

“CLOUDY SKIES”

Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:6-11 May 24, 2020

Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor
Knollwood Baptist Church
www.knollwood.org

One of my earliest memories is watching my daddy leaving to go to work
I looked up at him hopefully, thinking we might play tickle or catch
--but instead, he knelt down and gave me a hug and I smelled his Aqua
Velva
I saw his shiny black steel-toed working shoes, looking like giant's feet
next to my
tiny white tennis shoes
--then Daddy rose, towered above me, and picked up his lunch box
An instant later, he walked out the door was gone
--I stood there, trying to be a big boy, trying not to cry
But my little heart was breaking because I didn't know why he left,
where he went,
or when he'd be back
I'm guessing being left stranded by Jesus on a little knob of a hill outside
Jerusalem felt
something like that
One minute, he's standing there, beaming with joy, cackling with laughter,
telling
stories about the kingdom
--and the next, one of those low-hanging thunderclouds, looming on the
horizon,
comes rolling in
It wraps Jesus up in its smoky tendrils and sweeps him away
--one moment he is there; a heartbeat later, he is gone

No wonder the disciples stand there, slack-jawed, staring into heaven
They want to know what has become of Jesus
--so they peer and gaze at the place where they last saw him
But all they see is a bank of dark clouds, rolling and churning like the robe of
God
swishing shut as a brilliant pin prick of light fades and disappears
These days, we find ourselves at a similar place
We're all staring at the Coronavirus cloud, wondering what comes next
--some folks seem to think they can peer through the cloud and see the
future
The worst is behind us, they say, and it's time to get back to business as
usual
--others of us are not so sure
After all, viruses are not cowed by bullying and bluster and gun-toting
protestors
gathering at state capitols
--lethal viruses can only be defeated by distance and hygiene and
science
Sadly, not even the church of Christ can agree on what Jesus people are called
to do
Some say we need to demand our rights and gather whenever and however
we please
--others of us believe that the freedom Jesus gives is not the freedom to do
as we wish
The freedom Jesus gives is the freedom to love others with a compassion
and
consideration and kindness like Christ's own
This week, my colleague and fellow minister, Katharine Martin, pulled together a
remarkable
Wednesday night offering called *Pages from the Pandemic*

Various Knollwood writers shared their musings about life and work in the
COVID-19 age

--one, a chaplain, wrote,

Enough already! we say as dawns yet one more day -
too much the same, and yet too strange.
Chaotic demands becoming too familiar.

Already enough, Spirit whispers.
You are already enough
for this day, this hour, this moment.

Enough already! we cry
Arms heavy with held-back hugs,
spirits frustrated with distancing demands.

Already enough, Spirit says gently as
She knits our prayers and longings into a cloth of compassion
that weaves its way to where
we cannot go and wraps in comfort those whom we cannot touch

That's the hard work of love, especially when loving at a distance

But according to Jesus, that's what we're to be about, stranded as we are
on
this side of the Coronavirus cloud

--as the angelic messengers tell the disciples, staring into heaven, "This
Jesus, who has
been taken up into heaven, will come back in the same way you have
seen them go"

This is an exhilarating promise because it means someday Jesus will
return to
finish what he started

--but this is also a scary promise because in the meantime, Jesus plans on
showing up
in us -- the body of Christ -- as we strive to love others as we have
been loved of God

Thankfully, the Good News is that we don't have to do this alone

As our Knollwood poet ends her poem, "Enough, my love, Spirit coos.
Enough!"

--this is where Jesus' leaving is quite unlike any other

For he leaves only that he can come back in a new and even more
powerful way:
in the life and love, grace and goodness, of the Holy Spirit

--as Jesus tells his disciples, shortly before his Ascension, "Wait in
Jerusalem for the
the promise of the Father. . . For John baptized with water, but you
will be
be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now"

The British artist and sculptor, Sir Hubert von Herkomer, persuaded his aging
father
to come live with him

Sir Hubert's father was also a sculptor

--but with advancing years, the father's eyes had grown weak and his hands
feeble

Often, after a long day's labor, the elder sculptor would put away his work
feeling
greatly discouraged

Sometimes, after his father went to bed, Sir Hubert would slip into the studio
and
secretly work the clay

Lovingly, painstakingly, he would smooth out the rough edges, firm up
drooping elements,
and restore the work with a master's touch

--the next morning, when Sir Hubert's father rose to survey his work, he was
pleasantly surprised

Standing before a sculpture now brimming with possibilities, he
exclaimed,
"Why that's not as bad as I thought!"

Sometimes when we feel discouraged and inadequate, an unseen set of hands
come to our aid

An invisible presence draws near and multiplies our meager offering as of
old, he
multiplied the loaves and fish by the sea

--in the midst of despair, hope is born

In the midst of the darkness, a shaft of light breaks through

--in the midst of our trembling and our weakness, the Everlasting Arms
steady and hold us

Have you not found it so during your own struggles during the COVID-19 crisis?

Sometimes our love and prayers seem so little, due to hugs we cannot give
and
concrete, tangible help we cannot offer

--and yet somehow, in the mystery of God's providence they become
Enough,
enough to help somebody make it through another hard day

Like the members of Knollwood and Temple Emmanuel doing a drive by
graduation parade
for a beloved refugee family, showering the graduates with gifts passed
through
open car windows

--or the mom or dad, exhausted by the constant, stay-at-home demands of
life
and work only to come in time to appreciate the gifts of simplicity and
faith
and family and slowing down

Or the simple acts of kindness, from buying groceries for an at-risk
neighbor to
supporting local businesses to help them stay afloat

--in gentle, selfless, loving acts like these, the Kingdom of God is found

As another of our *Pages from the Pandemic* writers bore witness

Even in darkness, Even in fog,
Beautiful reminders of God's love.
So much love. So much love. So much love

No, I don't like being stuck on this side of the Coronavirus cloud with Jesus
seemingly in hiding

Like those first disciples, I'd prefer a quick fix or a miracle cure: "Lord, is now
the
time you'll restore a kingdom more to our liking?"

--but Jesus answers, "Leave that to me. You all have a job to do. For you will
receive
power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you . . .

"And you will be my witnesses in Winston-Salem and NC and throughout
this blessed land
you call home and to the ends of the earth"

As this pandemic unfolds, don't look for Knollwood to be making a big splash
about
demanding our rights or asserting our privilege

And don't look for us to be first to throw open our doors and put at risk our
members
and community and God's beloved children

--instead, look for us to keep finding quiet, simple ways to do the work of
God's kingdom
until -- by God's grace -- we can safely gather again

A would-be disciple asked a Spiritual Master, "Does your God do miracles?"

"Well, that depends," the teacher answered, "on what you mean by a
miracle"

--"Some say it's a miracle when God does the will of the people. We say, it's
a
miracle when people do the will of God"

That's the kind of miracle I'm after

And I know God's people at Knollwood well enough to say with confidence:

--that's the kind of miracle you're praying for and hoping for and working
toward too!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus
In your glory *someday* . . . and in our faithfulness, *now*

*Gracious God, ever present in the life-giving love of your Spirit, guide and
empower us
to follow Jesus throughout this crisis.*

*We are grateful Jesus is no longer bound by space or time, for that
means he can
meet us, right here and right now, in the sacred Kingdom work he left
us to do.
In his name we gather and pray, work and serve, Amen.*

Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor
Knollwood Baptist Church
www.knollwood.org