

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

John 14:1-14; I Peter 2:2-10

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And Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

In these confusing times of social media, who is showing you the way, as if were? In my teaching confirmation classes over my 42 years of ministry, we always did a unit on the Psalms. As we were studying the well-known Psalm 23, acknowledging the Lord as their shepherd, the one who leads to green pastures, still waters and right paths, the one who shows goodness and mercy. I asked them who are the contemporary shepherds for you today, who are the ones who have shown you the way in your life? They responded: "Teachers, Coaches, Parents." Not knowing what I was getting at, I asked them if there are any others? Hmm! Someone who may be in the same room as you right now. Hmm. Someone who may be standing right in front of you now. Ah! Pastors. Yes, I hope that we Pastors play a mentoring role in your life, showing the way, and as well as the others God sets before us.

How many people in your lifetime have shown you the way on the simple things of life? The way to do laundry, cook a meal, brush your teeth, bathe yourself, comb your hair, do your homework, practice the piano or like instrument, maintain your car or house and the list goes on.

How many people in your lifetime have shown you the way on some of the more difficult things in life when it comes to relationships, job decisions, life decisions, health concerns, particular losses in life? Who helped you navigate your way through these? And if we are truly honest with ourselves, there are times when, in moments of anxiety, we have

shared the same sentiments as Thomas. Lord, if you are leaving, how can we know the way? Who else will show us the way, as if were.

I would like to think this morning that we have all been in Thomas' shoes asking the question: *"How can we know the way?"* In our Gospel Lesson, the disciples who gather with Jesus for the farewell meal almost certainly have a measure of heartburn. Their hearts are torn and disquieted as they hear Jesus say a long good-bye. They have been following Jesus since he began his public ministry, but they are, at best, adolescents in their understanding of his message, vision, and mission. They have been looking for a Messiah and believe that they have found him. They have a vision of a messianic strongman who will liberate the people from occupation of the Romans, but he, Jesus, who lived out a different narrative, is about to be executed. The disciples are about to experience horror beyond their most terrified imaginations. How will they know "the way" if the one leading them is going away?

This gospel lesson is often used as a passage of comfort and support to families and mourners at funerals and memorial services. In the midst of loss and confusion about what happens next to their loved one, it is meant to bring comfort to the mourners that their loved one will go to a place where Jesus is, a place with many furnished rooms. Yet, the disciples of Jesus' day find no sense of well-being in the words. They do not know it yet, but it is not just Jesus who is saying farewell; it is also that his crucifixion will mean the death of how they understand the messianic message and mission, "the way." All that they have hoped for throughout their lives to be liberated from the Romans, which they have believed has come to fruition in Jesus, will soon be nailed to a cross. Therefore, we can understand Thomas' heartfelt question, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"*

One of Phyllis' and my favorite shows on PBS is "Call the Midwife." Its plot follows newly qualified midwife, Jenny Lee, and the work of midwives and the nuns of Non-Natus House, a nursing convent, and part of an Anglican religious order. The mid-wives and the nuns are coping

with the medical problems in the deprived Poplar district of London's desperately poor East End, in the 1950s, and showing “the way” to many adrift pregnant women and townspeople. In the midst of these poor unfortunate folk, the show tackles a variety of topical subjects and contemporary social, cultural and economic issues, including local community, miscarriage and stillbirths, abortion and unwanted pregnancies, birth defects, poverty, illness and disease epidemics, and many other topics that I cannot mention in polite company. While the sisters and midwives carry out many nursing duties across the community, their primary work is to help bring safe childbirth to women in the area and to look after their countless newborns. In other words, the nuns and midwives show these anxious women, in difficult situations, “the way” through the compassion and care in the name of Christ. The anxious folk in difficult situations, not knowing the way, mirror not only Thomas in this gospel lesson but also mirror us in our anxious and desperate situations, at times.

As a hospital chaplain on my seminary internship, I got in touch with the difficult situations in people’s lives. I not only had to visit people in their rooms who were going to have surgery or treatment of some type, but I also had to be present at every death situation in the hospital. Many families whose loved ones were on the verge of death would ask me, “What do we do now?” As a chaplain, I assisted these families in their grief by helping them say goodbye with words of thanksgiving, by telling the family to offer permission to their loved one to go, that they would be okay, by encouraging them to touch the body, if the situation allowed that, by offering scripture and prayer, by asking who needs to be called, by helping them find a funeral director, and finally, by giving them permission to leave the room and eventually the hospital. Basically, showing them “the way” in a very confusing time.

When Jesus gave the news of his departure, the disciples needed a hospital chaplain or a midwife, as it were, to show them the way. When their hopeful visions melted away in the crucifixion of Jesus, the hearts

of these disciples were anxious about the future and they needed an understanding of the mission of Jesus, and of themselves in the future.

It is interesting to note the work of a midwife and a hospital chaplain, in birth and in death scenarios, stand in comparison to our gospel lesson. As the new is birthed, something dies. In both the maternity wing and the hospital room, the family is changed—all things *are* being made new whether they know it or not. Birth and death are but the bookends of a shelf full of stories of transformation; birth and death are repeating cycles in the narrative of our lives, and there are times we need someone to show us the way, between not only physical birth and death but also between spiritual and emotional birth and death.

A friend of mine sent me a quote from one of the early church fathers, Irenaeus.

*It is not you who shapes God, it is God who shapes you.
If then you are the work of God, await the hand of the artist who does
all things in due season.
Offer God your heart, soft and tractable,
And keep the form in which the artist has fashioned you.
Let your clay be moist,
Lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of God's fingers.*

There are times, in the midst of desperation and anxiety or whatever troubles our hearts, we not only ask, how can we know the way, but also comment like Philip that we would be satisfied if we can see a bit of future. There are times, in the midst of listening to competing voices, supposedly showing the way, that we forget who *we* are, and whose we are, knowing that when something dies, something is reborn.

In the Epistle Lesson, the Apostle Peter is writing to the exile churches of the dispersion who were struggling with “the way” they should be going in cultures foreign to them. What did Peter tell them?

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.

In Matthew 24:23 Jesus warns us of false leaders who claim to be “the way. They will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead you astray.” What we Christians need to remember is that we share in Christ’s anointing, not as Messiahs but as participants who share in Christ’s work. In my Reformed tradition, one of our standards of faith is the Heidelberg Catechism. In Q&A 32, it says we share in Jesus’ anointing to be prophets, priests and kings. It’s basically our baptismal calling. Like prophets we speak God’s truth to the powerful and the powerless. Like priests we intercede for our world and its leaders. Like kings we live out the reality of God’s kingdom in the midst of the world kingdoms.

When Jesus said to his disciples: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” It is a direction to the disciples' will. It is a command to stand firm, even when their hearts abandon them in the midst of anxiety, confusion and fear about the future. And even if you cannot stand firm by yourselves, seek the help of those who are like minded in Christ.

This is why we need, in these uncertain times, the Church’s One Foundation which is Jesus Christ our Lord. This why we need companions in the faith who can be both midwife and chaplain, folks who will help us navigate our losses into something new. We as Christ followers need to keep the mission of Jesus before us in these trying times so we don’t lose our way.

As Fred Rogers said to the children after 911, look for the helpers. If you have loss your way, and I may be preaching to the choir here, look to the ones who do justice, love kindness and walk humbly before God. Look to the ones who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and so forth. They are the ones who will show the way. The

work of the Holy Spirit is at work in us and those helpers whom God gives us. May God give us the grace to know the difference.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.