

[PRAYER] [BLANK] Good to see you again from the pulpit! I am so grateful for the wonderful service that Maggie Carr led a couple of weeks ago, while I was leading a men’s spiritual retreat, and I have heard nothing but good things about Reverend Alpher’s powerful preaching. I feel so blessed to be part of The United Methodist church at times like this. We claim to be what they call a connectional church, knitted together across the world as one people in Christ. It feels good when we see the power of our connections at work, Amen?

We are connected as a church to one another, in Christ. Our reading today from John’s gospel underscores how important it is to be connected in Christ. Jesus was praying to God, the Father, and Jesus said of his followers, “I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me.” The connections that we have as a church, with one another, with other churches, as people connected to one another in Jesus, is the core of what makes our faith work.

I’ll say it again: to be IN Jesus is the core of our faith. What does that mean? What does it mean to be “in” Jesus? It means that you look at yourself, and God, and God’s world, as if you were a part of who Jesus is. As United Methodists, we don’t just believe that Jesus existed. We don’t just believe that Jesus still exists, in heaven. We don’t just believe in the teachings of Jesus. We believe, as United Methodists, that we are supposed to live lives as if we were a part of the living presence of Jesus on earth. Do you want the world to see Jesus? Start with the mirror, because that’s the first Jesus that the world will see.

And the world needs to see Jesus. Boy, oh boy, does our world need to see Jesus. In the streets and homes of Meriden, the world needs to see Jesus. In the villages of Nicaragua, Uganda, Ghana, in the cities of Pakistan, and China, the world needs to see Jesus. In our own daily lives, as we confront our fears, our pains, our challenges, our opportunities, we need to see Jesus. If we need to see Jesus, and if we need to first look for the image of Jesus in us, then at least we never have to look far to see Jesus.

I had a good time acting as a spiritual director for my men’s retreat. There were a lot of great moments of preaching, singing, praying, and many times of laughing, and enjoying being with brothers who were trying to see Jesus. We were just everyday people on this retreat. And yet, miracles do occur in everyday people.

Every time I preached a sermon on the weekend, someone was praying for me in the retreat center chapel. After one sermon, my prayer partner shared with me that he had had a beautiful vision from God while he was praying. This man was definitely not the type of guy that you would ever expect to say something like this. Yet God’s vision came to touch this man in his heart, the part of him that sees without having to see.

Maybe that’s why we don’t see Jesus as often as we might like. It’s not that we don’t have hearts. We do, of course. We do try to stay in touch with that part of us that’s not depending on our eyes to see, or our ears to hear, or our mind to think. But faith uses our hearts in different ways, ways that let us see what God wants us to see. And to

use our hearts the way that God wants us to use them, we have to be willing to let Jesus be the one who lives in our hearts.

A man on the Greek island of Patmos once saw amazing visions from God through his heart, in Jesus. His name was John. We're not sure that this was the John who wrote John's gospel, but we do know is that this John who wrote the book of Revelation, the final book of our Holy Bible, wrote it when most of the first generation of Christians who had known Jesus personally, and who had come to Jesus through the original apostles of Jesus, had died. The words and the style of John's vision in Revelation tell us that it was a time of great persecution for Christians, and also a time when faith was getting ready to be handed to new generations of Christians.

And if we look at John's Revelation from this point of view, I think that we can accept that it is not really a book about the end of the world as we know it, but a book about the constant rebirth of the world, in Jesus. Great empires will rise and fall, churches will prosper, and perish, and even the stars from the sky may fall from heaven, but still, Jesus is never going to stop getting ready to do new things in God's creation. In Jesus Christ, God will never, ever, be done with us, and with God's world. We want to see Jesus, because, at the end of the day, we want to believe that Jesus is not done wanting us to see things in Jesus.

[YOUNG LADY] Is that really the way we live our faith, though? Are we living our faith in a way that prepares new generations of Christians to believe in the promise that Jesus offered God's world through John's vision: "Surely, I am coming soon?" Do we nod to God on Sunday, or maybe pray for our own healing and deliverance, and forget that Jesus has promised us, surely, that Jesus is coming, and soon, not only for us, but for our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren, now, and forever? Do we seek to see Jesus in our hearts, so that they might have faith to find Jesus in their hearts?

This is how faith grows in God's world. Faith grows when the world knows that we are people who look in our hearts to see Jesus, and to share the Jesus who we see there. [DONATIONS] Faith that we will see Jesus in our hearts leads us to do things beyond our doubts, sometimes, like helping a young family in need who just might wind up sitting next to you in church, or marching with and for Jesus in a Memorial Day parade, when others have stayed home. Faith that we will see Jesus in our hearts leads us to go against our doubts, and replace our doubts with the new possibilities of a God who will never stop trying to come to us, soon, and surely. [BLANK]

The Romans did not stop persecuting Christians after John's Revelation. In fact, the persecutions got worse, as Christianity became stronger, and stronger. The Romans called Christians "Atheists," because they refused to worship the false gods of their culture. But it didn't stop Christianity from spreading, and growing, especially among young people, who saw the living Jesus in their hearts, in the middle of the dying Roman culture.

[PERPETUA] About a hundred years after John's Revelation, two young

Christian women wrote about their own visions from God, which came to them just before they were torn apart by wild animals in a Roman coliseum, because they refused to stop telling the world about seeing Jesus in their hearts. As they were dying in the middle of that horror show, they shouted out their love and faith in Jesus - and the horror became the amazing transformation of hearts in Jesus. People saw their faith, in the middle of their horrible death, and, against their doubts, believed.

[BLANK] “Surely, I am coming soon,” Jesus said to John. At the very end of God’s story in the Bible, the end is not the end. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and the end of all things is this: surely, Jesus is coming, and soon. We can doubt it. We can deny it. We can hide from it. We can ignore it. But in our hearts, the hearts that saw the Christ-child, not so many months ago, lying in a manger, the hearts that were leaping for joy on Easter Sunday, we can’t unsee what we have seen, without losing the never-ending story of who we really are, because of Jesus. And if we lose that, then new generations will never see Jesus, in God’s world.

We are now at the end of our Easter season. Next week, I will be away, as I am commissioned as a Provisional Elder at our New York Annual Conference session. Together, you will start our season of Pentecost next Sunday, the season when God’s Holy Spirit starts to form God’s church in Jesus Christ. Will your heart be ready to see Jesus in our season of Pentecost, as people who are becoming the body of Christ? Will your heart become ready to show the world, against their doubts, that you are willing to go against your doubts, and to show God’s world what a living, saving church in Jesus Christ looks like, and sounds like? Will you go against your doubts, and finally stop trying to unsee what your heart knows that you’ve seen? Will you show new generations everything that there is to live for, in Jesus? Surely, Jesus is coming soon. Look for him now, in your hearts, because Jesus, the Christ, is here, and will always be here. Amen.