathers and mothers in the faith ran towards hardship like soldiers volunteering for the front lines of the fiercest battlefield. Send forth your Holy Spirit, breathe holy courage within us for the living of these days in this place.

Creation Groaning

St. Paul said in Romans 8 that creation will *always* groan for redemption until the Son of God returns. Yet that groaning seems so much more audible in recent years. There's a shaking happening in our world—in Europe, in the Middle East, throughout these United States. The nature of our news media draws us to the events and happenings far afield. Thank God we have the means by which to know what's going on in the world, for we are called to be intercessors, a royal priesthood praying for the aching world.

But Rogation Sunday won't let us ignore the ground beneath our feet. Our attention cannot be forever far afield and forget our fields nearby. The Church processing on Rogation Sunday cannot constantly opine about what's happening in Washington and ignore what's happening at the City Council Building. We cannot overlook the needs of farmers and food producers, their dependence upon regular, gentle rains and moderate temperatures. The summer forecast is well above normal throughout the US in 2024. Creation is strained, the threat of drought is upon us, creation is groaning for redemption. So we process and pray the Great Litany. We ask for these things according to the will of God.

That's the origin of the word 'rogation.' Rogation derives from the Latin verb meaning 'to ask.' If you haven't heard of the word 'Rogation' until today, it's hidden in plain sight when paired with a familiar prefix 'inter-rogation.' Which most often has a negative connotation because it means intense questioning.

But what if someone *wants* the questions, desires the questions? // And Jesus said

John 15:16–17 (ESV): You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Oh, much ink has been spilled over that phrase ‘whatever you ask in the Father in my name, he may give it to you.’ Much debate and conversation about what the Lord meant here. Another sermon all itself, so suffice it to say that praying in the Name of Jesus is not like the closing phrase of a letter or email. The invitation to ask anything is rooted in the revelation of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God come to earth.

Let’s keep it simple. Remember the place and time of these words: Upper Room, Maundy Thursday. Jesus speaks his farewell words to his disciples, preparing him that the Father will soon send the Holy Spirit. Now he says ‘I chose you and appointed you *that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide*. No longer does he call them servants, but friends. The apprenticeship is over.

Though they cannot understand Jesus’ words about being lifted high on the cross, of rising again, the sending of the Spirit, our Lord prepares his disciples in the Upper Room for the work of new creation. When the Spirit comes upon the Church, the Lord will keep making things new in his creation through his Church.

For three years, they received the Lord’s teaching. These are the ones who sat at Jesus’ feet when the Lord preached his Sermon on the Mount. They are witnesses of his signs and wonders. And now he will depart. And when he departs the Father will send the Holy Spirit to abide with them forever, to empower them for obedience, to send them into the world to be ‘repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to dwell in’¹. Before Jesus departs, he tells them, ‘ask my Father what you need to abide in Him. Ask Him to give all that you need to continue the new creation mission I’ve given you. Rogare. All the works you have seen Jesus do—preaching the Kingdom, blessing the poor, showing mercy to the brokenhearted—ask Him for help to fulfill these commands of love.

Might we think of the Great Litany as a humble interrogation of the Almighty God? We’ve printed the Great Litany today so you have a copy yourself, not just so we have it for Rogation Sunday. Pray the Great Litany again and see if it’s not liturgical prayer based on the Sermon on the Mount. These are the things God desires. This liturgy teaches me how to pray. These prayers reform and reshape my desires.

God has asked us to ask him for these things. And not just anywhere, but somewhere. In the place where the Holy Spirit has led you to sojourn to the New Jerusalem.

Conclusion

We are leaning toward Pentecost, praying and asking God for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit on his Church. And I pray that we can hear new depths and purposes to that prayer. We do not pray this for our salvation and sanctification alone. We have been sent to bear the fruit of his Kingdom here in Knoxville; to be faithful to the end, no matter what the future holds.

¹ Isaiah 58.12

When we join a procession following the cross of Christ, led by the Holy Spirit, remember that it is not only a procession that reaches back. It's a procession moving forward. It's a vanguard, bearing witness in this place that Jesus Christ makes all things new because he is risen from the dead. So ask him to make all things new. Let us do this together here in this place of our sojourn, until our procession ends in our eternal home, when we behold with all the saints of all nations and places the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.