

Pentecost 12, Proper 14
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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God of Uncertainty

There's nothing like changing the subject to avoid an issue. Whether it's an awkward something that came tumbling out of my mouth while I wasn't paying attention, or a reference to the elephant in the living room that I'm just not prepared to talk about just yet, a rabbit-trail into weather or politics is always a safe bet.

That is exactly what the Jewish leaders do with Jesus in today's Gospel lesson. He has just cornered them with their own words into admitting that the path of life is found in putting their faith in him. His crowning statement begins our reading today. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." He has claimed to have the keys to the great Shalom of God, where all is well and all manner of things are well.

Of course, this is exactly what the Romans proclaimed they were doing with the Pax Romana. If all nations will just submit to our amazing laws, and acknowledge the brilliant divinity of our Emperor, all will be fine. If you don't play along, we'll send in our unbeatable army to change your mind and set you straight. Now Jesus rises as a contender to that place of honor, without an army, without an olive leaf wreath around his head, and with just one law: to love as he loves.

Awkward! So, they launch down a rabbit trail. Who is this guy anyway? We know who you are. We know where you came from. Isn't it a bit cheeky for you to claim to have come down from heaven? Rabbit-trail. If we can discredit the source we can discount the message, right? We know politicians who resort to that sort of thing all the time, except in their mouths, it's as likely throwing stones to hide your hands as an awkward rabbit trail.

Of course, Jesus doesn't let them get away with it. Ultimately this isn't really about Jesus. It's about God. Yes, you don't like what I said—it puts you in an awkward position. It might upend the fragile relations you have with Rome—I get that. But this is really not my doing, it's God's. If you don't like the message, take it up with the Source. God is the one who opens the eyes of those who believe, which only implies that you have your eyes firmly clamped shut. No wonder you opted for a rabbit trail!

And then he presses it further. What I give is greater than manna in the wilderness. What

I give is the very life of the world, and I give my life for that life. Eat my flesh, drink my blood, and you will have life. (In next week's Gospel we will see how people responded to that one!)

Here is revealed the true nature of rabbit trails. When I don't want to go somewhere in a conversation and it's barreling down that path, then I have to grab control of the situation, lest I have to say something I don't want to say or do something I don't want to do, or deal with an issue about which I am uncertain. My ego has to grab control, and that's the rub. Spiritual growth always challenges the ego's desire for control.

- The ego wants to control; the spirit wants to open up and see where things go.
- The ego wants to control; the spirit wants to love.
- The ego craves certainty; God is in the uncertainty.

What is uncertain in today's world? Maybe it would be easier to ask, "What is certain in today's world?" National politics today is a great drama between a convicted felon and a rising star. The economy is a new world, with inflation dropping and people buying yet still feeling unsettled about it. The housing market still suffers from insufficient homes for sale, driving prices and inflation through the roof (pun intended.) Our own church is in the process of installing a new Primate, the Rt. Rev, Sean Rowe, in November, and our own Diocese will consecrate the Rev. Dr. Phil LaBelle next month.

On the world stage, the grinding war in Ukraine has see-sawed back and forth since 2014, but escalated in February, two years ago. Some say WW3 is erupting in the Middle East as more and more nations get sucked into the violence that started between Israel and Palestine last October. The immigration issue is not at all limited to the U.S. There is hardly a corner of the world where the immigration issue is not a hot button.

Who we are as a parish is being discussed at length. Do we remain a predominantly white congregation that hosts a Hispanic one, or do we become one congregation with two cultural expressions, moving St. Paul's from a non-ethnic to a multicultural congregational status in the Diocese? I think the rising consensus is that we should merge, at least that's what I hear, but that doesn't resolve all the uncertainty. HOW do we do that is of utmost concern. How do we achieve equity of voice between a minority who is not used to power and a majority that is?

Even closer to home, we will lay to rest a beloved member of our community next Thursday at a private graveside service for family members only. In September we will host a reception to remember Ray De Boer, who after 94 years of this life, crossed over into the Larger Life on July 31. We are not eternal, and by the grace of God, we know not when our day will come, only that it will. The world is an uncertain place.

What does it mean, then, to say that God is in the uncertainty? It's all in how we approach it. Will we approach it with our egos and chase down a rabbit trail to maintain control, or will we approach it with our spirits?

The ego will try to impose order in the chaos. That alone is not a bad thing in and of itself. David Lorente has done wonders imposing order in the chaos that had descended after our previous administrator left. Now you go into the office and drawers are labeled, and you are really going to find that the label actually has something to do with the drawer's contents. But when ego imposes order, it is always self-serving. It's all rather self-focused. What one believes is order is what that person defines as order. Other peoples' systems of order do not count. Dominant White culture has a system of order. It is not necessarily shared by other cultural systems, who, because Whiteness is dominant, struggle to be heard. Equity of voice is not a value to the ego.

The collective ego of dominant White culture dictates that The Great White Father knows best. One of the greatest, President Abraham Lincoln ordered the hanging of 38 Dakota Indian men in Mankato in 1862, because it was a distraction from the waging of the Civil War. But the Great White Father had agreed to provide food for the Dakota and had not delivered, reducing the tribe to starvation, so, the men attacked a White settlement and killed 490 people. They went to their deaths chanting a Christian hymn in their own tongue that they had learned in an Episcopal mission to their people—though in the local press reported it as a savage and godless song.

Ego handles uncertainty poorly. There is no room to listen to God. There is no room to listen to the hearts of other people. There is no room to find common ground.

The Spirit, or as our friend Jay Bowen says it, our hearts, lean into uncertainty in a different sort of way. Uncertainty is a time to listen. It is a time to listen to the Spirit of God within, whispering wisdom and compassion. It is a time to listen to one another with wisdom and compassion. Being able to sit in the uncertainty without jumping to order, opens up a space in which a new creation can emerge, in our case, a place where the future relationship between our two congregations can work out a third place, one shared by both, and yet greater than either, a place of mutual enrichment, even in the midst of the work of cross-cultural relating.

Being able to sit in the uncertainty without jumping to order opens up a space to be with family and friends who have different opinions about our politics, our economics and world events. It allows conversation in which new ways of relating can emerge, perhaps in some ways more closely reflecting the reign of God.

Being able to sit in uncertainty without jumping to order means surrendering the future to a loving Creator, who entrusts that future to us all, and not to just a few. Then, having listened, we will know how to move forward in wisdom and compassion.

O God of peace, you have taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.