

May 19th, 2020

John 14:1-14 “Stay Calm And ...”

We've been in John's gospel for most of Lent and Eastertide. We've been talking about the Shift that we're currently in and what our response is going to be to that Shift. Will we come out of this COVID-19 pandemic as better people? Will we be better stewards of God's creation? Will we emerge with a newfound appreciation for human connection? Will we be more mindful of people's needs and will we take steps to collaborate with those whom we disagree so that we can find the best solutions for our world's worst problems? Will we learn to unite rather than divide? Will we continue to grasp, horde, and compete, or will we live with an attitude of abundance? Will we go the way of Star Trek where we spend our time and resources seeking the answers to the mysteries of the universe, or will we go the way of Mad Max and fight over water and gasoline on a scorched, lifeless Earth?

Most of the reading that I've been doing during Shelter in Place has been about how the church needs to reclaim Jesus' values so that we can experience the former instead of the latter. And the way we do that is to study the words of Jesus. Last week we talked about the need to practice inclusivity. We used one of Jesus' famous “I am” statements to illustrate this - “I am the Good Shepherd.” **This week, I want to take another one of Jesus' “I am” statements to illustrate the value of not letting fear dictate our actions.**

This morning's scripture starts out with these words: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” Goes right along with the Jesus value that we're going to explore this week. “Don't let your actions be dictated by fear. Have faith in God and have faith in me.” Well that was easy. Can we go to virtual fellowship time now? Not yet. Because I want to address the other elephant in the room in this passage. The most familiar part of this scripture is *not* “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The most familiar verse is the “I am” statement in verse 6 – “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the

Father except through me.” And that’s how we prove to the rest of the world that we Christians are the only ones who will be standing before God in heaven after we die. “It says right here, nobody gets to God except through Jesus.” Jesus said it, I believe it, and that’s that. We Christians have exclusive access to God, and everyone else can go to hell. Literally.

But I want to talk about the *question* that Jesus was addressing in this passage. If I tell you that the Saints had a glorious triumph over the Demons last week, you’d need to decide whether I was talking about last week’s ball game or an exorcism. You would need more information before you made that decision. This passage is no different. So let’s say that Jesus was answering the question – “Can Hindus and Muslims be saved?” If that were the case, then yeah ... “I am the way, the truth and the life,” would mean, “Nope. They can’t be saved.” But let’s change the context and see what happens. What if Jesus is speaking to a small, frightened group of his followers? And maybe they’re saying things like, “We’re being thrown out of the temple and the synagogues because of what we believe. They’re turning our families against us. They’re locking some of us up, and we’ve heard rumors that they’ve killed some of us too.” And these frightened Christians rationalize that the only way they can stay safe is to stick to the old ways, stop rocking the boat, and do as they’re told. The people who are harassing them ... the religious leaders, the government leaders ... are telling them, “No one comes to God without doing things our way!” So the frightened people say to Jesus, “We *want* to know God, and we *want* to live. Which way are we supposed to go now? What is the right way for us?” If that’s what Jesus is responding to, then “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” has a whole different meaning doesn’t it?

Same goes with the second half of his statement. If the question is, “What sort of theology does a person have to believe in to be saved?” then “No one comes to the Father except through me” has a specific meaning. Unfortunately, we often hear this verse used as if that *was* question. But if the question was something like, “They’re telling us to

live *this* way, and you're calling us to live *another* way. Who has the authority to decide our fate before God?" If that's the case, "No one comes to the Father except through me," means something entirely different! And when you read this in Greek, it's very clear that Jesus does *not* say "No one comes to the Father without *believing* in me." It says, "No one comes to the Father unless I make it happen." Sure it makes a pretty astonishing claim about Jesus as it relates to one's quest to find life in God the Father, but it says absolutely *nothing* about what happens to those who follow some other religious system. It says no one comes to God the Father unless Jesus gets them there, but it says *nothing* about who he *will or won't* get there. That question wasn't even on the table.

Now let's talk about the fear issue. In this passage, Jesus is addressing people who have already decided to follow him, but are under pressure to give up. The way of Jesus is proving to be difficult. These followers are under a lot of social, political, religious and legal pressure - to conform to the expectations of those around them to stop pushing against the flow. They are not sure if they have got what it takes to follow Jesus on a road that might include complete rejection, hatred, hostility and even death. They are *afraid* of what lies ahead. They were living in fear, and their actions were being dictated by fear. And so Jesus is speaking to them and to us about what to do when we're afraid and want to find an easier way.

His opening words in the passage Mary read are usually translated, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." We hear this passage a lot at funerals, so we think, "Oh, Jesus is saying don't be sad when I'm gone." But that's *not* what he's saying. It's more like, "Don't panic. Stay calm. Hold your nerve when the heat is on, when it looks like the powers that be have the upper hand. Hold your nerve when the power mongers try to convince you that grasping, hording and competing is what makes the world go around. Hold your nerve when they say that a culture of celebrity is going to rule forever. I am the way, and those who follow my way will not be disappointed. Even when the road gets hard. Hold your nerve

when it looks like the propaganda machine of whatever is the dominant ideology is winning the day. Hold your nerve when everyone settles for the fake feel-good platitudes they feed you instead of seeking the truth. Hold your nerve when people find lies more comfortable than the truth. *I* am the truth, and those who want to learn how to look at the world through my eyes will find that the truth is gonna set you free. Hold your nerve when it looks like the powers of death are always going to win. I tell you this - No matter how complete death's victory may appear, I will rise up again and with me all the victims of death will be raised to new life. And I will come again and take you to myself. The power of death will be broken forever, and all of God's people will be free."

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No matter what they do to you, they cannot tear you out of the Father's hands. They cannot separate you from the love of God. They cannot demolish my Father's house which is built from the living stones of those who hang in there along the way. They cannot destroy the royal priesthood and holy nation into which you have been called. They cannot banish you from the life of the Father, because it is me, not them, who decides who comes to the Father. You come to the Father on my word, not theirs. So hold your nerve. Hang in there. Stay calm and carry on. I have spoken. This is the way."

Do you see this passage in a different way now? Good. Because the way this passage *has* been used only *increases* our fear. We're afraid we're going to miss out on our heavenly reward, which means we've got to see others who don't believe like we do as the enemy. And if they're the enemy, then they must be conquered. Because if they aren't conquered, then they'll conquer us! The powers and the principalities of this world wants us to live in fear. If you don't believe me, turn on your TV or scroll through your news feed right now. With very few exceptions, the message is, "Be afraid." And yet it is Jesus who tells us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." He assures us that, "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, in the love and life of God, there you may be also."