

“Jesus Christ: Our Promise and Our Hope”

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

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I'd like to begin with a confession this morning. In my 68 years, I can't ever think of a time when I've felt so dispirited, so fearful about our world in general and especially our own nation's state of affairs. The adage of how it's so much harder to END a war than it is to START one never proved any truer than as we helplessly watched thousands of terrified Afghans trying to flee the Taliban at the Kabul airport this past week. And then amidst the rush to fly as many Americans and Afghani allies out of the country as possible, Isis sent suicide bombers into the crowd and upon self-detonating, killed 13 U.S. Marines, wounded 20 more, and left almost 200 of their OWN people dead from the explosions.

Furthermore, we find ourselves presently in the midst of a NEW pandemic just as we thought we were emerging from it. The virus which shut down most of the nation last year and claimed over 600,000 lives (including three of my dear friends) has spun off a strain called the Delta Variant which we find is EVEN DEADLIER and MORE INFECTIOUS than its PREDECESSOR was. Many hospitals, particularly throughout the South and Midwest, no longer have any IC units available because a large segment of the population still refuses to get vaccinated themselves or their children. And as more communities find themselves having to mandate the wearing of surgical masks, we hear grave threats and fist fights are breaking out over having to don them.

We're told that climate change is not only causing the world's great glaciers to melt, triggering sea levels to rise at an alarming rate, but major rivers and lakes and dams out West are shrinking to the extent that cities are now forced to ration their remaining water supplies. And if the aquifers dry up any further, then entire populations will not only be deprived of water, but farmers will no longer have enough for their crops and livestock. Furthermore, here in the East and the central parts of the country, we are witnessing the greatest numbers of tornadoes and hurricanes we've EVER seen, such as the one presently bearing down on Louisiana and Texas this weekend. Meanwhile, the fires in California continue to spread unchecked, consuming thousands of acres and hundreds of residences. In fact the WORST of them--the one called the Dixie fire in the northeastern part of the state--is now on the verge of consuming the home of a dear friend of mine- a place I've vacationed at numerous times.

But the UNKINDEST cut came just prior to my leaving for Chautauqua a few weeks ago. I received word that the YOUNGEST SON of one of my dearest friends (a minister who had succumbed to covid earlier this year) had died sometime during the night. Elijah--only 34 years of age--was a Deputy Sheriff in Arizona and he leaves behind a beautiful wife and four precious kids- the youngest of whom is only two months old. Only weeks earlier, his mother had driven all the way from Arizona to spend several days with Rose and me. She related how excited she was to be a new grandmother and only wished that Dan had lived long enough to see his new grandchild born. If after all this you can sense any of my own feelings of anguish and discouragement, you now know why. In the face of such ordeals, many people are finding

themselves asking—INCLUDING MYSELF--“Where DOES one go to find the capacity and resources to face the future with HOPE once again?”

Well our New Testament text has something to say about this. It is part of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, that is, his final teachings to his disciples in the Upper Room just prior to his betrayal and arrest. We find ourselves now in the endgame of our Lord’s ministry. They have just concluded their last meal together--the Last Supper--and Jesus is trying to impress upon them certain lessons and truths he had taught them during the previous three and a half years. At present, there is a rising sense of urgency, even foreboding, to our Lord’s words. Their time together is quickly growing short and there’s still so much left to tell them, and what he HAS shared, they have great difficulty grasping. He tells them “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear.” It seems their heightened level of anxiety has put a limit as to just how much reality they can stand at this time.

Some years ago, there was a life insurance commercial on TV that began with the husband wanting to make some financial planning in the event either he or the wife was to suddenly get ill and die. The wife will have nothing to do with it and refuses to even discuss the matter. “NO, Jim,” she screams. “I just don’t want to talk about it anymore!” And it ends with the exasperated husband throwing up his hands in frustration. It was quite a popular and effective ad at the time precisely BECAUSE it tapped into the viewers’ OWN fears regarding end of life issues.

On Easter Sunday, 1975, my parents had my sister Diana and her family over to celebrate Easter dinner with them- I was in California at the time. After the meal, Diana was sitting alone with my father in the TV room, and he began to share some deep concerns he had. He said, “Diana, I’m trying to get my affairs in order in the event something was to ever happen to me. I just can’t talk to your mother though. Every time I try to raise the issue with her, she either changes the subject or refuses to discuss it with me.” It seemed that for months, my father was growing physically weaker yet my mother kept insisting to everyone just how wonderful he looked. And then he said to my sister, “Promise me that if anything ever happens to me, you’ll look after the boys” (referring to me and my twin brother Howard who were twelve years younger than her). “Of course, dad,” she said. “You won’t ever have to worry about that.” My father must have had a premonition because less than four days later, a blood vessel burst in his throat and he hemorrhaged to death. He was only 57 years old. It’s hard to confront people with matters of death and dying because it forces us to face our OWN mortality, and that’s a pretty painful thing to do.

Well Jesus has to discuss such issues with his OWN disciples, and what he wants to impress upon them more than ANYTHING is that as conditions over the next few hours and days deteriorate and events begin to spin out of control, THEY ARE NOT TO LOSE HOPE. Although he will be gone from them for a short while, it will only be for just THAT- a brief time. They are not to regard what is about to befall him as the end of the world. It does not mean their relationship is over. Although they don’t KNOW it yet, he will be arrested, tried, condemned, and then ultimately executed, but he would soon reunite with them- in ANOTHER guise. He would return to them in the form of the Holy Spirit, God’s OWN Spirit. No longer would he be walking and talking and eating beside them as they had but they would experience

him in an even MORE intimate manner than they ever had before. He assures them he will never leave or forsake them. He promises them the Comforter who will not only dry their tears and assuage their sorrow, but will empower and guide them in many new and exciting ways. The Spirit is his alter ego, and just as HE had come to perform the Father's will, no less will THEY do the same, ultimately accomplishing far greater works than HE ever did.

In verse four, Jesus tells them that he had not revealed this information about the Spirit earlier because he was still with them. As long as he was physically present, it was not necessary for them to receive the Spirit. But now that he will be leaving them, they need to be assured that they will not be abandoned and left on their own. The fact was that he would STILL be there WITH them and FOR them but in SPIRIT form rather than in body.

But then in verse five, he makes a very unusual remark. He says, "But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, "Where are you going?" It is strange because twice earlier in this same discourse, Jesus had been asked, "Where are you going?"- once by Peter and another time by Thomas. The irony is that all throughout the gospel of John, his disciples have been FULL of questions. Like little children, they never stop inquiring who Jesus is, what his ministry is about, and where it is he is taking them. They had abandoned their families and friends and occupations to risk all in following this man and they just wanted to be sure that their instincts were right, that all their sacrifice had not been in vain. Yet, now that he is informing them that he must depart, none of his followers dare to follow up on his remark or question him as to where he IS going.

The reason for their sudden reticence is obvious. Jesus says to them, "Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts." They finally grasp the fact that Jesus is serious about leaving them and, like the wife in that life insurance ad and much like my mom when my father suggested that they discuss plans in the event he was to die, they are thrown into a terrible melancholy. They are beside themselves at the thought that they just might have to go on without the one man who had called them and cared for them and filled them with a sense of purpose and adventure for the past three plus years. Life without Jesus was unthinkable to them- it could NEVER happen, or so they had thought!

What this exchange between Jesus and his disciples points out for us is just how blinding fear and sorrow can be to us in times of crisis. It is nearly IMPOSSIBLE to hear the word of hope when one is so self-absorbed or overly preoccupied with oneself. Notice that as the reality of the moment begins to sink in, the disciples are not so much concerned about JESUS and what it is HE may be going through as they are about THEMSELVES. After all, Jesus was human. He had to have fears and worries every bit as much and as real as THEY did. Yet all THEY can think about was their OWN situation, of what might happen to THEM in the event Jesus had to go away. Their attitude was "Woe is me!" and NOT "Jesus, is there any way we can help YOU or support YOU as you have been there for US these past few years?"

Psychologists tell us that the danger of excessive fear or sorrow is that it drives us deep down into ourselves to such an extent that it causes us to forget about others, that there is something inherently selfish about it. The Reformers like Luther and Calvin frequently referred to SIN as "curvitas en se" or a "curving in upon oneself." It was an excessive preoccupation with the self and one's own situation to the exclusion of everyone else. It is the attitude of "ME

FIRST!” at all costs. When Lazarus dies in John chapter 11, Jesus was in Galilee to the north with his disciples. Immediately, he makes the decision to return to Bethany, an area he had just returned from where dangerous threats had been made on his life. But what we see is that he is more concerned about comforting Lazarus’ sisters Mary and Martha than he is about his personal security. When he arrives, we are told that Martha goes out to meet him while Mary remains in the house- her house actually serving as a kind of tomb or prison which her sorrow now locks her in. She is SO inconsolable, SO locked within herself with feelings of grief and despair, that she can’t even see the HOPE AND PROMISE OF NEW LIFE that arises when Jesus appears on the scene.

Similarly, when Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb of Christ on Easter morn to anoint the body of her Lord, she discovers the stone removed and his body gone. Overwhelmed with sorrow, she can’t even recognize the presence of Jesus before her, mistaking him for the local gardener. Once again, we see how grief and fear are devastating emotional states that drive us deep into ourselves and cut us off from healthy intercourse with God and others. They blind us to FAITH, blind us to HOPE, blind us to JOY, blind us to LOVE, and blind us to NEW POSSIBILITIES- even when they are standing right there before us. More than anything, we need our friends, we need our family, we need our church, but MOST of all we need CHRIST HIMSELF to help pull us out of ourselves, out of that self-protective cocoon we wrap ourselves in which hinders us from becoming healthy, vibrant people once again. Jesus’ response to his disciples in that hour was to remind them that they would NEVER be abandoned, NEVER be left alone, but that through every step of the ordeal that lay before them and beyond, he would STILL be present to GUIDE them, to EMPOWER them, and to PROTECT them. His presence in their lives would help pull them out of themselves and back into the world where THEIR presence and THEIR ministry would be continually needed. Their heart would become his new home. However, if Jesus did NOT go away, they would never receive him; and if they did not receive him, they would never know this wonderful new intimacy with him and all the security that goes along with it.

By saying that he has to leave, Jesus is not talking about lying low or getting out of Dodge until the heat around him dies down. On the contrary, he is committed to REMAINING in Jerusalem even if it leads to his own DEATH. The place Jesus IS talking about leaving to prepare for them is NOT another city nor is it even some veiled reference to heaven. Most of us are familiar with the old gospel song, “I’ve Got a Mansion, Just Over the Hilltop.” The refrain goes:

*I've got a mansion just over the hilltop
In that bright land where we'll never grow old
And some day yonder we will never more wander
But walk on streets that are purest gold*

Well despite the song’s timeless popularity, it actually MISCHARACTERIZES the place Jesus says he must go. I can’t tell you how many sermons or funeral eulogies have been preached on this text, implying that when we die, each of us has our own mansion located on some golden street with our own name printed on the mailbox awaiting our arrival. They suggest that Jesus must leave his followers so that he might finish getting their NEW home ready for them to move

into. Well the text says no such thing! Rather, the “dwelling place” Jesus is referring to here is the disciples’ own HEARTS. He is telling them that amidst all the chaos and uncertainty that is about to descend upon them, he will be preparing their HEARTS and SPIRITS for the days ahead. He is going to fortify them with a PROMISE and fill them with a HOPE that will enable them to remain faithful REGARDLESS how dire and desperate the situation becomes. Yes, he must leave in the sense that he will be arrested and taken away. Yet soon afterwards, he will return to them afresh, in the guise of the Holy Spirit who will fill them and give them a whole new perspective on his ministry and on their mission. THEIR HEARTS will become his new home where he will reside forevermore. It is THAT promise, THAT hope of his abiding presence which will carry them through the “valley of the shadow of death,” that will sustain them through the hellish period into which they are about to descend. Hence, on the very night that the worst that could ever happen to them is about to occur, Jesus gives to them the GREATEST NEWS they could ever possibly receive!

Friends, as Christ sought to impress certain truths upon his disciples in that Upper Room so many years ago, so he desires to impress those very same truths upon US here in this sanctuary in the year 2021. This morning, he says to you and to me, “Time is short and, yes, life IS hard but know that I have OVERCOME the world! DO NOT WORRY AND NEVER LOSE HOPE. As difficult as your circumstances may be, please believe that I am above and below, around and even WITHIN you this very moment. You can never escape my presence nor the love that binds me to you. I am the Comforter and I will not only dry your tears and relieve your sorrow, I will empower and guide you in many new and exciting ways- only do not despair! Do NOT let fear and sorrow dominate your heart. They are a cancer that can leave you selfish and miserable and blind to the condition and needs of others. They can make a prison house of your soul, allowing little room for faith or love or joy in it. Permit my Spirit to take up residency in YOUR spirit; let me make your heart my new home. My presence within you will then become a PROMISE that will carry you through the darkest of times and a HOPE that will raise you to ever more glorious heights. Of that I promise.” Let us pray...

Dear Lord, help us to appreciate your Son, Jesus Christ, and his Spirit which makes our heart his home. May our trust and reliance on you become so total that we would never capitulate to excessive fear or worry or sorrow or despair ever again. The promise of your presence in us is the ONLY thing that can draw us out of ourselves and back into the world where you would have us serve. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.