

“Turning Bad News into Good News”

John 14:1-4

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Some of my most meaningful conversations are with people who are dying. When your days on earth are drawing to a close, you don't waste words, which is why most of the dialogue is focused and serious.

This appears to be the case with Jesus in today's text. Jesus is speaking some of his last words to the disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. They have gathered in the Upper Room to eat the annual Passover meal commemorating the night their ancestors were released from Egyptian bondage to begin their journey to the Promise Land.

That year, the conversation around the table was quite different. Jesus' attention was not drawn only to the Israelites' journey from Egypt, but to his own journey to the cross. He talked openly about his death at the hands of his enemies.

This was not the first time Jesus told them he was going to die a violent death, but there was a sense of urgency in his voice that night. He included details about disciples betraying and denying him, which seemed to have taken them by surprise and caused them to become defensive. Listen to how this conversation is described in the Fourth Gospel.

“My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now. Where I am going you cannot come.”

Simon Peter asked him, ‘Lord, where are you going?’ Jesus replied, ‘Where I am going you cannot follow now, but you will later.’ Peter asked, ‘Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.’

Then Jesus answered, 'Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!' " John 13:33, 36-38.

Can you imagine how difficult it must have been for Jesus to tell the disciples what was coming, and how hard it was for the disciples to hear it? No wonder the disciples were reeling in shock and dismay, which Jesus detected when he looked around that room. So evident was their grief and confusion that Jesus responded immediately with strong words of comfort and hope.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus said as he looked around that room. "Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place I am going." (John 14:1-4)

This may be the most often quoted passage from the New Testament at a funeral. I know I have quoted it on many occasions and believe it has been the source of much comfort and hope.

"Let not your heart be troubled."

Why did Jesus begin with these calming and comforting words? He knew the disciples' hearts were troubled, and he refused to ignore it.

What he said to the disciples around that table in the Upper Room about dying was terribly disturbing. Looking around the room, he saw anxious looks on their faces, heard confusion in their questions and sensed fear in their silence. He had no choice but to respond.

"Let not your heart be troubled," he calmly said to them.

Don't you love a God who knows when your heart is troubled?

What recently turned your life upside down and struck fear in your heart? What did someone say to you that left you confused and dazed? Does it help to know God is aware of what you are experiencing and God cares?

“You are only as happy as your unhappiest child,” I read years ago. This is not just true for parents and grandparents but also for our Lord.

When we are disturbed and perplexed for any reason, God is concerned. Like a loving and responsible parent, God is eager to rush to our side to offer comfort, strength, courage, wisdom and hope.

I pray you welcome God’s presence in these times, allow God to calm your troubled heart and lean on God to help you navigate your way down unfamiliar paths. Truly, this is what God wants and who you need by your side when your heart is troubled.

“Believe in God, believe also in me.”

Why did Jesus say this? He was prepared that evening to make a promise to the disciples that sounded too good to be true.

He knew they must believe him in order for this promise to reduce their anxiety and replace their despair with hope. This is why Jesus emphatically told them his Word and words were just as credible as God’s. If they believed the One who sent him, they must also believe him.

Don’t you love a God you can trust?

Jesus’ words and promises are also meant to help us in our darkest hours. I hope you trust him as the disciples did and look to Jesus to help you sort through your confusion so you can chart a new and better way forward.

“In my Father’s house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

Why did Jesus say this? Jesus wanted the disciples to know not all the news he had for them that night was bad. He had good news to share, too. What was that?

Death would not have the final word in his life, and disappointment would not have the final word in their relationship. God would, and that word would be a good one.

God would raise Jesus to new life, making it possible for Jesus to live in their hearts through the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, when their time to leave this world was drawing nigh, Jesus, himself, would come and carry them to their new home.

Don't you love a God that turns bad news into good news?

How do you think it made the disciples feel to know Jesus' future and theirs would not end with his crucifixion? It had to give them hope, and it had to help them through the worst experience of their lives. While not all their questions were answered that evening in the Upper Room, they knew in their hearts their relationship with Jesus would continue, and the mission they had given their lives to would not end.

Our text today reminds me of the words of a former church member and dear friend whose twenty-one year-old son died suddenly on the basketball court. Later that evening when I asked how she was doing, she simply replied, "I am not all right now, but I will be."

How often have I recalled these words in my darkest hours and shared them with others during theirs? I have lost count, but it is now one more.