

Preacher: Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: John 14:1-7

I tend to be an anxious traveler. In general, I like to go into situations for which I have some understanding of the context. I like to be able to anticipate any circumstance that might arise. However, traveling is usually filled with new experiences and new places. Whether it is driving or flying, especially if I am on my own, I tend to stress about things like “Will I know where to go when I get there?” “What happens if this problem arises?” “Will I be able to problem solve my way out of an issue?”

A man named Dennis Miller shared about his travel anxiety. He said, “My fear of flying starts as soon as I buckle myself in and then the guy up front mumbles a few unintelligible words, [and] then before I know it I’m thrust into the back of the seat by acceleration that seems way too fast and the rest of the trip is an endless nightmare of turbulence, of near misses. And then the cabbie drops me off at the airport.”¹

I respond to my travel anxiety by trying my best to be as prepared as possible, troubleshooting potential issues, and being as knowledgeable as I can about where to go once I reach my destination. The increased access to technology has made this easier. When I fly, I can get text messages from the airline giving me updates on my flight if the time or gate changes. If I’m driving, I can check for a traffic update before I leave. I can check for weather updates and make sure my traveling condition are good. And if I get lost or run into heavy traffic, I can pull out the GPS on my phone and get directions. Knowing what to expect as I travel to my destination does so much for calming my nerves even if I can’t change the circumstances.

In our scripture this morning, Jesus is making preparations to travel to a new place; but before he leaves, he takes a moment to prepare his disciples for what is coming because one day, they will take the same trip. This scripture is a part of a larger section that scholars call the “Farewell Discourse.” Jesus wants to give direction and hope to his disciples knowing that his time is quickly coming to an end.

In some ways, Jesus acts like a travel agent in this scripture, explaining the details of the trip before the travelers leave. The destination to which they are headed is his Father’s house. And the disciples need not be worried because Jesus is going ahead of them to make the arrangements before they arrive. It’s a nice house with many rooms. And they know how to get there; all they need to do is follow in the way of Jesus.

When I was in Kindergarten, I had appendicitis and had to have my appendix removed. I was really young at the time and have very few memories of the what happened. When my brother Nathan was in high school, we discovered that he too had developed an infection in his appendix and was going to have to have surgery to remove it. In his anxiety over what was about to happen, my brother asked me to explain to him what it was like. I told him what I remembered and it brought him comfort to know that someone had gone through this before. I could show him that there was a way through what he was about to experience.

Likewise, Jesus describes the journey ahead in a relatable way, which brings the disciples comfort. Unlike a travel agent who may never go to the place you are preparing to see, Jesus is returning home in some ways. And he invites the disciples to someday make this new place their home too. It’s a place to dwell, not just visit -- a place to settle in. Even though the disciples have never seen it, they can trust in Jesus, their travel agent and companion, to go ahead of them

¹ homileticonline.com

and prepare the way. They will not be able to anticipate every part of the journey or even fully comprehend the destination, but they know they are in good hands.

As a pastor, I have had people ask me what to expect as they near the end of this life and see glimpses of the next. Sometimes, I draw on the beautiful scriptures in the book of Revelation that talk about being in God's presence in metaphorical ways. Sometimes, I draw on the words of Jesus in scriptures like the one we are focusing on today that tell us a little of what to expect. However, these scriptures often provoke more questions than provide answers. Scripture does not tell us much for certain. Instead, scripture gives us glances and murmurs so that we do not become so focused on the destination that we lose sight of the journey.

There is a significant amount of trust that goes into this journey of life. However, the words of 1 John 4:8, which says "God is love," remind us that if we are going to dwell in God's house, then we will dwell in love. That is all we need to know for certain. If God is love, then whatever is to come will be filled with and inspired by that love.

As Jesus says, "You know the way I am going." Thomas misunderstands what Jesus means. He assumes Jesus is giving him a physical direction so he asks in his confusion, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus, who became like us so that we might become like him, says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." They already know the way because they know Jesus. They are the ones who have learned from Jesus and are being made disciples into his way. Jesus shared in our humanity so that we might share in his divinity. Therefore, do not let your hearts be troubled.

Jesus knows as he says these words that the days ahead for him and his disciples will be dark. Jesus needs the disciples to understand that there is a purpose to what is about to come. There is a purpose to the cross. They can be reassured that Jesus must go ahead of them so that they can be gathered into God's very presence. The disciples must have faith, being assured of things they hope for and be convicted of the things not yet seen.

I like the way the New English Bible translates this familiar text from Hebrews 11:1. It says: "And what is faith? Faith gives substance to our hopes, and makes us certain of realities we do not see." This is what Jesus is trying to do; he is trying to strengthen the faith of the disciples so that their hope has substance even when the work that God is doing through Jesus seems unclear.

Scripture is filled with this type of substantiated hope. When God calls people, God often asks them to see a different future than their current reality, even when it seems ridiculous and impossible. Noah, ridiculed by his neighbors, builds a boat before a single drop of rain falls. Childless Abraham and Sarah leave their home with only God's word that they will parent a great nation in their old age. Mary knows that God will turn the world upside-down even before she feels the first kick in her womb. These faithful people were dreamers. They had the ability to live into the vision of things not yet seen, even in their present. Their dreaming didn't predict the future, but their current reality was changed by their vision, God's vision, for the future.²

What these forebears of our faith did not do was sit at home waiting for the day that God would fulfill the promise made to them. They didn't sit back hoping for their pie-in-the-sky promise. They became active participants in God's future. Even though the journey was still unknown they were not crippled by fear nor did they give in to false optimism.

Henri Nouwen once wrote: "Optimism and hope are radically different attitudes. Optimism is the expectation that things -- the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political situation, and so on -- will get better. Hope is the trust that God will fulfill God's

² "Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians" by John Paul Lederach

promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom. The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future. The person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands.”³

As much as I like to be prepared as I enter into new situations, I have learned that no matter how much I agonize and stress about tomorrow, I cannot fully anticipate what is to come. We have to be open to the new that comes when we are called to leave where we are comfortable. We have to put aside our troubled heart so that we can begin to glimpse, even now, that which is being prepared. We must fully put our trust in God’s faithfulness that strengthens us for today and gives us bright hope for tomorrow.

Rob Bell tells the story of a time he was eating breakfast with some family in a restaurant. He says, “We were finishing our meal when I noticed that the waitress brought our check and then took it away and then brought it back again. She placed it on the table, smiled, and said, ‘Somebody in the restaurant paid for your meal. You’re all set.’ And then she walked away. I had the strangest feeling sitting there... There was nothing I could do. It had been taken care of. To insist on paying would have been pointless. All I could do was trust that what she said was actually true and then live in that. Which meant getting up and leaving the restaurant. My acceptance of what she said gave me a choice: to live like it was true or to create my own reality in which the bill was not paid.”

Jesus tells his disciples, and us, about the place that he goes away to prepare so that we can trust in the future God is creating and to live now as if what Jesus says is true. The one whom we know as teacher, as friend, as Lord, goes ahead of us to prepare this place in his Father’s house. And we know the way. If we trust in his goodness, then our hearts need not be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in Jesus who was, who is, and who will be the way, the truth, and the life.

³ “Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith” by Henry Nouwen