

I wonder how many of you know what the current national threat advisory level is for our nation? The national threat advisory system is managed by the Department of Homeland Security – and it has five levels, with a color for each level: low threat level is green; guarded is blue; elevated threat is yellow; high threat is orange; and severe is red. Currently the national threat advisory level is at yellow – elevated threat for our nation; and it is one step higher for airline travel – orange – high threat level. We are informed by Homeland Security that we are at elevated and high risk as a nation – so, what does that mean, specifically? It’s not entirely clear, but the government website says:

We are mindful of the recent tapes and propaganda messages allegedly from Al Qaeda regarding increased attacks. At this time there is no credible information of an imminent, specific threat to the homeland. All Americans should continue to be vigilant, take notice of their surroundings, and report suspicious items or activities to local authorities immediately. Everyone should establish an emergency preparedness kit and plan for their family, and stay informed about what to do during an emergency.

That is the summary of a yellow/orange security threat level.

It is interesting to note that since this system was established in 2002, the threat level has NEVER been at the 2 lowest levels, of low and guarded – green or blue; the message communicated to us about our security is that the threat is always elevated or high, and occasionally severe – a constant threat to our national security, for 6 years+ and counting.

It was some discussion and reflection at Early Worship last Sunday that got me thinking about the Ascension story for this Sunday in a new way – the discussion was looking ahead to the Ascension story – and one of the things that became clear to me, is that one of the central dynamics going on in the Ascension story is that it is about

security – it is about what security is for those who are followers of Jesus Christ, and how that security shapes how we live as followers of Jesus Christ.

One commentary I found says that the story of the Ascension as it's told in the book of Acts is best read as some sort of a slapstick comedy– the disciples are portrayed as a bumbling group of misfits who never quite get it: Jesus is Risen and appears to the disciples and promises to send the Holy Spirit – so what do they ask?...“Hey Jesus, NOW are you finally going to put Israel in charge so we can take control and rule all the other nations...”...one can only imagine Jesus' frustration: “NO – this isn't about a timeline for supremacy...I will send the Holy Spirit to you” Jesus says - “that will be your power, and you will be by witnesses, everywhere.” And with that – Jesus is lifted up...and the disciples are left standing there, gazing – mouths wide open, one can imagine. So then it's the two figures in white robes to straighten them out – which for the disciples may have been a flashback to the messengers at the empty tomb: ‘don't just stand there' they say ‘Jesus, has been taken up, and he will return’ - you can go back to Jerusalem now...

Perhaps it's unfair to characterize the disciples as bumbling misfits – but maybe not if we identify ourselves with them as well...because what is happening in the midst of these Ascension story antics, is that the disciples are confronted with the need to change, to have transformed, the concept of security that has been engrained into them – and their engrained understanding of security is very familiar to what has been formed and shaped into our minds and hearts as well.

What could we say is a present day concept of security...? Well on the one hand it seems to be about withdrawing into safety by hiding behind as many walls, as many barriers, as many levels of protection as possible: build a “security fence” in Israel to keep out the terrorists; build walls in the southern US to keep out the illegal immigrants; build missile defense shields in space to keep us safe; build airport screening mechanisms to stop terrorist attacks; devise threat alerts to keep us vigilant; train security forces to encircle us with protection...then we will be safe in our security cocoon.

While on the other hand security is achieved today by being the strongest – the biggest – the one with the most weapons. If we can enforce our force on others – eradicate the violence of those who would harm us – crush the resistance of those who oppose us, then we will be secure. When push comes to shove – it is best to be the one with the biggest push to shove threats out of the way.

It is remarkable how those 2 ideas of security today – hiding behind walls and imposing force on others – how they mirror the Roman empire ruling the world when the Ascension story occurred. Rome was all about simultaneously building walls of protection while also brutally imposing it's will to quell threats to its security. And it is even more remarkable, I think, how you could do a reading of the Ascension story which would seem to reinforce the same ideas....

...on the one hand you could say that Jesus' Ascension is some sort of escape to safety – Jesus withdraws from the world into heavenly security: and are his disciples to do the same? Well, that has certainly been mirrored in the life of the church – emphasizing separation from and protection from the world; building walls of doctrine used to keep out spiritual threats; dividing the world into who inside the church and who is out – seeking security in being destined for Jesus' heavenly location, while assigning others a less desirable eternal address...faith in Jesus as a source of separation and insulation in this world, and a secure destination in the next.

...on the other hand, this Ascension story can be seen as a way of presenting Jesus as the ultimate power to enforce on others – the true weapon of mass dominion. Did you soak in the language from Ephesians...?...‘the immeasurable greatness of the power of Jesus Christ – the power of Christ put to work far above all rule and authority and power and dominion – all things under his feet and his body, the church, over all things...’. That is heady, swaggering stuff – and the church has often embraced that image literally. The church's power imposed over others – triumphal, judgmental, political control,

superiority – all lived out in the life of the church as a way of imposing the kingdom of Jesus Christ on the peoples and powers of this world...

When the disciples are presented as bumbling misfits in this story, and at other times in the Gospels as well, it's not done to belittle them – after all, these stories were accounts by Jesus' followers and for his followers. Their impact was meant to be a constant reminder that Jesus' followers tended to look at what was happening through the engrained perspective of their culture, their world, their hearts – rather than the transforming perspective Jesus gives. If withdrawal and might are how the world sees security, it is very unlikely that is the message Jesus is giving – and yet the church falls into those patterns again and again.

But in fact the Ascension of Jesus is a direct reversal of, a challenge to and rejection of those security values in the world – which means it speaks to those very things most engrained within us. What the Ascension portrays is Jesus going away not to escape, but to be present in a new way – the Ascension is in essence the continuation of the incarnation, in that now the Risen Christ is to be present to all who follow him through the Holy Spirit – the resurrection of Jesus empowers that presence of true life to be present in the church, the body of Christ. Which means that our security as Christians is simply – only – profoundly – this: the Spirit of the Risen Christ is with us. That's it – that's all - and according to this story, that is everything.

Our security is not about withdrawal from threats – it is not about placing ourselves behind national borders, or behind doctrinal walls. Our security is not about imposing power on others - domination across national borders or the practice of spiritual superiority. The security we are given is the abiding presence of God's Spirit – the life-giving Spirit of the Risen Christ. And what the Holy Spirit does is empower us not to escape or dominate, but to be a presence also – to be God's presence in the world in a particular way: that engages the powers of this world with courage, conviction, hope – a witness to the life-giving power and ways of the resurrection.

The Ascension story gives a sense of security which is DIRECTLY at odds with Homeland security – the message of our government is this: be afraid! – and therefore we must protect and dominate. The Ascension tells of a sense of security DIRECTLY at odds with some our own theology: that the church should be afraid of other ideas, other religions – that we must protect our faith and rule the world with it. The Ascension story expresses a sense of security that confronts those assumptions of safety and power we hold dear. Because ultimately it is about not being afraid – and God knows – and you and I know - that is difficult – and may seem impossible. Ultimately it is not being afraid of death – it is saying there are things more important in this life than death, and we will not let our fear of death stand in the way of life – we will not let our fear of death stand in the way of what it takes to be about the ways of compassion and peace and community and reconciliation and justice and love – that is what the triumphal language of Ephesians speaks of and calls us to.

And that is so difficult – because we really like being secure – something deep within us yearns for security – and that’s a good thing. But what is difficult for us is to trust that we already are secure, because the Spirit of God is with us, and nothing can separate us from the Risen Christ. When we seek security through walls and weapons, through doctrine and judgment, we find instead we are not safe at all - there is always something more to be afraid of...the threat level is always high.

I cannot fully express to you how difficult this different sense of security is for me to hear and follow – for the church to hear and follow – for you to hear and follow; but I can try to express for us how much freedom there is in listening to it in this story: THIS is your security – Jesus Christ has ascended to be with you always; THIS is the triumphal language: nothing can separate us from God’s Spirit. That is true security. And in that life-giving presence we are freed beyond walls and weapons and threats, to community and life, courage and hope – that is the power of the Risen Lord, ascended to send the Spirit of life. Amen.