**7 Easter, May 17, 2015, Acts 1:15-26; Ps 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19; Rev Mary Trainor**

The little green things look so delicate and fragile, and yet they serve the vital function of protection. I am talking about sepals. Sepals are the outer bracts, or leafy looking green petal-like structures that surround a developing flower, a bud. Then, as the petals and other parts of the flower grow, the sepals begin to separate and release their tight hold...but they continue to protect. This week of spring here in Wisconsin, abounding around us are so many sepals protecting developing flowers! Our recent rains have brought out the flowers in the forest: Trillium, Mayapple, Violets, Marsh Marigolds. They are all beginning to bloom, and bloom they are able to do in large part because of their protection by the sepals.

Just as those spring wildflowers are planted in the earth, we are planted in here on earth -- and we need protection too. This world where we are planted is joyful, but also it is a difficult and disturbing place. Sometimes, we as Christians don't feel like we even belong here! Jesus understood this, and said in today's Gospel: " ***they are in the world.....they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world."*** We have a sense of not belonging in the world because when we are really close to Jesus, we get a taste of heaven, of otherworldliness of the supernatural.And that sense is truly wonderful, even if it is brief. We are transported to a place of pure grace, the paradise of love in God's Kingdom. Remember the old TV series "Startrek?" On Startrek, Captain Kirk, Dr. McCoy, Mr. Spock would climb into the transporter room and be magically transported in an instant to another planet. For us when we are transported to experience a glimpse of heaven, our external surroundings don't change like they did in Startrek, but our perceptions of life change and we gain a sense of the shelter, the protection that we are given daily by the Lord. Just as the sepal protects the developing flower, Jesus protects us through His presence, His Word, His sacrament.

Today, we ponder what our Scriptures tell us about God as our protector. The word: protection is defined as, "**a person or thing that prevents someone or something from suffering harm or injury."** Today's Gospel is part of Jesus' "high priestly prayer," when He prayed for us and for his apostles the night before He went to the cross. Included in this prayer, Jesus prays three times for us to be protected and guarded. Jesus said to His Father, "***I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one....Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth***." So, although we are planted here in this world, where evil lurks, we are also in God's Kingdom where we are protected and sanctified. This passage from John is not the only one that speaks of God's protection. Psalm 12:7 says: "***You, O Lord, will protect us.*** Ps 91:14 says, "***I will protect those who know my name***." And, there are many more passages about God being our shelter and refuge. One of the hymns I sing often in my head goes like this: "**You have been a shelter, Lord,To every generation;To every generation; A sanctuary from the storm**

**To every generation;To every generation, Lord."** This does not mean that nothing bad will every happen to us and it does not mean that we don't have to be careful and aware of safety precautions, but it does mean that God is right close to us no matter what.

My husband, Jim, taught all three of our children how to ski in northern New Mexico where they grew up. This was no small feat, but you had to learn to ski in our little isolated mountain town as that is all there was to do in the long winter. First, Jim would ski down the bunny hill with the child between his legs - the child's arms wrapped around his legs, and Jim really carrying the child, as the child was scared and didn't put weight on the little skis. This was no small feat, as he had to not fall himself. After the child got used to the feeling of skiing, Jim would hold the child's hand....and then after a while, the child could ski on his/her own. Even then, for a few years, Jim did not leave the side of our precious child. Oh, Erica-Karl-and Lucas began to really enjoy skiing and thought they were taking off on their own -- but Jim was always there, not taking his eye off them; right there in case they fell or got scared. All three of our children can ski now better than either Jim or I ever could, and much of that confidence and joy in the sport came from these times of being protected by their father. As we go through life, Jesus is right next to us, protecting us in the joy-filled times and in our times of trial. God is always there.

This past Thursday was the feast day of the Ascension. On that day, 40 days after Easter, we are told in Luke 24:53 and Acts 1:9 that Jesus "***was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight***." The apostles were not convinced that God would always be there for them, and having Jesus disappear up into a cloud was not something they coped well with. Two angels appeared and said to the stupefied, bewildered apostles, "***Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"*** It must have been a time when they must have not wanted to let go of Jesus and wondering if they could carry on in His footsteps. They must have felt like they were **in** the world, and yet they not really **of** the world. Jesus reassured them and us (in Matthew 28:20), "***Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.***" By rising into eternity, Jesus is able to be present with all of us across the globe and across generations in prayer, in Word, in Sacrament. Jesus our protector is here for us, today, tomorrow, to the end of our lives on earth, and on into eternity.

As we live our lives in the world, but not of the world, our stories unfold. God's hand upon us becomes more evident when we look back, and we can tell others about God's important role in our lives. Those stories are our "testimony." In our Epistle reading, the word "testimony" is used five times in six lines. Testimony is our witness, our statement of truth about how God has revealed Himself through us and in us. Jesus prayed for us in the Gospel that we "***may be sanctified in truth***." The New Testament is full of testimonials about the truth of Jesus, and if we stop and take the time to reflect we discover that our lives are full of testimonials about Jesus. And, if we don't share our testimonies about Jesus, how are people to know? God is protects us, but does keep us in our comfort zones. The Holy Spirit gives us the strength to share. Next Sunday is Pentecost, 50 days after Easter, the day when we celebrate the outpouring of God's Spirit. Our true home is in heaven, but for now we are called to live in Jesus' footsteps in the world and share our testimony, with God our protector. Amen.