

TRAVEL PLANS

May 14, 2017

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: John 14:1-14

SCRIPTURE

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.

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Over the last few weeks it seems like traveling by air has become more and more bizarre. Traveling always involves a certain amount of anxiety, but lately it seems like it is getting really crazy. On April 9, United Airlines flight 3411 traveling out of Chicago to Louisville, KY, late in the day, was overbooked because a flight crew needed to get to Louisville. Even though everyone had boarded the plane, the airline decided to bump four passengers. When no one volunteered, they selected four at random. Three passengers complied and got off the plane. However, one passenger, Dr. David Dao, refused to leave. Tensions escalated until the airport police were called in and they forcibly dragged Dr. Dao off the plane. It might have gone unnoticed but someone recorded the whole incident on their cell phone, and that video went viral. Regardless of all that might have happened leading up to Dr. Dao’s removal, it was rather disturbing to see him dragged by his arms up the aisle of the plane, as well as later images of his dazed and bloody face. Eventually United Airlines did apologize and there were reports of a substantial financial settlement with Dr. Dao.

That might have been seen as an unfortunate and isolated incident, but a few weeks later a young mother with an infant was trying to board an American Airline flight with an oversize stroller. It is not exactly clear all that happened, but a male flight attendant apparently was rather rough in yanking it away from the mother. When another passenger tried to intervene the flight attendant warned him to stay out of it, threatening to “knock him flat.” Again someone caught some of this confrontation on their cell phone, with the mother obviously upset and in tears, as the flight attendant seemed to lose his temper.

Then just a week ago, two passengers got into brawl on a Southwest flight that had landed in Los Angeles, as they were waiting for the doors to open so they could get off the plane. Again, it was recorded on a cell phone. And then on Monday, in the Ft. Lauderdale airport after hearing that a number of flights on Spirit Airlines had been canceled some passengers became so enraged and out of control that three were arrested for rioting. It all has been rather crazy.

But perhaps what was the most surprising this week was that on Thursday, the J.D. Power company released the results of their annual survey stating that overall this year passengers have a higher level of satisfaction with the airlines than they did last year. Those participating in the survey cited lower fares, better on time performance, as well as fewer mishandled bags all as factors bumping up their approval ratings. Other factors were inflight entertainment such as Wi-Fi, and on demand movies. I do not understand these results. Yes, when I have traveled, the airlines have not lost my luggage, but that is because they charge you to check a suitcase, so we have learned to get by with only carry-on bags. And does being able to check your FaceBook page at 30,000 feet really make up for being crammed together like sardines and if you get hungry having to pay \$9 for a ham sandwich and tiny bag of Fritos?

Our scripture lesson for this morning starts out with Jesus saying, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The Greek word that is translated as “troubled” is an active word. It doesn’t mean just being depressed or in a bad mood, but rather it means being agitated or stirred up. It is a response to outside factors or irritants. It is the way we often feel when we travel, especially by air. There is a constant uneasy feeling, a sense that you do not know quite what is going on and that you really have no control should things go badly. It would be so nice, if when you walked into an airport you could meet someone who had the power and authority to say, “You have nothing to worry about. Everything is all set and all will be well. Do not let your heart be troubled.”

Now the context for this passage is the Last Supper, the night before Jesus would be arrested and then crucified. It is a text that I have read many times from this pulpit, but not very often on a Sunday morning, for it is usually heard at a funeral service. Of course it is a great comfort when we have lost someone we love to think that Jesus is preparing a special place for them. But this text has a lot more to say than just to those who are grieving. It is part of what is often referred to as Jesus’ Farewell Discourse. John 13 through 17 are the final instructions Jesus is leaving with his disciples. The verses that we read from chapter 14, are about taking a trip. Jesus essentially is saying, “Okay, guys. This is it. I am going away. Here is what you need to know, because you are going to be taking this trip too.” It is almost like Jesus is a tour leader who has everything all arranged. He is going on ahead to make sure everything is in place to ensure all goes smoothly when the rest of the group arrives.

Of course, any trip begins with a destination, so where are we going? Jesus talks about “my Father’s house” and we tend to think he is talking about where we will be going after we die. But this term “my father’s house” has a special meaning in the ancient Hebrew culture. In Genesis 12:1 we find the story of another trip. God speaks to Abraham, and God says, “Go from your country and your kindred and *your father’s house* to a land where I will show you.” Your father’s house was not so much a physical place as it was a community. It was the people you were connected with. It was more than just your blood relatives, although that was important. It was those who took care of you; those who protected you when danger threatened; those who watched your back; those you could trust with your life.

Jesus says, “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places...” but the term “dwelling places” is difficult to express in English. It means the place where you inhabit or hang out; the place where you can be comfortable and relax. Some of you will remember the old King James Version translated this as “In my Father’s house are many mansions.” We think of that as someplace lavish and luxurious. That is not entirely accurate. It actually means a place where you feel safe, and it fits with the idea that the Father’s house is a community or kinship group. So one way to talk about this destination would be to paraphrase what Jesus is saying as “There are lots of openings in my Father’s family and I am going to do what needs to be done to ensure you are included in our family.” That is the destination of this trip we are going on.

Besides the destination, it is important to know what the accommodations will be like once we get there. Your anxiety level will drop if you know the place where you will be staying will be clean and comfortable. Two summers ago, Judy and I attended a church conference up on Washington Island in Door County, WI. We had to find our own lodgings for this conference. We came across a place on the internet that sounded great. It said it was a cozy lakeshore cottage. The pictures seemed very nice and the price was reasonable, so we booked it. Well, our suspicions began when the place where we were supposed to meet the owner was not an office or home, but the front porch of a building he rented to the local town newspaper. Our misgivings increased when he didn't seem to want to go with us to the cabin, but gave us a key and directions. When we unlocked the door and walked in the first thing we saw was the kitchen and on top of the refrigerator was a row of every kind of insecticide you could imagine; ant killer, roach killer, wasp killer, spider killer... I don't know there might have been scorpion killer as well. We discovered that the term "cozy lakeshore cottage" is a euphemism for damp, mildew smelling, converted fishing shack built around 1950 with new curtains and bedspreads to look nice for website pictures. Now the conference itself was great, and lasted for five days. However, after three nights, we had had enough. We packed up and headed back down into Door County and spent a very nice night in a luxury hotel with crisp sweet smelling sheets and a sparkling clean bathroom. Judy didn't seem to care about the cost.

We survived and now it makes a great story. But what sounds like a great place to stay on a website or travel brochure may be a huge disappointment. However, if someone you know tells you that they went on a trip somewhere and the place they stayed was fabulous, you are much more likely to try it. You are not as stressed when you have a firsthand account of what the accommodations will be like, and you can be certain that you will be safe and comfortable. In the trip plans that Jesus is making he assures us that he himself is preparing a place for us. There can be no better accommodations than that.

However, probably the greatest anxiety with any trip is much more basic. The destination may be clear; the accommodations may be superb, but we need directions. How are we going to get there, after all? Jesus says to the disciples, "Okay guys, yes, it's true. I am going away, but you will be fine because you know the way to where I am going." At which point Thomas pipes up and says "Um... No we don't. We haven't got a clue. We have no idea what you are talking about, so how could we possibly know the way." Jesus responds with those familiar words, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Before I get too far into this, I want to make a little side bar statement. There has been a lot of discussion, a lot of sermons, and a lot written about this verse, how it sounds so exclusive, implying that anyone who is not a Christian is lost. I am not getting into all that this morning, other than to echo noted scholar and writer Barbara Brown Taylor. She says this verse is more love language than it is a doctrinal statement. Just minutes before, Jesus had washed the disciples' feet as an expression of his love for them. When he made this statement he was not thinking about Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists. He was thinking about how much he loved these friends of his. Barbara Brown Taylor says this statement in John 14:6 is more on a par with a love ballad, such as "I only have eyes for you," than it is with any sort of creedal proclamation that Jesus is the only way to get to heaven. So let's get back into what Jesus really is saying. It is clear the disciples are confused and upset by what is going on. They are hung up on this idea that Jesus is going somewhere. So what they want is a detailed map of what they might expect at each step along the way. They want the coordinates to punch into their GPS device. They want Jesus to lay it all out for them, clear list of dos and don'ts that they can follow. But that is not what Jesus has to offer. Instead he offers them himself.

I have done quite a bit of traveling, to Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and other places. It can be great fun to explore some location by yourself and discover things on your own. But there is nothing like having a good tour guide, especially one with a lot of experience who tailors the tour to what you really want to see. Years ago, we spent a summer in Scotland. Some of you remember we did an exchange with a Scottish pastor, Eric Foggitt. We stayed in his house and I preached at his church and he came here, stayed in our house and preached in this pulpit. Anyway we did some quick overnight trips to various places in Scotland, and on one of these we went to the Isle of Skye. As we checked into the hostel in the town of Portree, where we were staying, I said to the clerk that we would be catching the train back to Inverness at 5:00 the next day. What did he recommend we do while we were there? He said that we should call Willie. What Willie did not know about the Isle of Skye was not worth knowing. He gave us Willie's number and we called.

Willie picked us up in his minivan the next morning, just Judy, the boys and me. We were his only customers. He spent the whole day taking us all over the island. He drove down little back roads and over mountain passes, and in and out of side streets in the villages we came to. He told us story after story about the history and places we were seeing. When he found out I was a pastor, he took us to the ruin of an old monastery. Of course, we saw castles and had a great lunch in a cozy tea shop. Truly, we had no idea where we were on the island and what we would see next, but we were with Willie. On our own we would have been totally lost, but we were not worried at all. Willie took care of everything. As the afternoon wore on I became a bit concerned that we might miss our train. I said something, and Willie told us he would be getting us to the station on time. I had thought he would be taking us back to the hostel and we would have to get a cab to the station. But, no, Willie was taking care of everything. He made sure we caught our train. We did not need to let our hearts be troubled.

That is what Jesus is offering to us. So many times on the journey of life we make it much harder than it has to be. We want to see everything clearly mapped out before us. We want the latest technology to show us exactly where to go. We become all stressed out about every turn, every decision we might have to make. Jesus says, let me make it easy for you. I know you want detailed travel plans. You would like a minute to minute itinerary from the moment you arrive at the airport until you pick up your bags at the end of the trip. But it doesn't have to be that hard, because I am willing to take you wherever you need to go. I have been down this road many times. In fact, I made the road. I am the road. On the journey of life, I am life itself. If you trust me, if you commit yourself to me, you will have nothing to worry about. Let not your hearts be troubled.

The disciples did indeed have to go through a difficult time. It was much more than Jesus just leaving them. Jesus suffered a cruel and terrible death on the cross. But that was not the end of the story. God shattered the powers of darkness and fear by raising Jesus from the dead and suddenly everything was radically changed forever. In this way Jesus did everything he promised. Because he lives we can relax and feel safe as a part of the family of God. Because he lives we know that he is preparing a wonderful place for us. But most important of all, because he lives, we can trust him to take us wherever we need to go. Because he lives all of our travel plans are set. Because he lives our hearts are not troubled. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.