

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 10, 2020

Introduction

A Personal Note from Pastor Steve: I write my sermons before I write these few words of Introduction; sometimes three or four days later. After some reflection, I still like the sermon for this upcoming Sunday. It allowed me to explore my own brokenness which has often centers on my certainty that *'I knew where I was going.'* I have learned a good deal as my life has progressed. But most of all, I have often experienced the grace of God that continues to pull me back to the life to which I was called in baptism.

Is there another way of finding the 'shalom' [divine peace and wellbeing] that God intends for each of us? At one time early in my theological career I would have argued *'No . . . Jesus is the only way.'* But now I am not so sure. I have encountered the **'shadow of Christ'** [perhaps a better phrase is the **'aura of Christ'**] in people and situations where I least expect it. These experiences have opened my understanding of God's grace to include so much more than I envisioned.

During the **Covid-19** crisis we share, I seem to have become more sensitive to God's grace as we see it manifested by our healthcare professionals, our police and fire fighters, our brave people who deliver our groceries, mail, and our orders from Amazon so we can safely shelter in place. **I am not a Pollyanna.** I still miss family. I miss worshiping with you weekly. I miss my old *'normal'* and I do have concerns about what the *'new normal'* will look like for us. And, I have to admit, I am getting impatient to **'move on'** with our life as a community of faith.

When will we gather again in our churches? I simply do not know. The age profile of the membership of the **Immanuel-Bethel Lutheran Parish** is made up primarily of people who are at risk because of age and/or other conditions. If we are a community of faith that is concerned about its members, we will *'shelter in place'* until it is safe for us not to. We help others by staying home. It is crucial that we follow Bishop Aitken's directive that we do not have **'worship as usual'** in the month of May. He and the other bishops of the ELCA are working with information provided by healthcare professionals and the governors of our states.

How will the decision to return to public worship be made? This will be a parish decision made by our two church councils meeting on *Facetime* or *ZOOM*. As the intentional interim pastor, I will also have input into the decision. We will follow the guidance of Bishop Aitken and our governor. We will have a written plan in place for cleaning protocols, how we do worship [communion, offering, singing, etc.], and how often we gather in our buildings.

What do we do now? We are people of faith and we wait trusting in God's abundant grace. If we can do this, we will get through this as we look to the future that remains hidden from us. Be open to the possibilities that God set's before us because that is where we will certainly encounter **the 'shadow of Christ'** in our lives. May God continue to bless you and keep you and your loved ones safe.

Pastor Steve ✝

Textural Note: And Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. What follows is a brief note about the significance of the **'I am'** statements with Biblical citations for those of you who wish to explore this a bit further. This is our Lord's most famous of his seven **'I am . . . the bread of life [6.38] . . . the light of the world [8.12]. . .the door [10.7] . . . the good shepherd [10.11] . . . the resurrection and the life [11.25] . . . the way, the truth, and the life [14.6] . . .the true vine [15.1].'** The evangelist remembers these special sayings of Jesus because they present of new way of describing the significance of the **'Christ-event'** in the lives of believers. Suffice it to say, John uses metaphors that are open-ended and not time bound to first century Palestine. For the earliest followers of Jesus, the use of the **'I am'** phrases also remind them of the Hebrew name God used as a self-identifier to Moses when he encounters the burning bush in Exodus [3.14]. The literal translation of God's name [**'Yahweh'**] is **'I am who I am.'** The Evangelist John wants the reader to understand that Jesus is directly linked to the self-revelation of God in the Older Testament. John writes twenty to thirty years after the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke who explore the humanity of Jesus. John presents Jesus as the divine Son of God.

Gospel – John 14.1-14

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In 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? ³And 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. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus 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’? ¹⁰Do 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. ¹¹Believe 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. ¹²Very 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. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

‘Me Lost? . . . I Know Where I’m Going’

Let us pray. Dearest Father, it seems as if we have been on the way for a long time. So long, in fact, that we’ve almost forgotten where we are going. But Lord, you have not forgotten us. It is you who called us to this journey through baptism; you feed us along the way with the bread of life; and you know where we are going.

Father, we pray this day that you might give us the eyes of faith. Let us see that we do not travel alone because your Son Jesus goes with us. We pray also for those who travel in our company. Use us, dear Father, to ease the difficulty of their journey, as you have eased ours. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The great adventure was at hand. I was ready . . . I was keyed . . . And I was prepared for anything . . . Nothing would stand in the way of success. I was sixteen years old . . . I had just gotten my driver’s license . . . and I was in love. After asking for the car at least three times a day for two weeks, my father finally gave me permission to use it for a Saturday night date. Like I said, I was ready. I knew exactly where I was going to take Nancy. A rock band that we really liked was playing at a teen club somewhere in Hopkins --- twenty-one miles away from Roseville. I knew that it was going to be the perfect date. Nancy would be impressed; I was going to look good; and I could still make my midnight curfew and keep my parents happy. **All the bases were covered.**

However, there were several factors I did not consider. Factors well-known to just about anyone who has ever driven in the Twin Cities; but factors, nonetheless, that never dawned on a newly licensed, self-assured sixteen year old driver. **First**, when you’re used to sitting on the passenger side, you don’t pay very close attention to small details like directions and street addresses. You just assume that you’ve absorbed them because you live there. [Remember this was long before cell phones and GPS.] **Second**, one tends to underestimate driving times, even when you know where you’re going. The Twin Cities are much bigger than you expect . . . And those stop lights and detours seem to take forever. **And third**, and perhaps the most surprising, everything looks different at night. The route that seemed so clear on my map earlier in the day, disappeared into the darkness of the night. **But I wasn’t worried.** Like all men, I knew that I had the ‘direction gene’. . . You know what I mean: *Men never need to stop and ask*

for directions . . . By instinct, we automatically know where we are all times. Make no mistake – I was ready. **I knew where I was going.**

The evening did not go as expected. I discovered a route to Hopkins by way of Rosemount and Hastings. The Donner Party had better guides. **But I knew where I was going.** Nancy was certainly impressed. But in my defense, we did hear the last twenty minutes of the band's final set. Going home was another adventure. An hour into that route, Nancy found little comfort in my reassurance that 'this all looked familiar.' **But I knew where I was going.**

I will not bore you with the details. Everything went downhill from there. Not only did I miss my curfew by an hour and a half, but my father was indelicate enough to ask why I had driven a hundred and seventy miles the night before. Needless to say, it was a long while before I got the car again. And Nancy . . . Well, we did not get off on the right foot. She had really wanted to see that band . . . And she was angry because I would not stop and ask for directions. Even though I was certain I knew where I was going, the evening was a disaster.

I can laugh now; but it was not funny then. I was convinced that my social life was ruined forever. In retrospect, my parents, Nancy, and I all survived that climactic first date. And I think we all learned some things. I learned that it is 'OK' to ask for help . . . People will not think less of you if you do. My parents were intentional in helping me rebuild the trust relationship that is so necessary between teens and their parents. And Nancy and I eventually became good friends.

Sometimes I wonder how much simpler our lives would be if we were not so certain that we knew where we were going all the time. If we only had the sense to stop and ask for directions at those critical times in our lives. It's so easy to get off track. **Sometimes** we know where we want to go and what we want to do, but we don't know how get there. **At other times**, we are so convinced that we have everything covered . . . so certain of success . . . that we miss all the signs that we are headed in the wrong direction. **At still other times**, we know that we are lost, but pride and stubbornness keep us from asking for help.

Sociologists who study modern culture tell us that we have become a society of individuals who are convinced they know what is best for themselves. This assertion of self is the Genesis story all over again. **We want to do things our way. Sin is our refusal to recognize God as the One with whom we were created to live in relationship.** There can be no other way to think about it. Sin is not a little misstep here and there. Sin is fundamental to our being. It is a declaration of independence from God. We desire to be lords of our own lives. . . Not at the exclusion of God, but rather giving God the minimum required so that we might be masters of what's left. *We desire to be unfettered and unbound . . . doing what we want, when we want, for our own*

gratification. We readily sell our souls for the privilege of being our own masters, beyond rule and constraint, doing what we will, even to the pain others

What happens to the individual is mirrored in our communities. Multiplied over and over, the inevitable extension of our individual brokenness is **a society** that overlooks the needs of the poor ‘*because they don't work as hard as we do*’ . . . **a society** that understands sexuality as a tool for marketing and self-fulfillment rather than as a God-given gift to be shared within marriage . . . **a society** fast becoming intolerant of those who are either different than we are or hold different beliefs than we do . . . **And most tragically, a society** where an increasing number of children and young adults are becoming estranged from their parents and their peers.

‘I know where I’m going!’ They are words that have become the battle cry of our brokenness. **‘I know where I’m going!’** It’s no accident that Jesus used similar words when he spoke to his disciples in the Upper Room shortly before his death.

In the three short years they were with Jesus, the disciples had seen and heard much. The power of God was upon him. Multitudes were fed, the sick were restored to health, the people were taught with parables, and the Kingdom of God was proclaimed. Jesus transformed their lives. Before he called them by name to be his disciples, God was an abstract idea; and religion, a collection of meaningless rituals. But Jesus changed all that; the disciples could feel the power of God in their lives. God became real for them.

But hope quickly turned to despair. Jesus told them that they would deny and betray him . . . And that he would be put to death. The disciples must have been silent when Jesus spoke these words. **All** they had hoped . . . **all** they had trusted . . . **and all** they had believed had been destroyed. They all knew that messiahs who die bring little comfort to those left behind. Then Jesus spoke to his disciples . . . his disciples in the Upper Room and to his disciples here in Little Falls and Hillman **‘LET NOT YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED; BELIEVE IN GOD, BELIEVE ALSO IN ME. IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE ARE MANY ROOMS; IF IT WERE NOT SO, WOULD I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT I GO TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU? AND WHEN I GO AND PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU, I WILL COME AGAIN AND WILL TAKE YOU TO MYSELF, THAT WHERE I AM YOU MAY BE ALSO. AND YOU KNOW THE WAY 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, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE; NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER BY ME.’**

These words are frequently heard at funerals. But these words are not only for dying, but also for living. In these few verses, Jesus calls us to faith and he promises us life. **FIRST, JESUS CALLS US TO FAITH.** Jesus challenges his disciples to take their own faith in God seriously. Faith in God is to have confidence in the One who always finds a way to renew his people. God heard the cries of his people when they were slaves in Egypt, when they were pinned against the Red Sea by the armies of Pharaoh, and when they were in exile. This same God who delivered Israel time and time again, continues to

renew his people through Jesus Christ . . . even now when we all seem to be going our own ways.

AND SECOND, JESUS PROMISES US LIFE. When Jesus speaks of life, he means something far different than the 'three score and ten' that we human beings expect. For Jesus, life stands outside of time; it is not measured in years, days, and hours. Instead, Jesus understands life as a never ending relationship with him. Listen again to his words. **'IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE ARE MANY ROOMS . . . AND WHEN I GO AND PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU, I WILL COME AGAIN AND WILL TAKE YOU TO MYSELF, THAT WHERE I AM YOU MAY BE ALSO.'** There is no separation from Jesus; he does not leave us to our own devices. But Jesus even goes one step further. He guarantees what he promises with his own death so that we might live. This is why Jesus can say that he is **'the way, the truth, and the life.'**

Jesus is the 'way' because he is the road by which men and women must come to God. There is no other way. This does not mean that we, as disciples, must walk the same path as Jesus. But it does mean that each of us must make a decision about who Jesus is. **Will we follow where he leads us? . . .** That is the fundamental question. We've always assumed that Jesus is present here as we worship together . . . And this is true. But Jesus is also present in those very people who can't seem to make it in our success-driven world. Let me say it another way: **Not only is Jesus is present at the right hand of God, but he is also present in those who are our neighbors.** And remember that Jesus defines 'neighbor' as anyone who is in need. Our less fortunate neighbors confront us with the reality of God. Emulating Jesus by feeding the hungry, speaking for those who have no voice in our community, are steps along **'the Way'** to God.

Jesus is the 'truth' because he embodies the true life possible for all human beings. This truth is not some abstract philosophical principal. Far from it. Jesus himself is the truth because he is completely reliable in all that he is and in all that he does. **Jesus reveals the truth about us: we are sinners.** We do not know the way . . . We do not know where we are going. **And more importantly, Jesus reveals the truth about God: God forgives sinners and seeks them out as sons and daughters.**

And finally, Jesus is the 'life' because there is no life apart from him. In baptism, we are Christ's forever . . . In life, in death, and in life again. Life takes on a whole different set of dimensions. No longer can it be said to begin at the cradle and end at the grave. Baptism changes everything. Baptism ties us to Jesus. The once dead, but now living Lord promises life to those who believe in him.

Me lost? . . . Absolutely . . . Do I know where I'm going? . . . Do you know where you are going? I suspect not. Our track record has not been all that good. Regardless of what we chose to believe, we are lost and we don't know where we are going. **But that doesn't matter and it never has.** What does matter is that Jesus knows where he's going . . . And that he means to take every one of us there with him. Amen.