

Sermon for Easter 5A
Sunday, May 7, 2023
“The Way for People of the Way”

Text: John 14:1-14

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s Gospel reading is the one passage of scripture that I have to preach on the most frequently, because it is the most commonly chosen gospel text for funerals. It contains some of the most fundamental claims of Christian belief. Last week I pointed out that the themes we will encounter in the latter part of the Easter season focus our attention on *why* the Easter message is important. But, this text is one of the most challenging texts have to deal with in the modern age, because it can be read in such a way that suggests that Jesus is the *only* way.

In the old days—I’m at the age when I can talk about the “old days” and refer to a time within my own lifetime—but, in the old days, we used to use paper maps to help us find our way from one place to another. Maybe some of you still use a paper map from time to time. Nowadays, whenever I need to know how to get to where want to go, I ask Siri to find an address or location. Then Siri asks me if I want directions to that place and offers several route options. After I choose an option, the roadmap is automatically synced to my Apple Car Play and I get turn-by-turn directions with an estimated time of arrival. Knowing the way to where we are going is a simple matter of asking and then being told, “Here is the way.”

Jesus told his disciples that he was going back to where he came from and that they were going to join him some day. When Thomas asked for directions, because he and the others did not know the way, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but through me.” Thomas asked for directions, and Jesus told him simply, “Here is the way.” “I am the way.” What exactly was Jesus talking about and what does that mean for us?

Today’s Gospel reading is part of Jesus’s farewell discourse that runs from Chapters 13-17 of St. John’s gospel. It begins with Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper, when Jesus washes their feet and Judas leaves the company to betray Jesus. Jesus uses this time to prepare his followers for his fast-approaching departure. He tells them not to worry, because after he goes, he will prepare a place for them and they will have a dwelling place, a mansion waiting for them when they die. Now you might wonder why the lectionary takes us back to the days before Jesus’s death during Eastertide, when we are supposed to be celebrating his resurrection! Why are we being reminded of his betrayal, crucifixion, and death, at a time when we are supposed to be proclaiming that we have seen the risen Lord? Well, the declaration by Jesus in which he tells us that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” is, in fact, part of our proclamation that we have seen the risen Lord. Because we can proclaim that he is risen and that we’ve seen him, then we know that he *is* “the way, the truth, and the life.” No one comes to the Father but through him.

Throughout the centuries, Christians have interpreted these words of Jesus to mean that if you don't know Jesus, that you are condemned to an afterlife without your dwelling place in heaven in the company of God. Christians have claimed that if one doesn't accept Jesus as Lord, they won't be saved. It has been a means of creating exclusivity among Christians, claiming that the only way to eternal life is by knowing Jesus. It has been used as grounds for maliciously judging and even killing non-believers, or forcing baptism, or believing that those who do not believe are condemned to everlasting damnation. It doesn't leave space for the numerous ways God has been revealing God's self to humans since we appeared on earth some 300,000 years ago. I've even heard it said that faiths who, like we do, attest that there is only one God who created and governs all that exists in the universe—that is, Judaism and Islam—that they might not be saved, by the same God who saves us. But who gets saved is God's decision, and his alone.

What Jesus said is that no one can know the *Father* except through him. Jesus is the incarnation of God himself, who took human form and lived as one of us, though without sin, to reveal himself to humankind. Jesus enlightened humanity that God is not the remote, distant deity that people thought he was, but rather like a father who loves and cares for his children, who protects them and directs them like a shepherd. And he reminded us humans that God's spirit is always with us, even though we may not see it, we can feel it. People in Jerusalem got a jolt of that reminder on the Day of Pentacost. God has been revealing himself to humans from the beginning, and presuming that there are beings elsewhere in this universe, God has revealed himself to them too. But it's only because of Jesus the Christ that the world knows that God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "No one comes to the Father, but through me." Because Jesus has told us that, he is the way, the truth, and the life.

I came across a commentary as I was preparing today's sermon, that resonated with me as to what Jesus meant when he said that he is the way, the truth, and the life. The commentator suggested a more expansive understanding of truth as representing the "dream and hope" of God. An understanding in which Jesus serves as our example of what it means to walk on the way. Jesus, as the Way, gives us all a roadmap to what a better life looks like, even when life seems dreary and dull, even in the face of pain, tragedy, disappointment, and failure. This is the dream and hope that sustained the Israelites for some 400 years while they were enslaved in Egypt. That is the dream and hope that kept the Jews while they lived under a barrage of foreign powers like Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and eventually Rome. That is the dream and hope that kept Jesus's followers going while they lived under Roman rule. That is the dream and hope that inspired early Christians to keep believing, even in the face of persecution and martyrdom. That is the dream and hope that inspired people enslaved in America never to give up believing that things would get better. And that is the same dream and hope that should reassure us that even in the worst of times that we face, not to give up that hope that things can and do get better.

In the prior age, the age before the Incarnation, humankind knew God as the One who created the earth and gave us commandments to live by—our roadmap to a happy life. But that understanding of God as we experienced God through the eyes of the Israelites showed us a God who often seemed remote, less personal, and being “up there” somewhere. Jesus, God’s very self incarnate and living among humans, provided humanity with a personal glimpse of God, right next to each of us, interacting with us on our level, and giving us a roadmap to a fulfilling life. When we know Jesus, when we know that he is the way, truth, and life, then we can go about our daily lives proclaiming that we have seen the Lord, and here is the way to a more fulfilling life. Everything we do should be done to honor him.

We heard Jesus say, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” but in the original Greek text, Jesus told his followers: “Do not let you all’s heart be troubled.” He was offering them the wise advice of a teacher for them, as a unified collection of believers, not to worry. That was a message that his disciples needed to hear for when they had to continue moving forward without him, and it was the message that Christians in the late-First Century needed for reassurance when they faced persecution and martyrdom, people like St. Stephen, whose story of martyrdom was told in the first lesson today from Acts. That is the message that we need to hear today, that because we know Jesus the Christ, our hearts need not be troubled, nor our heart as the people of The Way.

As Christians today, we are supposed to keep our attention focused on what Jesus revealed to us about God and help point others to his way that leads to a better life. Many of you probably know that I love icons. Icons are images, prayerfully painted or written, of the things, events, and people who participated in all that we believe—images such as those of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the saints, and events in the life of Jesus. I especially like icons of the Theotokos, Mary as God-bearer caressing or holding Jesus, because she always points us to God. Icons are rich in their symbolism: the predominance of the red clothing of Mary, representing her humanity, and the balance of Jesus garments of blue and red, representing his being both divine and human. The most important feature of icons of the Blessed Virgin is that they direct our eyes toward Jesus; her eyes pierce our eyes and draw us to her hand which always points directly to Jesus, who gazes lovingly back at us. She points the way to him who is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and that ultimately leads us to the Father.

If we keep our eyes fixed upon Christ, we will know the way to have a fulfilling life, free of troubled hearts worried about the afflictions of the world, able to do things from day to day that edify and honor God, able to ask God for things in accordance to his will and purpose, able to know that whatever happens to us in this life we can get through it, and that we have a place with God when it’s all over. Before they were called Christians, the earliest followers of Jesus were called people of “The Way.” Like icons, we should always direct ourselves and others to Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.

Resources

David Ewart, <https://www.holytextures.com/2011/04/john-14-1-14-year-a-easter-5-sermon.html>

Caroline Lewis, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1994

Angela N. Parker, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-141-14-6>