

Moving In
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Our scripture this morning comes from the Gospel of John, the 14th chapter, and is part of the teachings that Jesus shares with his dearest friends at the last supper. It's a poignant, and a little confusing all these years later – Jesus is going away, but coming to them? Moving in with us?

It's nearly summer, but in the church, we are still in the Easter season. It isn't so odd that we're heading back to Jesus' last Supper, because his words directly impact us as Easter people.

The particular text needs some setting up. It is Jesus' response to a question that is asked by Judas – not Iscariot – the other Judas! The disciples are a curious bunch, and even now, on his last night, Peter, Thomas, Phillip and Judas interrupt to ask Jesus questions. Their questions are practical and straightforward, honest. Thomas asks, "How will we know the way you are going, Jesus?" Thomas asks for a roadmap and Jesus simply replies, "I am the way, I am the road." As we see all over John's gospel, the disciples operate on one level and Jesus on a completely different one. With all the questions I bring to scripture, I feel that I'm in good company.

Just before we pick up our verses, Jesus says that he will reveal himself to those who love him. "In a while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me."

Judas asks, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?"

John 14:23-29 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²³ Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with

them. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

²⁵ “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate,^[a] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸ You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. AMEN

There’s a story of a little girl who was frightened one night during a big thunderstorm. She calls out from her room, "Daddy, I am scared!"

Her father, not wanting to get out of bed, calls back, "Don't worry, honey. God loves you and will take care of you."

After a moment of silence. The little girl says, "I know God loves me, but right now, I need somebody who has skin on."

Eugene Peterson translates the prologue of John this way: The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

At the end of his earthly walk, Jesus prepares his friends for a time when his fleshly form will no longer be with them. He’s leaving them in physical form (with his skin on) and coming to them in a deeper, more intimate and profound way.

This is a difficult idea to grasp. All ages have experienced missing someone.

In Children’s Church, we teach about this. Each week, part of the curriculum illustrates how Jesus needed to move from being in one place at one time (concrete body) to being Spirit who could be everywhere. This is how we do it! We call Jesus the light and we light a candle. We affirm that every child has the light of Jesus within them. And then we explain that there came a time

when the light had to change – it was never completely goes away. We invite the children to watch carefully as the candle is extinguished but becomes smoke that infuses the air all around us. (Demonstrate with candle.)

I want to highlight a few things about the scripture:

First, this section of John is pastoral care. At the last supper the disciples are distraught, they are confused and frightened. Their Messiah, the one in whom they'd invested their time, their hopes and dreams, is being hunted down. Jesus is sure to die, and what will happen to them by association? The future is uncertain. In John's church community all 60 years later, when the gospel was written, Christ's church was struggling – house churches were being kicked out of the synagogue. People weren't trusting one another. They must have felt isolated and alone. Jesus' words were meant to reassure them – the disciples and the early church, that Jesus hadn't abandoning them. On the contrary, Jesus promises radical closeness – to God and to one another. Jesus' language for this is abiding.

Second, Jesus' answer to Judas lets the disciples know that he and God will “make their home” with the disciples. Don't you love that? Jesus' language comes from the building trade. Now, obviously the home isn't some sort of tiny building. The process for this home making, says Jesus, is keeping his words. By keeping his words, we honor and keep true what is important to Jesus – the stories, the teachings, the healing, the caring, the love, the truth speaking to power. This is how we as the church will become a sign to the world of our on-going communion with Jesus.

Third, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will be sent in his name. Advocate, here, literally means to “come alongside” the way an attorney or a teacher does. This Advocate will remind us of Jesus' words, will teach us everything, and convict us of the truth. Again, it is an indwelling of the divine – God moving in with and through us, and us in God. In an age of fake news, government corruption, systemic racism and the dismantling of human rights in our own nation, we need to lean on this promise of the Spirit of truth for our own discernment and peace of mind.

And finally, blessedly, Jesus assures the disciples that this indwelling of the Spirit, God moving into our hearts, will bring peace that surpasses understanding. We live in an anxious world. According to a Gallop pole (April 2019), Americans are among the most stressed out people in the world. Asked to describe their feelings, 55% said they were stressed much of the day and 45% said they were worried quite a bit and 22% reported being angry much of the time. (*The Christian Century*, May 22, 2019, pg. 8.) Jesus lived in stressful times – he was mobbed with people who both adored him and hated him, he was challenged, beaten, threatened. Through it all, he was grounded in his sense of belovedness, God’s grace and forgiveness, bathed in prayer, scripture and a sense of purpose. This allowed him to maintain a non-anxious presence in the midst of conflict and pain. Jesus promises the power of the Holy Spirit to do the same.

Jesus words are a good reminder for a community in transition. For weeks, we have experienced the anticipatory grief of losing a beloved, talented senior pastor. And, now we move officially into a time of creativity and transition. These weeks and months will offer opportunities for us reflect and dig beneath the all the amazing ministries that have happened these last ten years, and reconnect to the source of hope, challenge and love from which they grew.

Indeed, things will not be the same here with Bill gone, and that’s okay. The church is a living, breathing organism that changes with each new member that arrives and each who leaves, by death or circumstance. We need people to be a non-anxious presence for one another. I invite you to share your feelings with those whom you trust. My door is always open! Listen to one another. Offer words of peace and encouragement and take time to grieve, for indeed, we are grieving. Above all, know and trust that the Holy Spirit is very much alive and at work in this place.

Journeying back to the last supper is a poignant reminder that in the midst of our Easter season Alleluias, we still deal with grief and pain – it is part of life.

Those of us who have loved deeply and faced the death of a cherished person (parent, spouse, child, friend), or even the moving away of a well- loved

pastor or friend know that you don't need the physical presence of the person to carry on the things you have shared together.

As I was studying the John passage for today, I remembered an experience that I had almost 37 years ago this summer.

I was close to my grandfather – my mother's dad. He was a gentle and kind man. Born of Slovakian immigrants around the turn of the 20th century, he dropped out of school in the 5th grade to help bring income into his family of nine. He grew up to be a master electrician, and wired his local Lutheran Church and some public buildings in his town. My mother grew up in a multi-family home until two weeks before she was married, when my grandfather completed building his first and only home. I thought my grandpa was indestructible. He survived a fall from high scaffolding when I was about 5 years old, before children were allowed in hospital rooms – I remember waving to him from the sidewalk.

When I was about 9, my parents built a house, and my grandfather's contribution was a beautiful winding stairway in the entrance of the home. Shortly after, my grandpa developed advanced lung cancer. Through his grueling treatments, he often said, "I just want to live long enough to watch my granddaughter walk down that stairway on her wedding day." It was a promise. It was a blessing.

He died within months of his diagnosis. On my wedding day, 13 years later, dressed in my white gown, as I started down the steps I felt my grandfather's presence in a way that I haven't since. My grandpa's love had made a home in me, and I could carry on.

Thanks be to God that worship a God who makes a home within us, that helps us remember the ways and words of Jesus and that offers us peace and the way to carry on in this complex, painful, heart-breaking and beautiful world.

AMEN