

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey  
Sunday, May 17, 2026**

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**The Seventh Sunday of Easter  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento**

Once again I've found myself interrupted and haunted by a Bluegrass Song as I work with the weeks readings. But this time I had worked far enough in advance to ask Justin to sing it for you, and he was gracious enough to agree. So he will sing for you the first verse and chorus of O Come, Angel Band.

My latest sun is sinkin' fast  
My race is nearly run  
My strongest trials now are past  
My triumph is begun

O come, angel band  
Come and around me stand  
Oh, bear me away on your snowy wings  
To my immortal home  
Oh, bear me away on your snowy wings  
To my immortal home

Perhaps you can see why its been haunting me. Or you may recognize it from Oh Brother Where art Thou.

The singer is near death, and is summoning a band of angels to come and carry him to heaven, away from the sufferings of earth. Gospel, Bluegrass and Spirituals all have a library of songs like this, songs like I'll Fly Away. They encapsulate a kind of prayer, prayer where you are looking toward heaven and what life will be like there. The readings today teach us how Jesus prayed, and they show us that this kind of prayer is part, but only part, of how he prayed.

So first, what is good about the heavenward gaze in prayer? These songs were a great comfort to me, leading up to and after my mother's death. They spoke to her physical suffering, and the joy of release. These songs look to the sky, and that felt particularly appropriate, because rainbows were a sign and comfort to my whole family. I saw a double rainbow over the house a few days before she died. My brother and my aunt both saw rainbows as they drove to see her on her

last day, even though one was driving north and one was driving east. It even reached across the ocean to France, where my brother Bills daughter was visiting my brother Michaels daughter. They sent us a picture with a rainbow. We were all looking to the sky, glad for the sign that she was going to a beautiful home in another place.

Now many people don't like these songs, they think they are too mournful, too lugubrious. I think there's a place for them, and not just at the time of death. When the evils of the world or physical suffering become intense, it can be helpful to look to the future. However, looking to the sky can only be a part of spirituality and prayer, as both the reading from Acts and today's Gospel demonstrate.

In Acts, in his last moments on earth with his friends and followers, Jesus is pretty crisp about looking for pie in the sky. They ask him "Is this the time when you are going to restore Israel?" Jesus says no, and says it is not for them to know, that is not their business. What they should know is that they will receive power to do what has been given them to do, to bear witness on earth. When Jesus is taken to heaven, the apostles are understandably staring after him. Angels show up, but their feet are planted on the ground, and they are blunt spoken too. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" they ask. Get your heads out of the clouds and your minds on the here and now!

The apostles return to Jerusalem, and devote themselves to prayer. We are left to wonder how they prayed. If, as Anne Lamott says, Prayer is Help, Thanks, and Wow, there is plenty of room for Thanks and Wow in the days just past, and lots of need for Help! In the days to come. We are left to wonder if their gaze is towards heaven or towards earth.

John 17 is Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer," though we only hear about half of it today. Jesus has finished instructing his followers, now he prays for them in John's version of a Eucharistic prayer. Immediately afterwards, they will go to the Garden where Jesus is arrested.

Jesus' prayer follows the structure of a Berakah, a Jewish form of table Blessing. At first, Jesus' eyes are turned heavenward to God the source and ruler of all things. He remembers pre-existence with God and the glory they knew together. He has fulfilled his work of bringing eternal life and glory to earth, and he will be returning to God's presence.

In the second part of the prayer, Jesus' eyes turn earthward, and he asks God's blessing and protection here and now on the followers he must leave behind. They have received life, truth, and the word from Jesus and the Father, and Jesus asks that they can be one, as he and the Father are one.

Astonishingly, the third part of the prayer is not part of today's reading. Jesus looks ahead to the future, to the followers who will receive word, truth and life, generation by generation, from his disciples. Jesus looks ahead to us, asking that we will be brought into this union as well. "Father, just as you are in me and I in you, may they also be in us." Only now does Jesus' gaze return to heaven, and he asks that all these followers may be one with him in glory.

Today, as we pray the Eucharistic prayer, I invite you to listen for this same threefold structure. We'll begin with our eyes turned to God, the source and ruler of all things, and we'll remember what God has done in Creation and in History. Second, when we remember Jesus' words of blessing over bread and wine, we bring Jesus into the present with us. The Holy Spirit is called down, blessing bread, wine, and people, making us all the Body of Christ. The Spirit then points us outward toward the future. We remember our unity with the whole church across time and space. Finally, our gaze turns heavenward again, to longed for unity and glory with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You can hear this movement in every Eucharistic prayer.

The angels in Acts might remind us that we can use this structure in our own prayers. Yes, look to heaven and call on God, the source of all things. But bring your gaze back down to earth and pray with all your heart for those you see around you. Ask that they receive the life and word you now carry. And finally, ask that they can hitch a ride when the angel band comes for you.