

Preparing for Takeoff: The Hard Work of Peace  
John 14:1-7, 25-27  
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I have these very sweet memories of my first time flying. I was with my dad and we were getting ready to go to Disneyworld. I was an extremely anxious child with a very vivid imagination. Even at 10 years old, being stuffed into a very tight space, hearing unknown sounds, and thinking about being up in the clouds was enough to bring to mind the absolute worst-case scenarios that I had only seen on television. Needless to say, I was absolutely terrified. Now, my dad is not always the most patient person, but I remember him being really tender here. He took time to explain what was going to happen, step by step. And he even made it into a game so that I always felt prepared for takeoff. Since then, I've traveled a lot & I've never been more or less safe than my first time. His words did not promise that I would never experience turbulence, motion sickness, or even that nothing would ever go wrong, but it did give me a level of peace as I faced the unknown. That peace gave me an assurance. It gave me courage to go wherever I needed to in the world.

As we prepare our hearts for Pentecost, we return now to Jesus' own taking off, giving last words to his disciples in the midst of his imminent death. At this point, we've seen a whirlwind of events – they've been washed, they've just shared a meal together. One of their own has turned against them & and one of the most vocal leaders among the disciples is on the cusp of a great failure of loyalty. Questions without clear answers are dancing around in their minds. Who will screw up next? Who can they trust? And now their beloved teacher is talking about leaving them. Who will keep them safe from the iron fist of the damning empire around them? No wonder they are upset and confused. It is as though the ground is shifting beneath their

feet. And here is Jesus speaking again in abstractions and incomprehensible terms. Where is he going exactly? Why can't they go with him?

Jesus knows that his friends will soon be overcome with grief and he attempts to soothe them (Jodrey, WP). His own death is imminent and his own heart is troubled, yet his concern is for them (Sunday Prep). A commentator pointed out that maybe Jesus' tone here wasn't particularly confident or strong; perhaps his voice was cracking. We could imagine him speaking these words as his lip trembled and as tears formed in the corner of his eyes" (Hoezee). It's a profoundly sad moment and he wants them all to feel his love around them.

But for some reason, Jesus' comfort isn't exactly what we think it should be. He doesn't say, "Ok never mind, I'll stay." He doesn't say, "Everything's going to be okay." No! In response to all of the chaos & confusion, Jesus says the most ridiculous statement of all time - "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Like... are you serious? The atmosphere could not have been more troubling! The mayhem had already begun and more hell was about to break loose for Jesus and his followers (Hoezee, CE Preaching). But Jesus attempts to speak calm into their souls; he doesn't want them to feel alone. "*Do not let your hearts be troubled, I am preparing a place for you.*" That day, he says it to them over and over. This passage is used at funerals a lot and I can understand why. For many, the thought of Jesus preparing a place brings peace or hope, but today I resonate more with the reaction of Thomas: "We don't know where you're going; how can we know the way?"

This is the same Thomas that we love to criticize for all of his doubts about the resurrection. But honestly maybe Thomas was always the realest one in the room. Because I have questions too. Like, Jesus, where are you going & can I come with you? Because I don't know about you but my heart *is* troubled. When I look out into the world & I see that Covid has

taken the lives of one million people, my heart is troubled. When Asian lives are taken violently in a house of worship, my heart is troubled. When Black bodies are gunned down in a supermarket by a white supremacist and the headlines spent more time talking about Will Smith's slap, my heart is troubled. When all of sudden, mothers and parents all over the country cannot find baby formula to nourish their infants, my heart is troubled. So, my question is the same, as Thomas, *Jesus, where are you going? Show me the way!*

And Jesus says, look I get it. I'm going away but I'm not going to leave you alone. I'm getting ready to send you someone who will lead you into the ways of peace. But you already know the way. It's me. The things I've told you. The things we've done together. The ways I've taught you to free the captive, and loose the chains of injustice, & comfort the grieving. You don't have to keep looking— *I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life*. Which is to say whether I am with you physically or with you spiritually, our relationship will not be destroyed; stay close to me, and you'll find your way (Progressive Christianity). It's a word of comfort to his disciples. Jesus himself is the security they need; there is no need to panic, no need to search desperately for a secret map (E. Johnson, WP; K. Lewis, WP).

Unfortunately, these words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" have gotten twisted and abused in Christian understanding. They're often used as a threat, as a way to tell people that they better "get with the program" and accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior" in order to be saved or else (E. Johnson, WP).

For years, many have read this & been forced to ask themselves: Does this verse mean that Jesus is the only way to heaven? If so, what does that claim mean for all the faithful Hindus, Muslims, and Atheists, and Jews I have met, who are also good, funny, competent, kind, and smart human beings?" (Patheos). And yet, in its context, we can see that it's not a word of condemnation at

all; it's not even about other belief systems at all. It's a word of assurance to those who are already in relationship with Jesus to continue in it even after he leaves them. If they abide in him, they'll never be lost; they'll find peace, they'll find life, they'll find the next right thing to do.

And luckily for us, we learn that access to God and the revelation of God would not end with Jesus in the flesh. Because the Spirit would soon come, guiding them, moving the Jesus movement forward, and revealing God in new ways that speak to each context. The Spirit is described as Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, Helper. In this case, the Spirit is more like a tutor or prompter on the wings of the stage while a play is going on (Hoezee). She is the one called to strengthen our ministry of memory. She is called to whisper things into our hearts, reminding us of things we might otherwise forget, like who we are and whose we are. She is the one near us or alongside us, tempting us towards good deeds, prompting us towards justice, she is the one holding up the cue card when we can't find our place, saying, "this is the way; walk in it." And ultimately, she will guide our feet into the ways of peace.

Because In Jesus' time, the world was enjoying a version of peace— but Roman peace maintained by military prowess, ruthless power, and dominance (Sunday Prep). Thousands of years later, our own hearts remain troubled. "We live in a 'chronic heightened state of alertness,' particularly if you are a person in a marginalized body—it's a time where no public space can promise our safety: (St. Paul Eastern Shore). As massive acts of gun violence become increasingly ordinary, we, knowingly or not, carry the impact of this in our spirits and awareness. A time where the world continues to love war & the climate crisis looms, leaving us with questions about our own future.

But it is also so easy to get stuck in an endless cycle of looking for peace in all the wrong places. We think if people would just stop arguing and start listening to one another, there could

be peace. If we could just be satisfied with what we have instead of trying to consume more and more, we would find peace. But the peace the world offers isn't really any peace at all. At best, it's a bandage we put over the wounds of our fear and frustration.

In reality, Jesus' peace doesn't promise protection from violence or an end to conflict. The peace that Jesus offers comes from living into and trusting in the life of God (enfleshed). It isn't the feeling of escaping harsh realities; it is a calm assurance and a bold confidence in the face of danger, an active protest against all that is not the way, the truth, and the life. True peace is what enabled Jesus not to retreat even when he knew the crucifixion was coming. It's what kept him healing and preaching and teaching even when his own hometown tried to throw him off a cliff. It's how he was able to have an uncompromising and grounded conversation about truth and life with Pilate rather than beg for his life (enfleshed). True peace is what allows us to face even our worst fears with purpose and love. Even as corporations kill the planet, even as humans destroy one another, true peace is what enables us to live with integrity, remaining true to our calling and values no matter what situation we are in. This is the peace of Christ - enabling us to love anyhow. It is trusting that showing up to God and thus to each other is enough, even when the rest is out of our control (enfleshed).

And yet, the peace that Christ gives is NOT passive or a promise for let's-all-just-get-along. It is not that which soothingly tells us everything is okay when it isn't. True peace does not take the fight out of those who labor towards better conditions and a better world. No, true peace is active & working towards it can be risky. This kind of peace keeps us from choosing our own self-protection at the expense of the marginalized. It is that peace that causes us to live courage in the midst of terrifying situations. It is that peace that causes people to defy tyrants and stand up against the powers that threaten and intimidate. This kind of peace enables inspires us to

dream up tactics to address systems of domination. It is this kind of peace that Jesus promises us through the Spirit, who he sends to us in his absence. And yet, even though we do not see him, wherever there is healing, restoring, life-giving work happening, this is the work of God.

Wherever there is life in abundance, this is Jesus' presence in our midst (WP, e, johnson). Like when the first time I got on a plane, we are not promised no turbulence or danger. But true peace is what keeps us grounded in Christ's teachings & God's abiding presence, which has the power to keep us from despair. Jesus says, "Believe in God; believe also in me." Remain in me, I am the way. And you will be guided into the ways of peace. Though I am soon leaving, you will not be alone. The place I am preparing for you, the Spirit has already begun placing at your feet. So, do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let your hearts be afraid. Amen.

## References

Working Preacher  
Patheos  
Enfleshed  
Sunday Prep  
CE Preaching