

May 12, 2024  
The Ascension of Our Lord (Transferred)  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### Jesus is Everywhere

The first time I saw it was in a hamburger. Of course, maybe I should say, the first time I saw him was in a hamburger. One of my Facebook friends posted the picture with the words, “I thought this was a joke and now I can’t unsee it. Holy cow!”

Which was kind of funny, because when I really looked at the hamburger and squinted a little at it, like one might do at an optical illusion all of a sudden, I wasn’t looking at a hamburger at all. I was looking at a picture of Jesus. Well, of course since no one knows exactly what Jesus looks like, I was looking at a very recognizable artist’s representation of Jesus. Jesus in a hamburger. Holy cow indeed! How did they do that? (Another question that crosses my mind might be “Why did they do that?”, but that’s a question for another time.)

Weeks, perhaps even months, went by before I saw it, well, saw him again. Another Facebook friend posted another picture, this time of three girls, standing on what looked like the corner of a city street at an outdoor dining table or a coffee kiosk. This time the post included instructions, “Close your eyes and then barely open them and look at the picture.”

Because it was such a random picture, I did, wondering what I would see. It took me a couple of tries, but it didn’t take that much time until, instead of looking at a picture of the three girls and a city street, I was looking at the face of Jesus. Again, an artist’s representation of the face of Jesus, but the intent was clear. Jesus was there, on that city street, with those girls.

In both the hamburger image and the image of the three girls I was looking at a kind of strange, a little creepy, no doubt AI generated artistic representation of the natural result of Jesus' Ascension. Jesus is everywhere.

At a worship team meeting, earlier this year, I was lamenting something. I was lamenting the fact that when I'm away on a Sunday for vacation or for some church related business, attendance at worship tends to plummet.

When I was on internship my supervising pastor told me that he never tells his congregation when he is going to be away on a Sunday in advance because if he did worship attendance would plummet. When he told me that I remember thinking, "How vain is this guy, thinking that people are coming to worship to see him." Hah!

Even then, before I was even a pastor, I thought that it would feel deceptive to me not to tell my congregation when I'm not going to be here on a Sunday morning. I appreciate it when people tell me that they're going to be away for a week or a period of time. I appreciate the relationship that we share and the opportunity that we have to let each other know our comings and goings. Besides, I thought then, and I still think now, people don't come to worship to be in my presence. They come to be in the presence of Jesus. So, I've never followed that particular piece of advice. And you know what, our worship attendance plummets on those Sundays when I'm not here.

So, like I said I was lamenting that fact at the worship team meeting, saying, "People should know that they don't come to worship to see me, people come to see Jesus, to be in the presence of Jesus,"

In response to my lament, one of the members of the Worship Ministry Team reminded me of something, something important, the natural result of Jesus' Ascension. She said, "Jesus is with me everywhere. I come to church to hear a pastor I know and trust and have a relationship with, help me to experience and identify Jesus' presence in the world."

It was a great point. A great reminder that the church is certainly not the only place where we can meet Jesus. Jesus is everywhere.

Of course, my counterpoint would be that we experience Jesus in a unique way in the church. In the community that gathers for worship we experience Jesus in a reliable and promised way that cannot be duplicated in other parts of our lives, and we come together on Sundays and at other times during the week, to be with Christ's body, our whole faith community, not just with one part or person in it, but still, the larger and better point stands, that point is this. Jesus is everywhere.

It was during the children's sermon at last year's Worship in the Park when I boldly sent the children to find me something in the park that reminded them of God. I told them that they had three minutes. I watched them run away into the park with a little bit of fear in my heart. Because it only occurred me, after I had sent them running off in every direction, that I had, perhaps, done a very foolish thing. I had no idea how I was going to get them all to come back within the allotted time. How would they even know when three minutes had gone by? These were young kids. They weren't wearing watches or carrying phones. And the park is bigger than you think when you're contemplating running after children who have run in six different directions in it. And I don't run very fast.

Amazingly enough, they all came back within the allotted time. But their results were concerning. Because in spite of the fact that they'd run, fleet of foot, through the park, what they came back with was almost all human made things, most of them things that we had carried out of our building to the park to be a part of our worship service. They mentioned things like the community gathered for worship. Jesus is there. The elements of communion. Jesus is there. A bench dedicated to a young person who had been struck and killed by a car just outside the park. Jesus is there in her family's memories and in their grief.

Not too long ago I was reminded of that children's sermon, that Worship in the Park at a Boston Metro Conference meeting that I attended. We had a speaker

at that meeting, Pastor Nancy Wright, who is the Synod's Pastor for Creation Care, and one of the things that she talked about in our meeting was the sacredness, the presence of God imbuing and embedded in all things. The beloved creation, spoken to life by the breath of God, the holiness of God, the beloved creation that groans under the weight of human sin, the beloved creation for the redemption of which Jesus died and lives. And while she was speaking and I remembered that children's sermon, I realized that we need to talk more about that. The sacredness of the beloved creation.

Because the kids didn't see Jesus in the grass that they ran through, or in the geese that flew overhead, or in the trees that surrounded them, or in the rocks or the dirt or the flowers that we call weeds that dotted the grass. They didn't see the sacredness of the created things.

Well, maybe they did see it. But they didn't talk about it. And I have to wonder if they didn't talk about it, because they didn't know that they were allowed to talk about it, because we don't talk enough in our buildings made by human hands about the presence of God in the natural world, about the fact that Jesus is everywhere.

Think about the situations that concern you most in the world. The utter destruction of Gaza, the people, the buildings, the infrastructure, the supply lines, the horrors of the Hamas attacks in Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>, the continued war in Ukraine, places where tornadoes have destroyed homes, lives, communities in places where the waters rise and the floodwaters threaten, communities in places where people are experiencing year after year after year of drought, the nightmares that we can hardly imagine in places all over the world and sometimes so close to home that we really have to shut our eyes tightly not to see them.

But what if we didn't? What if we didn't look away? What if we didn't close our eyes? What if instead, we did what those optical illusions tell us to do, close our eyes tightly, but only for a moment, and then open them slowly and squint a little,

and all of a sudden, we'll see it. We'll see what was there along. We'll see Jesus. Jesus there in all of it.

Jesus weeping with the broken. Jesus opening his arms to hold the repentant, offering forgiveness. Jesus challenging those who would make money off of the suffering of others. Jesus showing up at the tables of sinners. Jesus strengthening those striving to bring life to places of death. Jesus inspiring our prayers and actions. Jesus speaking love, telling us to wash feet, reminding us that we will serve him when we serve the suffering. Jesus speaking peace, breathing on us the breath of peace.

Jesus in all of those situations, and in so many more. Jesus in our own lives, in our struggles, in our own suffering, in our own brokenness, our worries, our grief, Jesus is there.

The promise, the truth, the blessing of Ascension, is that it is not, it never was a going away. It was and is a coming to us, to be with us. Jesus with us and with the whole beloved, broken, beautiful and suffering creation.

Jesus with all of us across time and space. Emmanuel, God with us, always and forever. Jesus is everywhere. Thanks be to God. Amen.