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Lifted High From Down Below

Directions can be disorienting.

Yesterday I went hiking with some family at Devils Lake in Wisconsin. We had wanted to make a trip like this happen for a while. The beginning and end of our hike centered on the balanced rock trail. We started with an ascent upward and finished after exploring some other trails, with the final descent back to our car. Not being too steady on my feet, I was thankful for those trusty trekking poles that make the way so much more manageable and enjoyable. It is a bit counterintuitive but for me, it is so much easier to go up then back down. Somehow it seems scary and more risky to go down. I am a lot less confident going in that direction. Even looking below can be destabilizing.

It can be challenging and disturbing when we come to grips with directional movement of God. It can throw us off balance. It upsets what is expected. We are so used to the conventional ways of relating to God. We imagine God as the one who only dwells high in mystery and majesty. Immortal, invisible, God only wise. Where do we look for God? Of course, instinctively, we answer: up there.

Yet: Matthew has been making it clear these past weeks- the reign of God often does not make sense to us. Things are upside down.

Paul makes it clear: The one who has all authority and before whom all will bend the knee is the crucified one named Jesus. The name above all names. The God of all power and might is the one who empties himself becoming obedient to death- even death on a cross. His throne is the cursed tree outside the city which becomes the tree of life for all creation. The one who forever dwells below is the only one exalted high. The one who rules from the cross and conquers the grave is the wounded one whose hands hold you.

As Lutheran theologians have said, “Christ- is above all, deep in the flesh: his majesty is hidden in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. And, As God meets us in the human Jesus, so God is.”
Period. The cross is the center of the Christ hymn of Philippians.

We enact this when we come together.

At the beginning of each liturgy it is the cross that we follow into our gathering, and it is the cross that leads us back out into the world. Some of us even bow as this symbol of our salvation passes by. It is the cross that is traced over your brow when you are baptized. Martin Luther encouraged us to make the sign of the cross as often as possible. When we rise, when we go to sleep. He even said before and after any prayer it is good to make the holy sign. We are those who bear the cross and carry the cross with us wherever we go. We've come so accustomed to it we have lost the scandal of our practice. And the direction we point.

The cross is God's compass and eternal direction. You bear this compass in baptism. God is always coming down to us. We never work our way up to God. God's unending love poured out for you. The one who comes to serve you in humility, giving you his own body and blood. As unnatural as it is for us to look down and hard for us to accept- there, in the midst of our stumbling, sometimes failing lives, where the trail runs out, we find the rock of our salvation-- ever descending into your vulnerable flesh and mine.

I often live with worry and fear even when I'm not literally hiking down. The two companions of worry and fear nip at my heels. They always come unannounced. Anxiety makes its home with me more than I care to admit. It's easy to feel overwhelmed. And I hear that voice asking myself if I've done enough. If I'm busy enough, balanced enough, achieving enough, penitent enough, healthy enough, strong enough, etc. There-- in the midst of struggle I know God has been born there, at the end of my striving. Not with the familiar platitudes that come from up high, nor with the prescription for competence and to keep walking up-- but with Christ's own dying and rising. With promise. Grace. Forgiveness. Resurrection.

From the rubble, caverns and graves of your life Christ promises a future of God's own making. Fall into Christ. What does that look like for you? It might take the shape of vulnerability, accepting help, admitting weakness, or grabbing the hand of your neighbor. Think- opposite of bootstrapping.

Tombs open, as Christ's body on Earth, we look to those scorned and outcast for guidance. When you look below for wisdom what might you hear?

What is the direction in our parable? When we are overcome by the suffering in the world we can look down at what is right in front of us. When we are seeking direction we can listen to Jesus and Martin Luther King: *Do the next right thing*. This is the heart of Jesus' story about two sons. Actions are worth more than words in this transformed economy.

If you are like me, doom scrolling can lead to more doom scrolling. The news can be so overwhelming. Whether it is New York underwater, migrants living at police stations, or the

article that I saw multiple times this week: Illinois traffic stops of Black drivers reach record highs despite years of reform. It can all seem too much.

Need direction? Look down at what is here. What does loving your neighbor in this time and place look like? Where can you advocate, serve, bless where you are. Stop talking- Just do it.

Directions can be destabilizing, they also orient us- save us. As we prayed this morning, “guide us in the way of salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.” You’ve got your compass. Look down and live.