Do not let your hearts be troubled. On this Memorial Day weekend, this is the great challenge we share: our hearts are troubled.

Some of us are troubled by things we have read in the news. This week the state of Alabama passed a law that makes it a crime for doctors to perform abortions at any stage of pregnancy. People who uphold each woman and each girl’s ability to make this decision are troubled, deep in their hearts. But the leaders in Alabama who voted in favor of this law are also troubled. You know they are deeply troubled because they did not even allow for exceptions in the case of rape or incest. The hearts of people on all sides of the issue are troubled. Whether our first concern is for the lives of women and girls or for the potential for human life in the wombs of those women and girls, our hearts are troubled by the kinds of conflict we see in the news.

For some of us the trouble is much worse. Some of us don’t have to read the news in order to feel great trouble in our hearts. The trouble we feel might be very personal. The trouble might be in the center of our lives. The trouble might be a conflict with someone in your family or a conflict with someone at work. The trouble might have started the day you lost your job or the month when you couldn’t make the mortgage payment. The trouble might have started the day of the accident or the day you or someone you love had to go to the hospital.

The source of the trouble might be right in the center of our lives or it might be all around us, in our community or in our nation. The thing we share is that in some way, large or small, our hearts are troubled.

This was the situation for John and his congregation. The author of the Gospel of John was the leader of a small group of followers of Christ, north of Jerusalem, north of Galilee, most likely in the area of present-day Lebanon or Syria.

John’s people were deeply troubled. They were followers of Christ and they were Jews. For many years they worshipped with other Jews in the synagogue. But in the years following the destruction of the temple, Jewish leaders responded to the calamity with a series of reforms. One of these reforms was the expulsion of Christ followers from the synagogues.

We find one clue that John and his people were expelled from their local synagogue in the language of John’s Gospel. John created a word we do not see elsewhere in the New Testament: ‘asynagogos’ – which means to be expelled from the synagogue.

John’s congregation is deeply troubled because they cannot see what lies ahead for them. They don’t even know who they are. They always thought of themselves as Jews. Their friends and family members are Jews. But now they are not allowed to worship in the synagogue. This is why all of the bad characters in Gospel of John are called ‘the Jews’, even though the reality is almost all of the characters, including Jesus and his disciples, are Jews.

John’s congregation is deeply troubled. That is probably why John devotes five chapters, one quarter of the Gospel, to the last supper. During the last supper Jesus is preparing for the
most troubling time of all with his disciples. Throughout the last supper Jesus teaches us about living in times of great trouble.

Jesus encourages us to respond to our times of trouble by acknowledging the complexity of real life. Jesus tells his disciples, *You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’* Two seemingly opposite things are happening at the same time. Jesus is leaving them. At the same time Jesus is remaining with them in a way they cannot fully understand. So in our times of trouble we try to see the situation for what it is, complicated, not having just one meaning but many meanings.

Jesus encourages us to discover places of joy in our lives and in our journeys with God, even in times of terrible grief. When talking about his imminent death, Jesus tells his disciples, *If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.* Grief is not just grief. In a way we often do not understand there is love and joy in grief itself. So in our times of trouble we try to see places of love and joy amid the sadness and grief.

John’s congregation has been devastated. They have lost their way of worshipping God. They might even feel as though they have lost their relationship with God.

So it is in John that Jesus teaches his disciples to look for God to be present with them in ways they have never seen before. Jesus tells his disciples, *I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.* Today we refer to this aspect of divine presence as the Holy Spirit, but this is the only place in John where the phrase ‘Holy Spirit’ is used. More often Jesus refers to the spirit of God as the advocate, or the counselor, or the Spirit of Truth.

Our times of greatest trouble might be times when we feel abandoned by the one we call ‘God’. Jesus teaches us to look for God in ways we have not known before. Look for God to be like one who is an advocate for us, like one who counsels us, like one who encourages us to learn and know the truth about our lives. So in our times of trouble we try to see God as present in a new way in our lives.

Jesus encourages us to search out a kind of peace that is deep, a peace that is rooted in our relationship with the one who creates us in the divine image. Jesus tells his disciples, *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

Jesus knows the kind of trouble we have in our lives. It’s a kind of trouble that keeps us awake at night. It’s a kind of trouble that brings us to the point of panic. It will take work to keep ourselves from being overwhelmed. That is why he says, *Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

It’s going to take some effort. It is not going to come easy. So, in our times of trouble, we begin our work by seeking the peace God intends to be in the center of our lives.