

Where we are now in the church's annual calendar aligns with where we are now in the church's long history.

Today, the seventh Sunday of Easter, is a time in between.

It is the Sunday in between the ascension of Jesus into heaven, celebrated last Thursday, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, celebrated next Sunday.

This is the Sunday in between God's presence among us as a physical person and God's presence among us as a virtual reality.

Jesus came in human flesh to connect us with God and teach us God's way of service, justice, mercy, and daring divine love.

The Holy Spirit will come to connect and empower Christians of every time and place invisibly and inevitably, as intangible and as powerfully real as the Internet.

Now we the church, Jesus' disciples in 2011 who are still *in the world*, find ourselves in between the times.

We have committee meetings and conflicts by email, but we gather in person for worship, which some have suggested should also be streamed on the web.

Pastors communicate with parishioners by personal visit, handwritten note, telephone, email, text message, Facebook™, and Skype, depending upon who it is.

Newsletters and offerings happen both electronically and on paper, and so does the reading of Scripture.

This is important to Lutherans, because it was a technological revolution--the invention of the printing press--that made the Reformation possible.

This is important to Resurrection, because it was technological innovation--Mel Clawson's sound system--that made it possible for shut-ins to be included in worship at home over the telephone.

This is important to Church, because like it or not, we are hurtling headlong into a different way of being, and where this is all leading us is not nearly as clear as the fact that the way things used to be is up and gone.

Some of us are excited about this.

Others of us are petrified, and stare with open mouths, gazing up toward yesterday.

There is good reason for both the fear and the enthusiasm.

Technology has Promethean power; it's a fire that can both save and destroy, bless and burn.

Pastor Shane Hipps tells two stories together.

The first was the time when his mother was on the brink of death in an Arizona hospital. He met his brother at the airport in Phoenix, both of them uncertain whether they would make it in time to the hospital many miles away to see their mother alive.

On the way they were able to talk with her and to say their goodbyes, just in case, because they had cell phones.

The second story was the lament of a parishioner that it had been too long since he had seen his best friend.

The two talked and texted one another several times a day, but they had not gotten together in months.

They lived on the same block, walking distance from one another's houses, but they didn't see each other in person, because they had cell phones.

Technology, Pastor Hipps points out, can both unite and divide us, connect us and separate us, depending on how we use it.

We are watching a generation grow up that can do things old codgers like me never will, but which struggles to have a face to face conversation because it feels so unnatural.

Here at Resurrection, there is a palpable hunger for connection I hear over and over along with a matching lament that there is never enough time for people to get together.

We are in between, living in the awkward transition between Friendship Club luncheons and Facebook™ friendships, between experiencing God in physical presence and in virtual reality, between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, between last Thursday and next week, between yesterday and tomorrow.

If the disciples were rebuked for staring into heaven, then surely God can't be too pleased with a church that stands staring into 1953, or 1983, or whenever it is you would date your idealized past, whenever it was that you were last sure you saw Jesus.

Like it or not, as great as it was to be with Jesus back then, back there, the way and the truth and the life as it used to be is now gone, and our only hopeful choice is to move forward toward whatever God is going to do tomorrow.

If the experience of the first disciples is any indication, and I suspect it is, then what God will do will be utterly surprising, utterly new, utterly unpredictable, and also utterly faithful, consistent, and continuous with holy history in the same way that Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets and the Holy Spirit fulfilled the promises of Jesus and the prophet Joel.

God's tomorrow will line up perfectly with God's yesterday and today.

And God's tomorrow will look nothing like what we would predict or expect it to be.

The challenge of faithfulness, then, is not so much to hold on as it is to let go, not so much to hold fast to the (let's be honest) mixed-bag ways of the past as to open up to the (let's be honest) mixed-bag possibilities of the future.

The way forward, Jesus and his disciples teach us, begins with prayer.

We hear what Jesus says to the Father, something confusing and way over our heads, but we can catch just enough of it to know that he is praying for us to be united, and it's really good news to learn he is praying for us at all.

We don't hear what the female and male disciples are saying in their prayers, which is fine, because what's far more important than what they say is what God will say, and do, and then what they will say to others about it, and until then, for now, it is less important what they say than the fact that they are praying together.

Jesus can pray alone, but the rest of us disciples need help.

We need the support and the help of one another in a discipline as arduous and powerful as prayer.

More than that, when we pray together, Jesus' prayer starts coming true.

Prayer unites us, makes us one, gets us on the same page, and that page is God's agenda, not ours.

This is why early Christian prayed with their hands open.

Somewhere along the line we got more concerned about keeping the devil out than letting God in, so we taught our kids to fold their hands instead of holding them open.

But Bishop Miller told our Metropolitan Chicago Synod Assembly this weekend that to be a Christian is not only to pray but also to live with open hands.
Open hands are positioned both to receive grace and to share it, in contrast with fists that clutch and close and injure.
Open hands are positioned to welcome the Spirit, to welcome the stranger, to welcome the future, to welcome whatever God is going to do next.
Open hands are risky, of course; open hands also invite nails that spike them into a cross.
Open hands are vulnerable to the violence of a vicious world.
Yet it is the cross that is the surprising shape of our hope.
It is a burning fire and a violent wind that we welcome at Pentecost.
It is in the strangest, scariest ways and wonders that God loves and heals and saves us.
That is why we dare to open our hands, and our hearts.
And that is why if we are to cling and clutch to anything, it is our connectedness.
We hang on to God and to one another.
We hang on to the ways that we know God speaks to every generation: Scripture and sacred song, baptism and Communion, prayer and forgiveness.
We hang on to gathering together however we can, including in person on Sunday mornings as we are able.
Rumor has it that sex is still better in person.
It's the same with worship, and with any other intimate expression and celebration of faithful covenant love.
We are still bodily creatures, and we still eat real bread as the body of Christ, who honored our bodies by dwelling in one of them himself.
Yet we are also more than bodily creatures, and our frustrating limitation of being in only one place at one time is not going to constrain God's Holy Spirit.
We who live between the times live in the best of times.
We can give our offering on line and in person, in time and in money, by credit card or by check, in the plate and in the ether.
We can befriend and bless one another through the internet, through the mail, through the phone, and face to face.
We can share the Spirit and be Christ to one another.
We can honor the past and embrace the future, and we can learn from both.
We can pray on line and on our knees, with hands open and with hands joined as one.
And no matter where we go or get stuck, whether we are racing forward or standing slack-jawed gazing into the clouds, whether we are moving too quickly past prayer into hasty decisions or wallowing stagnant in dusty nostalgia, God will find us and find a way to communicate to us, whether it is men in white robes or women on Twitter, whether it is through fiery wind or through a firewall.
We cannot know exactly what God will do next.
We might understand it later.
But we can trust it and give thanks for it now.