

Sermon on John 14:1-14, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from our risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

The gospel text begins with Jesus at the Last Supper, reassuring his disciples in their hour of anxiety and uncertainty, with the comforting words: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”* Really, Jesus? He had just told his disciples that he would only be with them a little bit longer. Judas had just left the room to betray him to the authorities, and even Peter – the “rock” – would deny him three times before the morning. Not only were they shocked and made anxious by these words, but now Jesus said, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled... You cannot follow me where I am going, but I will prepare a place for you. It will be okay, because you know the way.”*

Really, Jesus? They didn’t know where he was going, how could they know the way? They were puzzled, lost, confused about what Jesus was telling them, and now they were also anxious about an uncertain future. Sound familiar? So Jesus said, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life.... If you know me, you will know my Father also.”* So Philip asked the obvious question: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Now, I recognize the irony of our scripture saying “show us the Father”, on this traditional Mother’s Day. On another Sunday I would also like to explore the feminine image of God as “Mother”, because the male image alone for God is too restrictive. But today the point is that the disciples’ desire and quest to know God was now getting real. If they could know God by knowing Jesus, but now Jesus was going to leave them, how would they ever know the answer to their deepest questions? Jesus’ answer? You have only to ask. *“Ask for anything in my name, and I will do it.”*

So, here we are today, listening in on Jesus and the disciples’ conversation, asking the same questions, but in a different time. We are back reading the same passage we read just a short time ago during Lent and Holy Week, about the coming Passion of our Lord that Jesus saw just ahead, instead of reading more resurrection stories of hope and new life coming with the Easter season. But we might as well be in Lent, because ever since the *corona virus pandemic* hit, we have been stuck in the same place of physical separation and anxiety. On Sunday, March 15 we stopped holding worship in church sanctuaries, and within days the governor’s Stay at Home order took effect. So we have been physically keeping to ourselves for the most part, in our homes with our only physical contacts being with those who live with us – except for grocery shopping or, if you are an

essential worker, in a workplace. Our times with each other have only been by telephone or the internet, so we gather with other Christians to worship on Zoom. This technology is a great gift, but it has its limits, and we long for the physical contact being in the same room with other human beings that we care about.

Perhaps the better scripture text today is the lament we read from Psalm 31, which begins with these words of trust in God: *In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness.*” For here we are in our homes, which have become our places of safety from the *corona virus*, and where others are safe from us. Because we cannot know who has this virus until there is testing, and because the virus is an aerosol, possibly hanging in the very air we breathe, we cannot risk being in enclosed spaces with other human beings until there is a vaccine and widespread testing. But not only that – we fear the rise in violence and confrontations in the world outside, as political and racial tensions increase. We see video images of Ahmaud Arbery, an African American man shot by a white man and his son while out jogging in a Georgia community. So COVID-19 is not the only virus we have to fear. It seems that we cannot be safe anywhere but alone or with our closest family indoors at home, or outside with no one else around. At this time the house of the Lord is not the sanctuary, where we are meant to feel safe. The temple is literally within us, as Jesus said, and the Lord’s house is in your own home, probably for many months to come. But God has prepared even this place for you, especially for a time like this!

So maybe it’s a time to ask, *where is it that you have felt safety in your life?* Share those times and places in the chat bar. Probably your first memory of feeling safe is in your mother’s arms, a caregiver, a parent. Most of us think about how safe we are in our own home, or in the arms of a trusted loved one, in the presence of family or friends. This is not always true, as homes can be places where trust is broken with violence or abuse. But today I want to focus on when, where, and with whom you and I feel safe, protected. It’s most often in the presence of those we trust and love. So what have you shared with each other? Let’s look....

So in the psalm, we see that the psalmist is speaking directly to the Lord, saying *“in you, O Lord, have I taken refuge.”* There was no one else to trust, nowhere else to go. It’s not in a sanctuary or temple made of stones that the writer feels safe, even when the Latin term “sanctuary” refers to a holy place of safety for humans. That can be anyplace on earth. But ironically, the refuge is not in any physical “place” – even though we humans tend to seek safety in castles, fortresses, or in the armed forces who protect us. In this psalm, our protection is in the presence, or the arms, of God. The writer seeks protection from enemies who conspire against him, but he knows that the real protection comes from God. So he asks God to be a strong rock, a castle to keep him safe. The first portion includes

the same words Jesus said from the cross as he died, *“Into your hands I commend my spirit, for you have redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth.”*

Most of the reasons for the psalmist’s fears are omitted in the reading today. If you go to the scriptures you can read the source of the lament, in verses 6-13. He is afflicted by others who don’t trust in God, they treat him with scorn and whisper plots against his life. But in the end he returns to trust, saying: *But as for me, I have trusted in you, O Lord. I have said, ‘You are my God. My times are in your hand; rescue me from my enemies, and from those who persecute me. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.’*

Now, the Hebrew word for steadfast love, *hesed*, can also be translated “commitment”. The psalmists trust that God is committed to them, and they in turn may commit their lives to God. Another famous psalm, psalm 57, compares the comfort of God’s protection to a mother hen’s wings: *“I have taken refuge in you; in the shadow of your wings will I take refuge until this time of trouble has gone by.”* Jesus used this image himself in the gospel. You and I are reminded here of God’s commitment to you of eternal love, compassion and forgiveness. In this you can trust, and so rely on God in these times of anxiety and stress.

But we are also called not to feel sorry for ourselves, but to love one another! Ironically, our forced physical separation has led us to find other ways to care for others. We show love for others by wearing a mask when we go out, to keep a safe distance to protect others, to check in more often by phone, and to donate food to hungry families and face masks to those who need them. For we still are the Church, called to care for others – but safely!

We don’t know how long this pandemic will last, or how long we will live in physical separation, for our own safety. We might have to wait for worship together until a vaccine is ready, in a year or more. Who knows? But rest in this, that our true safety is in the Lord, who gives us faith in God, hope in the future, and love for one another. Jesus has promised to always be with us, even in these trying times, when we don’t know how long we will wait for redemption.

So I close with the ending to Psalm 31, with words of encouragement and trust in God, which reads like this: *“Love the Lord, all you saints; the Lord protects the faithful, but repays in full those who act haughtily. Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord.”* (Ps. 31:23-24).

There are many psalms of trust and hope in the psalms, which focus on faith in God during times of struggle. We have in our Lutheran hymnals many songs and hymns of trust and hope as well. One of those is our hymn of the day, *Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life*, a poem by George Herbert. It echoes Jesus’ promise in the gospel, that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” of those who trust in him. It’s a particularly poignant text for the times we live in today, when we long for God to show us the way, to bring us life and give us joy. God bless you all.