

Sermon September 13, 2020
John 14: 1 - 7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” (NIV)

This passage is a joyful declaration of faith: a declaration that “in Jesus, incarnate Word, Son of God, one can see and know God in a manner never before possible.” It is good news in the highest. It is comfort and inspiration both. It is a message to which all of us can turn again and again.

First: backstory. This is the beginning of what is called the Farewell Discourse, which is just what it sounds like: a farewell speech to the disciples. It is a whole three chapters long, and it is sandwiched between Jesus’ final meal with his disciples, at which he washes their feet, and going out into the garden to be arrested.

This is Jesus’ last chance to speak directly to his friends, and the author of this gospel pours every piece of theology possible into this speech.

Jesus leads off with an instruction: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus is not speaking of generic worries; he is speaking directly to events his impending death. The trouble he means is the distress of coming face to face with evil and death. This is an exhortation to stand firm in the face of fear.

Does this not speak to us today?

How much has occurred this year to inspire fear?

Which particular news story do you want to point to; which current event around the world do you want to point to and feel afraid? Take your pick!

But Jesus, in the last minutes he has with his beloved disciples, knowing he is going to his death, knowing he will be betrayed by a friend, knowing all the agony and grief he is about to endure: he tells us *do not be afraid*.

And then, as if to counter any internal objections we have, he tells us we don't have to muster up our own courage in the face of fear.

“Trust in God; trust also in me.” Trust in God is what will empower their hearts to stay above distress and to be resilient in the face of anguish. Some editions of the Bible will translate this as “Believe in God, believe also in me.” Understand that this is not a command to believe in the *existence* of God, but rather to trust the steadfastness of God and the relationship between God and Jesus. God will give us what we need to be unafraid.

“In my Father's house are many rooms”: this is not referring to a concrete physical place, nor to some lovely dwelling in heaven. This is about the intimacy between Jesus and the Father. John uses the idea of

a *place* as a symbol for *relationship*. Isn't this beautiful? "In my Father's house are many rooms." There is room for all to share in the relationship between Jesus and the Father. There is room for *us*.

The intimacy between the Father and Jesus is the deepest, most radical closeness we can imagine; probably beyond what we can imagine. The closest image I think we have here in our lives is the image of pregnancy. We don't remember it, but we've all been carried in the womb of another person, *inside* the body of another person. That's the degree of intimacy that Jesus is trying to convey: Jesus and the Father are *part* of one another.

This is where the "Father" language becomes important.

Jesus is not using "Father" as a generic synonym for God. Jesus is deliberately using "Father" to talk about relationship. The words mother, father, papa, mummy: these all denote a relationship in a way that the word "parent" doesn't.

We do not all have good relationships with our parents. We have not all been the parents we would have wished. There can be pain associated with the word "Father." That is real. That is true. And used badly, the term "Father" can – and has – reinforced the patriarchy of our own culture, which is bad news for men as well as women and other genders.

But if we throw out the term "Father" completely, then we miss the gift of John's gospel: the gift of a language that tries to describe an incredibly intimate relationship. Jesus and the Father do not have a relationship *between* them; they have a relationship *within* each other.

And if the Father's house has many rooms, and if Jesus is going to prepare a place for us, then we are invited into that relationship. We are invited not *to* Jesus, not *to* God, but *into* Jesus and *into* God. If ever there was a mystery to sit with, this is it.

This is why Jesus has to leave his friends on earth and return to God: because it will make possible for us to join in the relationship between Jesus and the Father.

And then, Jesus promises, "if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." He will come back. Also known as the Second Coming.

Now, our understanding of how Jesus might return keeps changing, but it is still part of the Christian faith. The important part here is that nothing, not even death, can separate Jesus and those whom he claims, from God. "I am going to die," says Jesus. "*But I am coming back for you.* You are coming with me into God." Jesus is leaving, but he isn't gone. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ; nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Verse four of this translation reads, "You know the way to the place where I am going", but a better translation might be "And where I am going, you know the way."

Jesus is Jewish, and in the Jewish wisdom tradition, the "way" means the lifestyles of the wise. The "way" is a verb, not a noun; it's an action, not a thing. It is our journey into unity with God. But Thomas, like most of us, misunderstands him: "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Then we come to verse 6: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

This is an answer to a specific question, not a blanket statement. Thomas is asking: "How do we get where you are going?" Jesus answers: "Through me."

Jesus is the way to unity with the Father, the means of relationship with the Father. He is the embodiment of life with God. John is declaring that in Jesus, God incarnate, "one can see and know God in a manner never before possible." Jesus says no one comes to the *Father* except through him. He does not say that no one comes to *God* except through him. Jesus is speaking of a specific kind of relationship with the God whom he declares to be his Father.

Here's the crucial thing: when Jesus urges his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled, he is not only speaking to the disciples at that final meal, but to the disciples of the Holy Saturday vigil. He is speaking these words to his disciples while he still can, so that they will remember them in the hours to come, after his arrest and crucifixion. He is speaking to people he loves dearly whose worlds are about to be shattered and who are soon going to believe that all hope is lost. When the women sit at home on that Saturday, that sabbath between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, their world has ended. Their hope, their leader, this teacher and friend they loved so much is gone.

When Jesus starts off with "Do not let your hearts be troubled," he is speaking to *that* moment, that vigil, that agony. He is speaking to all of us when our world has ended. He is speaking to the early church, struggling to know its purpose and define its beliefs. He is speaking to us today. He is speaking to *you*, Westbank and Summerland United Church.

And it's not, "Do not let your hearts be troubled because nothing bad is going to happen." It's not "Do not let your hearts be troubled because it's all going to turn out just fine and everyone will have a happy

ending.” Some of these friends are going to die by suicide and execution.

No, it’s “Do not let your hearts be troubled because *I am with you.*” Jesus has come to his friends not just to teach, not just to love, but to wrap them up into this extraordinary intimacy with the God who created the universe, whom Jesus knows and loves as Father.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust in Jesus, who goes to prepare a place for you within the womb of God; trust also in the presence of the Holy Spirit, who breathes courage and inspiration upon you.

Trust in God will carry you through. Relationship with God will bring out your resilience and help you journey with calm.

Not just individual trust in God, not just individual relationships with God, but a collective relationship with God. We are all in this together. In the dark, empty, lonely times of our lives, in the Holy Saturdays of our lives, we will carry each other, and truly, the Way of Jesus is never closed to us.

Thanks be to God.