

Taking Flight
The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 24, 2020
The Rev. Paul McLain

“He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

After asking how you're doing in our COVID-19 check-in calls and talking about how we're navigating these times, many of you have asked, “So, what are you watching?” Well, I would like to put in a plug for viewing or re-viewing the film, *Out of Africa*, on its 35th anniversary. It's the story of the Danish writer Karen Blixen, who wrote under the pen name of Isak Dinesen. Karen became the reluctant owner of a farm in Kenya around the time of World War I. She worked on her farm alongside the local tribe to grow coffee, and, while she was a master storyteller, her life was consumed with all the day-to-day issues of running the farm.

One day, her friend Denys arrived in a biplane. He insisted she go up with him for a flight. Denys wanted her to see the real and wild Africa before it became overdeveloped by the white colonials. As they flew, they saw groves of trees, plains, prairies, mountains, a river valley, and a breathtaking waterfall. They flew through a herd of antelope and a flock of pink flamingos. They saw sunlight glistening on the waters. And then they flew off into the clouds. Karen recalled that flight and said of Denys, “He gave me an incredible gift – a glimpse of the world through God's eye. And I thought, ‘Yes, I see.’”

In our scripture passage from Acts, the apostles meet with Jesus on a mountain one last time. After all that he and they had been through, three years of his teaching, parables, and companionship, his crucifixion, and resurrection, guess what their question was to him? “So, are you finally going to restore the kingdom of Israel?”

In all fairness to the disciples, we would probably ask, “So, when is this pandemic finally going to end?” They and we can't help it. We are earthly beings with earthly concerns. Much like Karen Blixen, we are faced with the practical day-to-day chores of making a living, managing a household, putting food on the table, all while staying safe and well. We're looking for any help we can get, especially divine help.

For the apostles, the plague of their time was Roman imperialism. They thought it was time for a payoff – the risen Jesus at long last bringing about the political and military kingdom for which they coveted. Jesus answers them and us in the way he often does, “It is not for you to know the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority.” He does promise them power, but not that of political office or military might.

Instead, he promises them the power of the coming Holy Spirit. And, Jesus gives them a commission – not to be chieftains, but instead to be his witnesses throughout all the world. And, then he does something unexpected. He is lifted up and takes flight. And we and the apostles are

left wondering, what does it mean to follow a Messiah who takes flight? It does not mean Christ has abandoned us. Far from it. Jesus in flight sees the cosmos as a whole. He sees beyond the imaginary boundaries of earthly kingdoms, and imagines a world of boundless beauty and possibilities.

The theologian N. T. Wright puts it this way: “Jesus has gone ahead of us into God’s space, God’s new world, and is both already ruling the present world as its rightful Lord and also interceding for us at the Father’s right hand. Only when we grasp and celebrate what the ascension tells us about the continuing *human* work of Jesus in the present, are we equipped for the task of justice.”

Back to Karen Blixen in *Out of Africa*. At first, she had a lot of concern about her possessions. She transported her best china from Denmark. She required the servants in her home to wear white gloves. She saw the servants as her possessions too. That flight with Denys gave Karen a new context for seeing Africa and the world - not as something to be possessed, but as a gift to be enjoyed, shared, and loved. Denys gave her other gifts. He gave her a beautiful pen to write down her stories. He gave her his compass to find her way in uncharted territory. He gave her a camping trip to see the landscape and the animals up close.

When the farm was lost due to a terrible fire, Karen was no longer worried about her status or possessions. Instead, she was worried about the servants she had employed who were now her friends. She was so worried that they would still have a place to live and to farm that she went to the ceremony welcoming the new British governor and his wife. Karen fell to her knees and pleaded with the governor to promise to help her friends. While he was reluctant to commit to anything, the governor’s wife took Karen’s hand and told her, “You have *my* promise.”

That day in the biplane, Karen not only flew. She grew. In a way, Calvary has taken flight too. When we began these livestream services on Sundays and those of the Daily Office on weekdays, we had no idea that they would reach so many people in our region and throughout North America.

While we are still anchored in this sacred space, we have also taken flight to bring Christ’s message of hope both to longtime Calvary parishioners and to many of you who are newcomers or who have an interest in, or a connection to, Calvary. Now, that’s exciting!

We don’t know where all this will lead – we’re still building the plane as we fly it, but we do know we’re a stronger body because you’re here. And as we all take flight together with Jesus, we are called to look around our city and world and ask the questions,

“What are we missing?”

“Who are we missing?”

“Where can we do more?”

“Who can we lift up?”

At the end of that magnificent flight in the biplane, Karen gave Denys a gift. She reached out her hand and extended it back to him. Denys grasped it and they held hands as they entered the clouds together. In that moment, the grounded and the eternal became one. In that moment, heaven and earth became one. *Amen.*