

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - May 24, 2020
With Pentecost Approaching
John 17:1-11 and Acts 1:6-14

In the Broadway musical, Hamilton, Lin-Manuel Miranda tells a fictionalized account of America's first Secretary of the Treasury. Foreshadowing the day when a bullet fired by sitting Vice President Aaron Burr would end his life in a duel, Hamilton sings, "I'm just like my country. I'm young, scrappy, and hungry, and I'm not throwing away my shot... Don't be shocked when your hist'ry book mentions me. I will lay down my life if it sets us free. Eventually, you'll see my ascendancy. And I'm not throwing away my shot."

Forever devoted to the cause of American democracy, Alexander Hamilton served as one of George Washington's closest advisors, later rising to the rank of Major General in the Army. It was on his shoulders, along with those of dozens of other Founding Fathers, that the American experiment was lifted.

And now, on Memorial Day weekend, we remember that our nation was not established overnight. In fact, the victory made possible by the American Revolution was accomplished at great cost, including the loss of countless soldiers who gave their lives in exchange for our freedoms. Today,

we remember that in the course of over two centuries of national aspirations, many have given their all.

Yet this year, in a surprising twist, there will be no parades and no fanfare. Not because we don't remember. Not because we don't honor their sacrifices. But rather, because quarantine has loomed large for the last two months. Daily, we've altered our behaviors as we collectively ask what kind of life is worth dying for. And we've curbed our individual and collective freedoms in the interest of public health.

These changes will not be permanent. The current setbacks are not a threat to our democracy or to our faith. And the freedoms that we have temporarily relinquished are not the beginning of the end of our nation or of our world.

Rather, evidence now supports the belief that close contact and large gatherings are fraught with risk. In South Korea, over 800 exposures and 112 positive tests can all be traced to a single dance instructor. In Missouri, a hairstylist with coronavirus exposed nearly 100 customers and coworkers to the disease.

Sadly, church settings like our own are particularly conducive to the spread. Following a choir practice in Washington state, two people died of

COVID-19. In Arkansas, a single church service resulted in the deaths of three parishioners. On both of those occasions, dozens of people were sickened. Across the street from our church stands Ohio Living-Rockynol, the retirement home in which a number of our members currently reside. Recently, a number of residents there, in addition to the activities director, all succumbed to this new disease.

Understandably, the prevailing mood in our communities is cautious. Our hearts are heavy. And holding fast to the desire to keep everyone in our congregation safe, our Session has made the difficult decision to suspend in person worship, with the exception of our worship team, as well as all in person church activities exceeding two people, through the end of August.

There is nothing easy about this. To date, we've celebrated Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter from a distance. Today, we do the same in observance of the Ascension of the Lord. And next Sunday, on Pentecost, we will stream the worship service live for you just as we have each week since March.

This is not the way that any of us would have planned it - to be a part for so long. And yet, the story of our faith, much like the story of our country, is punctuated with valleys every bit as stunning as the peaks. Just recall the

Hebrews making their way out of Egyptian bondage. Before they ever reached the Promised Land, they wandered around in the wilderness for 40 years. 40 years!

I am not trying to minimize the grief, the sadness, the physical, mental health, or economic challenges that so many are facing right now during this period of increased unemployment, isolation, illness, and anxiety. It's easy for me to say that we ought to keep things in perspective while I remain employed and healthy.

But let us also be mindful that we have been taking these additional precautions for just two months, and that many of us have done so in well-appointed and comfortable homes. Giving thanks for how fortunate we are can help lift our spirits, and serve as a reminder that we can and will overcome this. Perhaps, we will even be stronger, both individually and collectively, as a result of these experiences.

In 1804, America's third Vice President shot and killed his political rival in a duel. Aaron Burr was still in office at the time, and the country survived to tell the tale. The American experiment has survived the enslavement of human beings. A Civil War. World Wars. Trade wars. Land disputes. Nuclear armament. And yet, we still carry on. As people of faith, we

know that Easter follows Good Friday. And we recognize that we will not wander in the wilderness forever. For God's glory forever reigns supreme.

The departure of Christ on this Ascension Sunday marks the beginning of something new. For that same spirit which blew over the waters of the deep at creation's birth is once again on the move, breathing new life into the hearts and minds of God's people. And with Pentecost approaching, the disciples, once fearful and fleeing in the aftermath of the crucifixion, are reaffirmed in their commission. As the first witnesses of the power of the resurrection, the wonder of his various appearances among them, and the awe-inspiring return to the Father who sent him, they understand the gravity of their calling.

For just as he rises up, he beckons them (and us) to rise up and join him. To be steadfast in the faith. To pray without ceasing. To keep the Commandments. To live in the unity of the Holy Spirit. To care for creation. To love our neighbors. To remember those who are suffering. And to serve.

Three months ago, if you had told me that the world would now be facing challenges of this magnitude, I would have found it hard to believe. I would have stood there slack-jawed like the disciples at the Transfiguration, the arrest, the cross, and the empty tomb. I would have been as stunned as

the disciples who journeyed with him on the road to Emmaus and those who witnessed his ascension. Yet in the midst of those peaks and valleys, they heard the voice of God. And, in response, they chose to rise to the occasion, to not throw away their shot, and to show others the way.

With Pentecost approaching, we do not know how or when this crisis will end. But we do know where to fix our gaze in the meantime, and how we ought to live, not with an unbounded view of freedom but with love for one another. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.