

Throughout most of my life I have been blessed with the ability to travel all over the world. In part this is because my parents have always seemed to enjoy visiting other countries and have passed that love onto myself and my siblings. In fact, when I was growing up I remember my dad leading special tours to the Holy Lands with parishioners and friends of the congregations he served. When my sister was 13 she was invited to go on one of his trips, and when my twin brother Michael and I turned 13 we also got to travel to Israel, Egypt, Germany, and Denmark on one particular tour. Not to brag or anything, but after I graduated from College I was invited to go to 3 of the 4 capitals of Christianity; Israel, Istanbul, and Rome and it was during a special visit to the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem when I received my call to be a Pastor.

That being said, with summer almost upon us, most of us are aware that the peak travel season in our country is approaching rather quickly. And with the Covid virus still an ever present reality for us, it isn't too hard for us to imagine that online news sources, including daily papers, will no doubt feature tips about how to take the terror out of travel. These days it would seem that the discussion is no longer about how to make travel a fun and enjoyable experience. Apparently those days are gone. What we want to know now is how to mitigate the unpleasantness of our impending trips.

To be fair, in some ways travel has gotten better over the years. We can now check in before our flights. Our boarding passes can be printed out ahead of time, or can be downloaded onto our smartphones. Many airlines offer in-flight entertainment that you can access on your tablet, or watch on a screen in front of you. But meals or snacks? We have to pay for them. Checked luggage? We pay for that. A little extra legroom? We're going to have to pay for that, too.

In our Gospel this morning Jesus is clearly making some travel plans of his own, and he's just now sharing these plans with his disciples. Like us, he, too, wants to take the terror out of travel, and thus his opening words recorded in chapter 14 are, "Do not let your hearts be troubled!" Wow! Those are good words for any of us when we're headed out into the world, or if we are just going out to the grocery store. Hey, no worries! What could possibly go wrong? Jesus is saying, "Look, fellas, I'm going away. Here's what you need to know -- because someday you will be taking this trip, too." And then he talks to his followers about their trip.

In our story for today, Jesus is sort of like the tour leader of a group who has arranged everything, and is going on ahead to ensure that everything is up to snuff before the arrival of the group. With that in mind it might help us to briefly consider four different arrangements he will be making to help prepare his followers for their final destination. Let's take a quick look at them point by point.

The first arrangement involves a question about their destination. *Where will they be going?* Jesus answers this question by informing his disciples that he is going to "his Father's house." He then identifies a location within "his Father's house" as a "dwelling-place." In other words, where he is going, and where his disciples will eventually be going, is a place where one lives. The destination is simply called a "place" and he doesn't go into much detail about it.

Knowing that Jesus liked to speak in parables, and that he often used illustrations to make a point, clearly the expression "my Father's house" is a metaphor. It's not like there's a physical structure in the third heaven that has rooms with our names on them. We're not be asked to believe in castles in the air, are we? Yet, the implication is clear: The place where Jesus is going is a place to live and reside. He is going to his Father's house. In other words, he is going home.

And that is why the disciples of Christ should feel comforted. It is why we should be able to find some consolation and peace as well. Jesus is going home, and someday, the disciples -- and all of us -- will likewise be going to the divine "Father's house." We, too, will be, in a real sense, going home. But, and this is the cool part, there's another nuance at work here as we try to answer the question, "Where are we going?" Ultimately, our destination is God.

Look at verse 6: "No one comes to the Father except through me." The last half of today's gospel reading is all about the "Father." When we talk about our future destination, it comes down to this reality: We are going to God. We are going to live and dwell and have our eternal being in the presence of God. That is why we should not be troubled. We believe in God. And we believe in Jesus.

*The second point involves the person making the arrangements, a travel agent so to speak, and that person would be Jesus. Jesus is in charge of the details. Jesus has it covered. If you're taking an extended trip, visiting several countries, you need someone to take care of everything. You have rooms to book, rental cars to*

arrange, flights to schedule, sights to see and museum fees to pay. Someone has to do all of this. A good tour guide or travel agent is essential.

Perhaps you have handled these kind of details in the past. How did that work out for you? Thankfully Jesus has already and is handling this. You believe in God, he says. "Believe also in me." He reminds us that he's been communicating that all along: "If it were not so, would I have told you ...?" He describes his role as someone going ahead to make sure everything is ready. When it comes to their eternal destination, the disciples must trust in Jesus. They must believe that Jesus is the prep man to make sure everything is ready. We no doubt have a ton of questions about this journey. Quite frankly, it is sort of scary in a way. Not to worry though, the travel plans are being handled by Jesus himself.

The third arrangement to consider involves the directions, *How do we get there?* Well, we should already know how to get there. Jesus says to his disciples "you know the way to the place where I am going." But Thomas, speaking for his fellow students, says that they don't even know the destination, so how can they know the directions to an unknown destination? Clearly, someone has not been paying attention.

Jesus' answer is classic, and it's one of the most well-known verses of all the gospel texts: "Jesus says to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" It's like if you are going to some strange, off-the-beaten-path location. Someone asks you how you're getting there. You could answer, "I have no clue, but Bob's going with me. He knows the way. Actually, Bob *is* the way. As long as I don't lose Bob, I'm not worried about it."

Jesus is the way! Jesus is all the direction we need. Our journey to our eternal destination is already under way. And even now, today, as we struggle to love someone who makes it very difficult to love, as we struggle to lift up the needy, or provide comfort to the sorrowing, we may not know how to get to where we're supposed to go. But Jesus is our Guide, our Model, our Template. He is our sense of direction. Jesus is the pulsating blue triangle on our GPS screen that shows us where we are, so there's no need to be troubled about directions.

The final point for us to consider is who is going to meet us when we get there? Who will be in the welcome party? Saint Peter, of course! Everyone knows that right? We've all seen the cartoon illustrations featuring Peter at the pearly gates of heaven, or have heard jokes told about him. And yet, well, the truth is, we don't know who's going to meet us. But, it's an interesting travel question. We usually want to know what's going to happen upon arrival. One thing we know for certain is that the Bible tells us that the angels rejoice when one sinner repents.

Perhaps the parable of the prodigal son from Luke's Gospel is a fitting illustration that goes along well with our lesson for John'. Recall that when the reckless and careless son tires of his wasted life of lascivious living, runs out of cash, and is basically jobless and homeless, he doesn't say, "Hey, I should go back to my house." He doesn't say, "I should go back to my boyhood home." He says, "I will get up and go to my *father!*"

So who's going to meet us? The Father, of course. Back to Luke 15: "So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." If the father of this story runs to meet his long-lost child, how much more will our heavenly Father be there to greet us as we reach our eternal destination? And then, the celebration will begin!

We should not lose sight of the fact that none of this is possible unless Jesus goes away. This is what Jesus is trying to explain to his disciples. Jesus is going to his Father's house, but he is going by way of the cross. That little pulsating blue triangle on your metaphorical GPS screen of life, maybe it would be better for us to think of it as a pulsating red cross? That is our guidance and reference point: the cross of Christ.

Because of the cross, we will someday have a crown. Because of the cross, we will someday enter the kingdom. Because of the cross, we can know Christ, whose selfless sacrifice has brought us the gift of eternal life. So, there really is no need for us to have troubled hearts. No need to worry about our travel plans. It's all been covered by Jesus! He informs us where we are going, He makes the arrangements, He gives us the directions to get there, and he will be with the welcome party when we arrive. Thanks be to God. Amen.