

I am a bit surprised to see you all here this morning! I assumed I would still be here but I really expected all of you to be gone, yesterday being the end of the world according to some. I had debated all week whether I would need to prepare a sermon to preach to myself or not, so I guess that we are here, it is a good thing I did. We might have a little chuckle about all the billboards predicting the end, all the publicity around the country and world from one small group making such a bogus claim, but there is a serious side to all this utter foolishness.

The serious side to it all is that these claims about the end of the world were offered on the basis of what the Bible said. It is always serious work to listen for what the Bible says and reducing the scriptures to some sort of atomic clock, an inaccurate one at that is to rob the scriptures of their life and how they nurse us in our relationship with God. Lest we think it is only others who need to consider how scripture is to be read as we consider today's passage in the Gospel of John we will see how some forces continue to rise up to press a narrow, individualistic, culture-bound interpretation even on some of the most intimate and passionate words of our Savior.

I saw a cartoon showing a man lying on a psychiatrist's couch. When the psychiatrist asked the client about his problems, the man confided that he had many fears for the future. "Doctor," he began, "I'm worried about the financial crisis, terrorism, the situation in the Middle East, political upheaval in Africa, our diplomatic relations with China", and on and on he went, concluding with, "I have a child going off to college!" In the final frame of the cartoon the psychiatrist responded, "Shut up and move over," after which he proceeded to get on the couch with the patient.

This reaction is very different from the response of Jesus to the anxiety of the disciples to what is being said to them in John 14.

In just a few minutes, in staccato like phrasing, Jesus has told the disciples the following things, "I am leaving! You won't see me anymore! There is going to be a betrayal, by one of you! Peter you will deny me, not once, not twice, but 3 times!"

Jesus had donned the garb of a servant, washing the feet of the disciples, all of the feet, of all the disciples!

It has been apparent for all to see that Jesus Himself is "troubled in spirit"!

But then, into this mix, into this melee, into this confused maelstrom, Jesus does not roll over onto the psychiatrist's couch and bemoan these events, instead Jesus says, "Let not your hearts be troubled!"

If you are at all like me, you want to shout out, on behalf of the disciples, "What do you mean Jesus! How can you say, "Don't worry" when everything you have been saying and doing for the last hour has been raising my blood pressure, increasing my anxiety?"

Whazzup Jesus – You tell us all this, you tell us we will see you no more, that we will abandon you and then say, "Let not your hearts be troubled!" Well, frankly it doesn't crack it! Of course we are worried and now we are going to be worried all the more because you have told me not to worry!

The writer of the Gospel of John shapes and orders his material at this point in the story of Jesus to remind us of some very important words spoken by another Jesus, an earlier Jesus, whom we know better as Joshua. Joshua, Jeshua, Jesus, being the same name. In the time of Joshua the people of Israel were at their place of change and crisis, at the edge, on edge, when they stood at the threshold of who knew what, when they were about to cross the River Jordan into what they trusted was a Promised Land, when their fear factor was off the scale, their Jesus - Joshua - said to them: "Be strong and of good cheer."

The intimate conversation into which we are invited today is one with our Risen Lord, in which Jesus promises to be with us always and ever, in the midst of all the ups and downs of life. But this intimate conversation has an ancient ring to it, it is a conversation that has been going on between God and God's people from the very beginning, and it will continue forever, if we will just hush up and listen.

The manner in which the writer of the Gospel of John chooses to tell us this story offers us as readers an important theological insight into who Jesus was and what He was about to do. The story is told to underline that a greater Joshua, Jesus, is about to cross a deeper and a wider Jordan to open the way to the promises of God into which all people are invited to follow. It is this greater Joshua, Jesus, who in His crossing over and through a greater Jordan opens the way for all people to come to discover God, and it is this Jesus who can therefore declare, "People come to the Father through me."

If you flick through the preaching channels on TV, or listen to some of the demagoguery on your AM or FM radio; if you read publications from certain groups; if you pay attention to what certain so-called teachers and scholars teach and say you will very quickly hear from many such folks an argument about exclusion, about a very narrow understanding of the way and manner of Jesus Christ – but this is not the Jesus that I read about in the Gospels.

But you do and you have and you will hear some say that it is people like them, and only people like them, who have a real faith, in their words, "a saving faith" or a "true faith".

You will hear some state that it is people who look like them, who think like them, people who vote like them who alone are on the pathway to God.

You will hear some underline their view that there are only certain, select words that can be used to describe a real experience of life and faith, and that if people don't follow the formula then they cannot have true faith. Some of you in High School have had people tell you this sort of thing, questioning your faith foundations, and being good Presbyterians you did not reach back at them and attack their faith perspectives and that sometimes left you feeling somehow lesser.

Some declare that it is only the people who accept a specific list of do's and don'ts, or who can sign on to some human culture-bound statement about God who alone have found or are finding the way to God.

The odd thing about all this, the really odd thing about all this is this, those who make such exclusionary claims and statements claim to base what they say on the basis of scripture.... but as we have already heard today, from our reading in the Gospel of John, the scriptural text itself is extremely clear - Jesus says that He Jesus is Himself the way, that one comes to understand who God the Father is by living in and participating with God's inexhaustible love for us, and by expressing that love for everyone. Jesus says, "Everyone comes to the Father by me, through me, with me, because of me, in me." The statement of Jesus, "No one comes to the Father except through me", is not a limiting and or restrictive statement but an INVITATION. To read these words as exclusionary would be at completed odds with who Jesus is and all Jesus did to welcome, include, and involve.

Jesus put His statement, "People come to the Father through me", into action - constantly inviting all sorts of people to share His life and so discover peace with God – the disciples, tax collectors, sinners, Romans, Gentiles, betrayers, deniers. The way to be a Christian is the way of Christ, the person of Christ— the way is by participating in his being, practicing his love, living his life, sharing his compassion, living out his grace and goodness.

Ultimately our coming to God, our Salvation does not lie in what it is we say or think about God, for then we would be lost! Our coming to God arises always and ever in us welcoming and sharing and expressing the welcoming love of God in Jesus, the love that God has for the world, what we mean when we seek to describe, “grace”.

Yes, realizing that God has a welcome for us, realizing that God calls us to be servants, there is much we are invited to learn and know and trust concerning our faith. Thus we have the Scriptures and the creeds and confessions to guide us under the leading and direction of the Holy Spirit. The statements that we make in our own minds and hearts need to be checked and confirmed by the community around us or by the Greater Church – if they are merely our own thoughts they are partial, incomplete, provisional.

We do not claim that we have full and complete knowledge of the destination or the specifics of God’s timing, nor do we have access to all the details concerning how others are moving towards that same destination, just as Jesus Himself clearly taught. However, we do know the way of Jesus – for it is the way of being identified and incorporated into Jesus and His passionate, welcoming, loving purposes for the world, by living and sharing His life with one another and in the world.

Welcomed and embraced by God’s love in Jesus Christ we are not offered lifestyle choices rather Jesus offers and calls us to life.

A lifestyle is our strong suit, the cards we lead with. A life, on the other hand, is the totality of who we are, life is all the cards with which we are dealt.

Renting the video “Saturday Night Fever” is life style;
staying up all Saturday night with a child with a fever is life.

Wearing a certain style or color of clothes is life style;
Making sure that the orphan or the widow or the homeless are not naked is life.

Choosing to dine at one or other of our favorite restaurants is life style;
Supporting the work of Hope House or Family Promise is life.

Watching a whole season of “Glee” is lifestyle.
Being with someone who is sad or alone is life!

Reading Grisham or King or P.D. James is lifestyle;
Being diligent in reading, studying and understanding the Scriptures is life.

Booking a tee time at one golf course as opposed to another golf course is life style;
Taking time to drive someone to hospital or to visit a friend is life.

Life is not a getaway vacation but a gateway vocation that will inevitably take us down paths not of our own choosing. Christ is the way and the truth and because He is such He is also the life. And it is as we live this same servant life that we will be forever linked with and grafted into Jesus as Lord and Savior. The opportunities for serving others at Dorothy Day or the Haven or the Children’s Attention Home or in leading and teaching the children or youth are examples of ways we can express the servant life to which each and all of us have been claimed as we walk in the way of the master-Servant, Jesus Christ.

Just as Jesus washed the feet of the disciples as a group, just as He spoke all these words to them when they were gathered together, so all that we are asked to do, to express God's life in us and through us, we must do together, in community.

This is such a universal thought, found on every page in the Bible, seen in the covenant community of Israel, practiced by the Christian Church down through the centuries. But I tell you in our place, in our day and generation this essential truth is under pressure as never before. There are powerful forces in our culture that work to divide us, to keep apart - forces of individualism, some of our technology, the rise of consumerism are among the forces which tells us we should have and must have things just the way we want them and, "to blazes with everyone else!" And we carry the debilitating effects of these things with us everywhere we go, even into the church.

The picture Jesus would give us as His followers is every different: We are the community of the faithful, the people of the covenant; the fellowship of believers, together the Body of Christ. When it comes to what we believe about God and what it is God asks us to do we are in this together. By our baptism, sustained by our sharing in the Sacrament of Communion we are in the mix, with and for each other. We need to be with and for each other, even when that is hard, even if we disagree, even if we might do things differently - it is inescapable - we must be all for One and one for each other. The life of God needs to become not a lifestyle choice that is our choice but our life, coming from deep within the very ground of who we are. This is the life that then pushes us on in love and service to others so that others will come to discover and share God's life for themselves and joined with us and all God's people in our shared enterprise. Amen.