



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
"At Home" Worship
5th Sunday of Easter: May 10, 2020

Gathering Around God's Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

We long for abiding peace and friendship that renews our souls.

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

We seek wisdom that endures and guidance for our journey.

Jesus says, "Where I am, there you may be also."

We come to encounter Christ.

Let us worship our God!

OPENING HYMN

God Is Here!

#409

CALL TO CONFESSION

Whoever believes in Christ will not be put to shame. Confident in this promise, let us confess our sin before God and one another.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Almighty God, our hearts are troubled. We are quick to blame others for our unhappiness. We don't act like your people, those who have heard the good news of your love. Forgive us our lack of faith. Let us seek to be your witnesses to all the world. Remind us that we are your people: loved and forgiven by you. In the name of Christ, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Sisters and brothers, once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. In the name of Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, as we listen to your holy Word, open our hearts to the power of your Spirit, call us out of darkness, and lead us into your light. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 31:1-5,15-16

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God. My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

New Testament Reading: John 14:1-14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

SERMON

“Absence and Presence”

Rev. David Ukropina

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” It is impossible for me to read this first line of today's passage from John's gospel without thinking about our current situation in the world. We have a lot for our hearts to be troubled about, whether locally, nationally or globally, and whether it's our grief, our financial worries, or fear of what might happen in the future.

This is now my fourth Sunday writing a sermon during our quarantine and physical absence from the sanctuary and from each other. My first two sermons referenced the virus directly, but my last sermon did not at all. Like all of you, the virus is both our immediately lived reality and also something we want to get away from occasionally.

In our text, Jesus is with his disciples on the night of his arrest and the night before his execution. He knows he is going away, and he is preparing his disciples for this reality. This preparation for Jesus' absence connected me once again to the coronavirus, and our absence from our normal worship and community.

As always, today's passage raises a lot of questions and a lot of areas we could focus on. For me, a lot of questions immediately jump out from the text, many of which I don't have any immediate answers for. One such question comes from the line, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Some Christians have argued that this verse means only those who are knowingly and formally

Christians will ever go to heaven or experience life after death. One of the places I frequently read this passage is at memorial services, and I can usually feel some tension in the sanctuary when this verse is read.

Others have rejected this idea that Christians have some exclusive claim to heaven and life after death. They point out that we need to be on guard against Christian triumphalism. For me, the big question this verse raises is about exclusivity versus inclusivity. Some Christians point more to the exclusive claim, while others believe all people will ultimately be with God.

Personally, I think that Christianity can be both exclusive and inclusive. We can affirm exclusive claims that in truth, no one does come to God except through the work of Jesus Christ, but that this is not the same thing as claiming only those who formally identify as Christians will be those with God. I affirm the historic claims of the church in regards to resurrection, but I also see a much greater mystery at work in terms of how this coming to God happens.

Another question that gets raised is about the verse where Jesus says that those who believe in him will do the works that he does and will do even greater works than these. Like many, I find this line confusing at times. I mean, how can we as Christians do greater works than Jesus?

The only way I can try to understand a verse like that is to move out the perspective and look at the whole of the Christian community over two thousand years. When I consider all the healing, health care, education, and volunteer work that has been done in Christ's name, I can believe that collectively, Christians have done and continue to do what Christ has asked for.

Although these are all questions that arise from the text, the main question I tend to focus on in this particular moment is the question around Christ's absence and presence. How can we as disciples live apart from Christ's physical presence, and how does this speak to us during this particular historical moment?

One of the questions I find coming to my mind during this whole time of quarantine and physical distancing is how does our faith affect our journey, both during these past few months and into a very uncertain future. We are called to connect our faith at all times, but especially during times of trial and worry.

One of the main roles I see for myself as a pastor is to help people connect with God and with the gospel message. This may seem obvious, but it's worth spending some time on. The role of pastor has always been complex, but especially these days, it seems like there can be many conflicting cultural messages about what a pastor does.

A pastor can be looked to as an entrepreneur who will grow the church. They can be seen as a business manager to help with administration and organization. They can be looked to primarily as a preacher and worship leader. They can be seen mainly as a teacher, or as a pastoral care leader. There's almost no end to people's ideas and hopes for what a pastor can and should be, and sometimes one person's views conflict with another's.

Underneath all this, I think it's helpful to remember that the pastor's primary job is to help people stay connected to God and to the gospel. One way to think about this is through the definition of the word religion. At its root, linguistically, religion means to link back or to connect. "Ligio" means connection. We can see this in the word ligament. "Re" in this context, means back.

So religion means to link back. But what are we linking back? In religion, we link the individual person or soul or spirit back to God. That is the essence and definition of religion, and that is what the pastor's primary job is. They do this through preaching, leading worship, teaching, pastoral care, administration, management, outreach, mission, and lots of other ways, but that is the central definition.

As I mentioned, this is important at all times, but it also defines our roles in this particular time. And my hope is as Christians and parishioners, we can use the time we have during this quarantine to remember and reflect on our identities as Christians. Just as Jesus prepared his disciples for their separation, he was preparing us for our temporary physical separation.

For me, I'm always glad to know and to remember that in the middle of all of this, Jesus is with us, with

me, with you, and with all those we care about. The virus has not changed that, and it is a profound, good thing to remember that with all that we fear, and with all that has changed, the central fact of Christ's presence has not changed.

Someone once said that God is what you hang your heart upon. Jesus tells us not to let our hearts be troubled, and he also encourages us not to hang our hearts upon anything but God, especially not all the things that the world peddles to us to soothe a troubled heart.

Jesus tells us not to let our hearts be troubled as a direction to focus our wills upon. He is telling us to stand firm, even when you are grieving. It's interesting to me that in our text, the disciples keep asking about the physical place where Jesus is going. They are looking for a physical place to cling to with the safety of location.

They want to know where Jesus is going so that they will know how to get there. Both Philip and Thomas are lost in that moment, and we are not that far behind. We want a physical place to be with Jesus, and we all feel the loss of our physical location as a community in the sanctuary.

Like everyone else, I've been reading a lot of articles that have to do with the virus, and I'm struck by just how many different storylines there are. I've been walking a line between staying informed but not reading too much, but there are so many interesting aspects to this story.

One of the types of articles that tend to connect with me during these times are ones that have to do with using this time to step back and reflect on our lives and on our values. There are so many changes that have happened in just a few months that it serves as a good occasion to reflect upon our lives.

Many of these articles have included some version of the phrase, "What really matters" or "What truly matters." In one of these reflections, I was reminded that it was a tradition among both Christian and Buddhist monks to reflect on our deaths and mortality as a way not to be morbid, but to increase our appreciation for our lives and for our current moment.

I've heard this described almost as a "spiritual slap in the face", meant to wake us out of our sleep walking or spiritual and daily ruts that we can get in. Of course, our current pandemic has brought great suffering and death, and it is not meant just to wake us up. But the possibility of us finding meaning or value in this awful situation may depend on us intentionally reflecting on what really matters in our life.

One of the things we can do during this time is to try to find appreciation and gratitude for what we do have. Christians in general and Presbyterians in particular are reminded that all of life is grace, all of life is a gift, and we can never take any of it for granted, either during a pandemic or any other time.

Over the last few weeks, I've occasionally tried to be intentionally grateful for small things. One of the lovely things about the past few months is that the weather has been especially nice. Spring is always a time for celebration as we start getting warmer weather.

Instead of seeing rising uncertainty, unemployment or isolation, maybe we can occasionally pull ourselves away to reevaluate what is most important in our lives. Tragedies can sometimes wake us up to what really matters and remind us how fragile life is, but also how much of a gift it is.

Times like this can help spur us to take inventory of those things we do have in life, and it can help us look forward to glad reunions, both to the day that will happen in our worshipping community, and the glad reunion that will happen in the next life, with our family and friends, and with God.

The presence of Jesus is not severed by his death. Jesus promises us not just that our lives will continue, but also that we will be with him. He tells us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled", and it's a message needed by the disciples and by us any time, but especially this particular time, when we are apart from each other. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Let our hearts not be troubled, and let us bring our prayers to God, saying, God of resurrection, hear our prayer...

For the church throughout the world, that all who have met the risen Lord may be faithful in their witness and testimony to the way of Jesus. God of resurrection, hear our prayer...

For pastors, teachers and ministers, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, they may seek to build the church upon Christ, and humbly lead in faithful service. God of resurrection, hear our prayer...

For the governments of the world, that the nations may dwell in peace, that good may prevail over strife, and people of faith may worship as their hearts direct. God of resurrection, hear our prayer...

For rain and sun, and for abundant food, and for water for all who dwell upon the earth. God of resurrection, hear our prayer...

For the sick and those in need, and for any who are oppressed by wounds of the soul. God of resurrection, hear our prayer...

For our neighbors that we may live together in friendship, and that strangers among us may find us to be hospitable. God of resurrection, hear our prayer...

For our enemies, that their sins may be forgiven them and that they may find your peace. God of resurrection, hear our prayer...

Almighty God, your Son promised to grant whatever we ask in his name. By your Holy Spirit empower us to minister to the world as his faithful disciples, that our work may testify to what we pray and show forth your glory, through Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee

#816

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. -Genesis, 31:49