



“Be Not Afraid”

Text: John 14:1-14

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When my daughter was five and a half, she and I returned to the US for a few weeks. Summers in Cameroon are in the rainy season and so you never knew what kind of weather you might encounter when taking off. Also, the flights are always in the middle of the night. Darkness and rain are not the way I like to fly. The night of this particular flight was extremely stormy. We took off and as we were ascending, the plane took the biggest drop I've ever experienced. It was one of those drops that makes your stomach flop, the kind of feeling that I loved as a kid. When the plane dropped, my daughter laughed with delight as she felt her stomach flip. “That was fun, mommy!” she said as she turned to look at me. One look at my face and she said, “Oh, am I supposed to be scared?” The plane continued to bump up and down until we were above the storm. During those subsequent dips, my daughter didn't laugh. She just looked at me for my response.

This past week I read a story of another family who went through something similar. The child began to laugh and didn't respond to whatever expressions his parents may have had. With every dip he laughed until slowly the other passengers began to let go of their fear and laugh with the child. Soon the whole cabin was laughing. Their fear gone or at least push back to the recesses of their minds. The laughter hadn't changed the weather or the danger that may have existed because of that storm, but their attitude changed.

The reading today starts with “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me.” As I thought of this verse, it made me think of this story with my daughter. The storm didn't bother her. She felt safe in the confines of the plane and so was able to enjoy that

unique feeling that doesn't come often. She was able to experience this moment in an entirely different way than I was. It was only after she saw my fear that she became troubled and unsure of the situation.

While this passage from John is one we have probably often heard at funerals, this passage is also about living - living in trust that the plane, in this case the arms of God, will hold us even in the midst of turbulence.

This passage comes during their time in the Upper Room, before Jesus' crucifixion. The disciples have heard the words of Jesus telling them he would be leaving them. They had heard him talk of Judas' betrayal and of Peter's denial. Can you imagine? This was their Passover meal. It wasn't meant to be the last meal they would ever share with Jesus, their beloved teacher. How would they go on without him? And then Jesus is talking about where he would be going and what he will be doing when he gets to heaven. That's great, Jesus, but what about us now? What are we to do with the rest of our lives without you? You're just going to abandon us?

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In these words Jesus is calling the disciples back to this fundamental relationship of trust they've had with him and assures them he is not abandoning them; but going to do something even more for them. He is going to prepare a place for them in heaven and that is good news. But the future in heaven doesn't alleviate their anxiety and worry of what is going to happen next in this very real life they were living on earth. And so, like the good disciples they have always been, they question.

First Thomas says, "We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Thomas, like so many of us, wants a road map. He wants explicit directions on how to get there. Which road do I take, what turns am I suppose to make? He doesn't like the vagueness of Jesus' answer. Concrete instructions will take away his anxiety. But Jesus doesn't respond with specifics. His response is one of those *I Am* statements I talked about last week. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but through me." He goes on to say that because they have seen him and known him, they know God. And in knowing God, they know the way to go.

And then we have Philip who also wants something concrete to hold onto. "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Wouldn't life be so much easier if we could see God and know that God was there holding us, guiding our way, making sense out of that which doesn't make sense in our lives?

And Jesus' response is one that perhaps holds a hint of exasperation. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Here Jesus echoes an affirmation that we find in the prologue of John's gospel: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known."

This has been the whole of Jesus' mission, to make God known, to reveal who God is. Jesus is the fullest revelation of the person and character of God. If we want to know who God is, we need look no further than Jesus. All the words that Jesus has spoken, all the works that he has done, come from God and show us who God is.

And that is why this passage is just as much about living as it is about our lives after death. Because in this passage, Jesus is conveying to the disciples that he is entrusting his mission to them. "Very 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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask for me anything, I will do it."

These verses have thrown Christians throughout history. Greater works? Greater than healing the blind and raising the dead? And you will do whatever we ask in your name? We have all known the pain of praying for healing that didn't come, of feeling powerless in the face of disease and death. How can these promises be true?

Perhaps our problem is that in hearing these promises, we expect to do these greater works in the same way that Jesus did them - with miraculous power that instantly solves the problem at hand. I think the miracles that happen come more through connection and the power of love more than anything else.

The other day I saw this video online. It was a former military person who was missing one arm and his other arm was made of metal as were both of his legs. He told this story: When he was deployed for the third time to Iraq, he was 25. His wife was 23 and his baby was just six months old.

He was sent out to sweep for mines. He wasn't finding any and decided to take a break. He took off his backpack and dropped it at his side. Lo and behold, where he dropped it happened to be where an undetected mine was. He lost his right arm and leg in the blast and part of his left leg and his left arm was mangled. They both had to eventually be amputated.

When he saw his wife, he told her to take the house, the money, and their daughter and to leave him. He said that she responded, "I thought about doing that, but I like the idea of having handicapped parking." She stayed. That was the first blessing to him.

The second was when, as he referred to it, a robot walked into his room. It was a marine who had also lost some limbs and told him "Welcome to the club." This young man was angry and said he didn't want to be part of the club. The marine said that it was a little late for that. He was now part of that club. That wasn't a choice. But what was a choice was how he was going to respond to his situation moving forward. He could choose to remain angry or he could choose to live an abundant life. Could he find the joy in a terrible situation, as the children did as the planes bounced around, or would he let fear and anger dictate his life? He said that conversation changed his life. While he had initially been angry, had questioned why God had allowed this to happen, questioned what life could possibly be like moving forward, how life could offer anything meaningful as a quadruple amputee, this conversation changed his life.

He became determined to feed himself and hold his daughter again and so got prosthetic arms; and he wanted to walk again and so he got his prosthetic legs. And during the time that he was learning to walk and control his arms and hands, he also went around visiting the other patients at Walter Reed, offering them hope the way that marine had offered hope to him. Six and a half years later he was a comedic motivational speaker. His marriage was strong and they had added a son to the mix. He concluded that he had 25 great years with arms and legs, but he had had over six years of a pretty good life with artificial arms and legs. And isn't that the miracle? One man sharing hope to another who is able to share hope to others and it goes on.

We don't know what life will bring as much as we would like to control our futures. We will continue to encounter difficult times that will cause anxiety, fear, confusion, pain, even anger, but we need to remember Christ's words "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me." As Jesus called his disciples back to this fundamental relationship with him, a relationship based on trust and love, we must always remember that. We are not alone.

Jesus walked this earth showing us the nature of God, which is one of power, of hope, and peace, of joy, but most of all the nature of God is faithfulness and love. And God's love will never leave or forsake us. God's love will see us through. And God's miracles will continue to happen to us and through us, just as it did for this quad amputee. And then, after God has seen us through, we are to go forth and do the mighty works of God that we were commissioned to do - to go forth sharing faith, hope, and most of all love. Amen.