

“Troubled Times”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”

“The Troubles” is a phrase that refers to the violent sectarian conflicts that plagued Northern Ireland from 1968 – 1998, during which some 3,600 people were killed and more than 30,000 wounded before a peaceful solution was reached in 1998. While the “Good Friday Agreement” led to the end of violent conflicts that had gripped the province, the scars that remain in Northern Ireland (including so-called “Peace Walls” that separate Protestant and Catholic communities) serve as a reminder of this troubled period in the history of this region, troubled times that will be remembered long after the sound of gunfire and bombings has faded.

It is far too soon for any of us to consider how these troubled times will be remembered, but we are beginning to realize that after this COVID-19 crisis life will not go back to the way it was. The “troubles” in which we find ourselves will leave scars that will forever define and change the way in which we live after the pandemic has passed. As we mourn the deaths of people who have succumbed to the virus, we will also be mourning the way we were able to live, the manner in which our relationships were structured, and the feelings of comfort and security that have been shattered by this unprecedented experience. The “troubles” of our current age will have an impact on future ages in way that we cannot yet imagine, but which we know will be real and difficult.

In the midst of the troubled times that continue to find us separated from one another and unable to gather for worship for an eighth straight Sunday, the words of our Lord Jesus Christ speak to us a message of hope that can only be spoken by the one who is *“the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14). Today’s Gospel lesson is a passage that has probably been the focus of more of my sermons than any other biblical text; it has been included in many funeral services in which people gather to mourn the loss of a loved one, grieving both their death and the loss of any future relationship. At a time when people are deeply troubled as they walk through their own “valley of the shadow of death,” the words of our Lord and Saviour speak a powerful message that is at the center of the Christian faith, the good news that Jesus Christ is *“the way, and the truth, and the life”* (14:6) and that not even death can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- “I know of no other help or counsel, consolation or comfort, path or way, but alone my Lord Christ, who for my sake suffered, rose again, and ascended into heaven. To this I cling, and I will persevere, even if nothing but hell, death, and the devil are beneath me and before me. For this is the right way and bridge, firmer and surer than any built of iron or of stone, and heaven and earth would burst before this would fail or deceive me.” – Martin Luther.

Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel lesson are a part of the Farewell Discourse in the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus is sharing his final teachings with his disciples before his passion and death. Jesus’ opening words to his disciples begin with three commands on how they are to deal with the troubled times into which they are entering on this night in which Jesus will be betrayed: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”* (14:1). Jesus has used the word “troubled” (*tarasso*) three times previously in John’s Gospel to describe his condition of distress:

- “When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” – 11:33.
- “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” – 12:27-28a.
- “After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, ‘Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.’” – 13:21.

In each of these three uses, the verb refers primarily to Jesus’ agitation and disturbance in the face of the power of death and evil, not simply of his sadness. In instructing his disciples to “*not let your hearts be troubled*,” Jesus is not speaking of the disciples’ personal sadness at his death, but instead encourages them to stand firm in the face of his departure, when the events may look to them as if evil and death are having their way; “*it is a rallying cry for strength*.” (Gail O’Day). Peter’s denial, which Jesus predicted in the previous verse (“*Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times*.” – 13:38) can be seen as an illustration of how the disciples will act if they surrender to their “troubled hearts.”

- “Therefore it must be true that if anyone has a heavy, dull, and frightened heart, it cannot be from Christ. For he is not the one to make hearts fearful, sad, and heavy. He came, accomplished his work, and ascended into heaven to take away from our hearts all fear and sadness and give us instead a joyful heart and conscience and joyful thoughts.” – Luther.

Jesus’ two imperatives to believe are built on the Christological core of Jesus ministry: the unity of God and Jesus (“*The Father and I are one*.” – 10:30). The disciples’ faith in the relationship of God and Jesus will empower them to rejoice in the events of Jesus’ “hour,” because through the eyes of faith they will recognize Jesus’ death and resurrection as the culmination of his enactment of God’s work, as the defeat of the ruler of this world:

- “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” – 12:31.
- “I will not longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.” – 14:30-31.

After opening his discourse with these commandments, Jesus turns to the promise of what awaits those who place their trust in the Lord. Jesus’ reference to “*my Father’s house*” (14:2) needs to be read in the context of the mutual indwelling of God and Jesus, a form of “residence” that is stressed in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel (“*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known*.” – 1:1, 18). Throughout the Gospel, location has consistently been a symbol for relationship; to know where Jesus is from is to know his relationship with God. It is in this relationship, as much as any heavenly dwelling place *per se*, that there are “*many dwelling places*” (*mone*), which is derived from the verb *meno*, “to remain, to dwell,” used in the Fourth Gospel to describe the mutuality and reciprocity of the relationship of God and Jesus:

- “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.” – 14:10.
- “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” – 15:10.

Jesus' return to God will make it possible for his disciples to join in the relationship that he shares with the Father, and his return will be the enactment of the eschatological announcement that *"I am the resurrection and the life"* (11:25), the ultimate witness to the power of God over life and death. It is the assurance proclaimed by St. Paul that *"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39).

- "Jesus' promise to take his own to himself is the promise of the arrival of the hoped-for age, which is marked by reunion and reconciliation with God, by inhabiting one's place in God's home." – O'Day.

Jesus' words are met at first with confusion: Thomas asks him *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* (14:5). Thomas interprets "the way" and "where I am going" as pointing to a physical destination; but for Jesus, "the way" is not a geographical term but a description of his revelatory work, which is revealed in one of Jesus "I am" statements with which he answers his disciple: *"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"* (14:6). The distinctiveness of John's use of "way" (*hodos*) rests in its combination with "truth" (*aletheia*) and "life" (*zoe*), and in its singular identification with the person of Jesus. Jesus reveals himself simultaneously to be the access to and the embodiment of life with God. To recognize Jesus as the truth is to affirm that as the Word made flesh Jesus makes the truth of God available to the world. Jesus is the "way," the promise of the possibility of unity with God, because in him one meets the truth of God, and is the access point to God's promise of life. *"In Jesus, the incarnate Word, the Son of God, one can see and know God in a manner never before possible."* (O'Day).

- "For I am the one who myself built the way or path, and I myself have trodden it and passed across, so that I might bring you and all who cling to me across. But you must put your trust in me, nothing doubting, must venture all on me, and with a joyous heart go and die confidently in my name." – Luther.

Like Thomas, we might also feel that *"we do not know where we are going"* in these days of uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike anything we have experienced in our lifetime, and we have no certainty as to when it will end and what life may look like in the future. The troubles of these times may well define our world for decades, and the scars left from this ordeal may be as lasting as those walls which scar the landscape of Northern Ireland. There are many losses that we have suffered and will continue to suffer, and the grief we experience will define the way in which we will be going for many years:

- "We must lament all the things we have lost and are losing now – travel, weddings, celebrations, holidays and holy days, jobs, businesses, dreams, friends and family members, confidence in our elected officials – all of it. We are missing being together at births and deaths, holding hands and each other. And while we can delay memorial services, there is no postponing grief. Part of my calling is to help people walk through the grief in all its complexity. To do this, I must first give myself room to grieve. I cannot guide others through something that I am not able or willing to experience myself. Now is the time for each of us to feel the guilt, shame, rage, fear, frustration, denial. All of it." – Nathan Kirkpatrick.

When Jesus encourages us to *"not let your hearts be troubled,"* he isn't saying that we should deny our feelings of loss in these troubled times, any more than he is denying one who has suffered the death of a

loved one the opportunity to lament and mourn their loss. In the psalms of lament, God's people are given the words they may use to express their sorrow and anger in the hour of their loss, when all appears to be dark and hopeless, when death appears to have gained the victory over life. Jesus himself expresses his agony when he uses the words of Psalm 22 in crying out *"my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* It is essential that we mourn all that we have lost, for in crying out in the midst of our grief we cry out to the God who hears our cries and comes to us with a word of abiding peace and hope:

- "The painful work of mourning is essential to the preservation of rich and meaningful experience. The unmourned loss can haunt one's life and cause an experience of inexplicably bitter sadness. Anything lost must be accepted and mourned before it is possible to honor a loved memory and being a new chapter in life. The process of grief can replenish each of us if we will but entrust ourselves to its healing powers." – Robert Chernin Cantor.

These troubled times will leave some permanent scars that will change the way in which we will live in the future in ways we cannot yet imagine. As we contemplate reopening our communities, we do not know how we will go about our everyday tasks: going to the grocery store, walking along the river, going to the theatre or to a restaurant. As we plan to reopen our church buildings for worship and other gatherings of the faith community, there is uncertainty as to how we will arrange our seating in our sanctuary, how we will distribute Holy Communion, how we will celebrate baptisms and weddings, how it might be possible to gather for coffee hour and community meals. As we continue to grieve over what we have lost, we cannot yet imagine what life will be like in a future that will forever be altered by the "Troubles" that have reshaped our world.

It is to these troubled times that the living Word of God speaks that eternal message of light and life. We can hear Jesus' words to "not let your hearts be troubled" not as a message that might cause us to feel guilt about the sadness and grief we are experiencing, but a message of hope that Christ is with us in these difficult times, that our faith is rooted in the sure and certain hope that no darkness is so great that the light of Christ cannot penetrate it, because *"in him is life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."* (1:4-5). We are called by our Lord to believe that as God was the help of God's people in ages past – bringing God's people out of slavery in Egypt, rescuing them from the bondage of slavery in Babylon, reconciling them to God and to each other through the death and resurrection of Christ – God is our hope for years to come and our assurance that while the troubles of these times might change the way in which we live, they can never separate us from the steadfast love of God that abides with us always. Our hope is rooted in the light that shone in the midst of the people's lamentation that assured them that the devastation of the present will not deny them the promise of the *"treasures in heaven, whether neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal"* (Matthew 6:20).

- "The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.' The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD." – Lamentations 3:19-26.

The Troubles of our current age may well define us and change us, but they will not destroy us. We do not know exactly what will happen in the coming months or how it will transform our everyday lives; but we

do know that no matter what happens, we have the assurance that God is with us always, that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, and that the one who is the “way, the truth, and the life” will lead us and guide us through whatever obstacles we may face so that we may know that we abide in God’s loving presence every day even as we look forward to that day when God will gather us into our eternal home where God *“will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:4).

- “But the proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well. And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well but as one who has faced the Cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory, who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. Christ the Lord is risen.” – Frederick Buechner.

The Troubles of our time may define us, but they will not defeat us. Christ the Lord is risen – and because he lives, we shall live also!

Amen.