

Shiloh United Methodist Church

John 14: 1-7

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March 25, 2018

The God We Can Know: I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life

Worship Intro:

What does it mean to follow the way of Jesus?

Think about that for a minute, if you were asked in an elevator and had 3 minutes or less to answer what would you say?

Have you ever asked your friends in church that question? What does it mean to follow Jesus?

This last week I had the opportunity to ask three people that question and the responses I got were deeply felt understandings. After worship today I would encourage you to ask one another, “What does it mean to follow Jesus?” and listen to each other deeply.

Today as we begin worship I invite us to center on how you have followed Jesus in your life this week and where you need prayerful support from our community to do it in the next week.

Sermon:

We continue this journey today to get to know our God through the “I Am” statements of Jesus found in the gospel of John. This journey also continues our journey into Jerusalem with Jesus as he begins those steps toward the cross, beginning with today the celebration of the palm waving, and saying of Hosanna’s that ring the truth that we as Christians believe Jesus is showing us the way to Life, and Truth and to God.

Today’s I am statement is “I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”

The author of the “I Am” study we are using, Rob Fuquay tells a story of his wife who shopping at something like a Walmart. Her name is Susan, and she was getting in line at the store to check out. When something deep inside her told her to “pay attention.”

Have you ever gotten a feeling like that?

Susan looked up as she got in line and saw a man with his children checking out ahead of her. He was balancing a couple of kids and one was young enough to hold. Seeing the man struggle to get his wallet, Susan offered to hold the child on his hip. Looking up to her voice and seeing her gracious face, the man thanked her as he handed the child to her.

Susan kept feeling that nudge to pay attention. The man checked out and she handed the child back to him and they walked toward the door. Susan finished checking out and as she was walking out she saw the man again, still helping get coats zipped and kids prepared to go outside. She said, “Have a good day!”

The man looked up from tying his child shoes and said, “Can you help me find a job?”

Susan stopped. Imagine for a minute what you might do.

Susan turned and said, “I don’t know what I can do, but what are you looking for. If I hear of anything I will pass it along.” He shared his skills with her, then gave him his contact information.

The following day was Tuesday at their church, it was a time when Rob Fuquay the author of our study and Pastor of his church held a time for staff and leaders to gather for prayer and devotions together. Susan was in attendance that day.

We are working to do something like this monthly too, and I would invite all of you to attend our time of this on April 19 at 6pm.

During the sharing of joys and concerns, one of the leaders shared, “I am starting a new business and I need qualified people to hire.” Susan could hardly believe her ears.

After the service, she shared the contact information of the man with the leader, and then a few weeks later the leader came up and said, “I interviewed the gentleman and he will be making twice his current wage when I hire him.”¹

The Way of Jesus is the way of coming alongside God, isn't it powerful when we can open ourselves enough to be available when God needs us to step up to help, stand aside to give others a chance, or step back and listen.

The truth is, the early Christians chose to have Jesus share the “I Am” statements in the Gospel of John to help followers of Christ, even us, find the road signs to God. The signs that tell us where God might show up on our ‘Way.’

Slide 1 (“No Explanation Inside the Church”)

When in Israel on a Holy Land trip, my wife, Crystal captured this picture. Signs direct us where to go, and while some road signs are clear, they need some interpreting from age to age. This sign was meant to keep tourist groups from crowding a sacred place, and so explanation

¹ Fuquay, Rob (2014-10-03). The God We Can Know: Exploring the "I Am" Sayings of Jesus.

Upper Room Books. Kindle Edition.

happened outside. However, if this sign was in our church building, my sermon would have ended before it began.

Our scripture today comes from John 14:1-7

John 14:1-7 Common English Bible (CEB)

14 “Don’t be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. ² My Father’s house has room to spare. If that weren’t the case, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you? ³ When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. ⁴ You know the way to the place I’m going.”

⁵ Thomas asked, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him.”

Slide 2(“Stay on the Path”)

This scripture has become one of the most challenging for Christians in the modern age. Primarily because it has become a scripture used to determine who is on “the Way” and who is not. In my lifetime, I have heard this scripture manipulated, so that people could say whether people were Christian or not. And many of my friends who are not part of a church, see this as the reason they would never follow Christ, because they have been explained that because of this passage there is one way to follow Christ.

However, like any sign taken out of context this scripture in context directs us as Christians to deeply understand the call of Christ. For in this passage is buried all of the hopes, and knowledge of the early Christians who wrote them down. It is the context in which many of us

have found our way to listen to God and follow Christ.²

Take note of the scripture today where it takes place in the Gospel story. This is not a happy and cheerful time for the disciples. The disciples have committed their lives, emotions, hopes, wealth, time and energy to trusting Jesus was their Rabbi and the teacher that would offer them a way to live their lives following God. Yet, when Jesus is sharing with them in this passage, their fate and especially Jesus' fate is all, but certain.

In the chapter before this, the disciples have just shared in the Last Supper with Jesus, this meal we celebrate each Sunday, is part of the story of Jesus' ultimate walk toward death. The next day he would be condemned to death. The disciples knew this fate was possible when we find them in this passage. Jesus has just told them, that he will no longer be with them in quite the same way he has been. He is leaving them.

Then he offers these words and the disciples respond and I think Thomas was the one who they all nudged to speak up, "We do not know where you are going, Jesus. How can we know the way?"

In this intimate setting, after sharing a holy meal with them, the disciples are gathered in that small upper room and trying to get some sense of understanding of what is about to happen to their beloved leader, teacher, and who many believe is their savior.

Jesus' response is meant to draw this small group of leaders back to understand that they don't get to heaven any other way, except for living the way Jesus has been teaching them up to this point. Jesus is saying, "I am your signpost, follow what I have done and God will give you direction and guidance."

² <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2000/08/jesus-the-way-the-truth-the-life.aspx>

Jesus had taught his disciples to go through the cycle of gathering in community, practicing connection with God through prayer, practicing sacrifice by going out to heal and bring peace, and to invite us to show compassion to all people. This was “The Way” he was talking about.

I recently watched a commencement speech given in the past at Gerogetown University.³ The speaker asked everyone to follow three simple instructions that I am going to ask you all to follow today.

1. Identify your dominant hand.
2. With your dominant hand snap your fingers 5 times very quickly.
3. With the same hand draw the letter “E” on your forehead.

The speaker said, “This is an experimental technique that social psychologists have used since the 1980s to measure perspective taking. The ability to get out of our own head and see thing’s from someone else’s point of view.”

Why snap your fingers five times quickly, there is no good reason. Just a way to distract you.

The part that is helpful in this research is how you draw the E. There are two different ways.

1. You can draw it so others can read it.
2. You can draw it so you can read it.

If you drew the E from your own perspective you are not a bad person.

Here is what we know the more power people perceive they have, the more they tend to take their own perspective over another person.

Context is key here.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/foundr/videos/1324453094322094/>

Jesus is trying to help his disciples get out of their drawing inward, and help them step back into the path of life Jesus had taught them. He is trying in a very vulnerable moment to get them to understand that beyond Jesus' death there would be a chance to live the life giving "Way" of following God. However, you can't do that by living selfishly or from your own power. Jesus is saying for you to stay grounded in really sharing the love of God, you have to open yourself daily to God and let God's power guide you, not your own.

Jesus is saying you can do this just as we have practiced: 1. Be in community with other followers. 2. Open yourself in prayer to God's love each day. 3. Live sacrifice each day, by giving from your heart. 4. Trust each day you may have to die to something to let other things live.

Jesus is dropping a key they might use to unlock "The Way" his own disciples, the ones who know him can follow to living with God and into God's kingdom. He is saying to follow Jesus is not to believe in Jesus, it is to believe Jesus when he says, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

Slide 3(Picture of Palm Sunday)

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday,

"We now enter the holiest week of the year – the heart of Christian life and faith. I don't think it is an accident that at the center of Palm Sunday is a road. Actually *two* roads – and two journeys, two parades, if you will. From the east, we find Jesus on a donkey, entering Jerusalem through the Golden Gate. It was through that gate in Jewish tradition the *Shekinah* (Divine Presence – power, grace) entered and would, they believed, enter again when the Messiah came. Jesus would have known the prophecy – and so did his

followers.

From the west, another parade advanced on Jerusalem. At the center of this parade was Pilate, the Roman, the Governor, the representative of Imperial power. Pilate was on his way to Jerusalem because there was a Jewish festival and military reinforcements might be needed to – you know – keep the peace, bring order, suppress any inconvenient demonstrations. Trust me, Pilate wasn't riding a donkey. His parade would have included war horses and great displays of military power. His parade was also a display of Roman imperial theology. Remember that, for Rome, Caesar was not just an emperor or king. He was also the 'son of God' and the 'savior of the world.' Those titles were his. Roman imperial theology taught that it was Caesar who brought peace on earth – through war and victory. Pilate's procession was meant to clearly remind those who gathered who was boss – and to let them know that he would keep the peace the only way he thought possible – by wielding a hefty sword.

The parade from the east would have been relatively small compared to the Pilate parade but it would likely have been noticed, especially with the heightened sensitivity Jewish festivals brought. And, while the ordinary Roman may have missed the significance, the Jews gathered on the Jesus parade route would have known that his entrance, through a gate that by its very nature declared divine blessing from the God of the Jews rather than through the divine Caesar of Rome, was an act of defiance. Quiet defiance, perhaps, but defiance nevertheless. Just a few days later it would all come to a violent end. Fear would have its way. Jesus would appear to have lost his bid to change hearts and lives. Rome would claim victory – as it usually did. Rome would claim that their victory restored the peace. And Jesus

would want his followers to remember that there was another path. His ‘way.’ He had confronted the powers of Rome armed with love. That was the path he affirmed on the day he chose to enter Jerusalem from the east on a donkey as the Romans entered from the west on war-horses.⁴

Sixty years later, when John wrote his gospel, the power of Rome was stronger than ever. And the temptation in the fledgling Christian community was likely to . . . give up, give in, succumb to the pressures of the world – or fight back. Christians were caught. *Give in to Rome’s power*, taunted the Roman overseers. *Come back to us*, whispered faithful Jews. And, in response to those voices, John’s Jesus reaffirmed the haunting message . . . *I am the way. Follow me. Follow on the path, from death to life. Follow.* And they did – which is why we are here. But in the end, the choice is a daily one and must be made by each Christian in every age. After all, let’s be honest. Through the ages Christians have done their share of beating up on people and mounting war horses in the name of Christ. On Palm Sunday we hear a clarion call to stop it and to decide which procession to be in.”⁵

Friends this week begins the steep climb up the Palm Sunday road . . . a journey our ancestors and forbearers in the faith have named as leading to Life and Truth.

Dare we follow the way of Jesus today? Dare we take the perspective of others and live in the Kingdom of God?

⁴ I join my mentor in confessing to being inspired in my understanding of Palm Sunday by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan’s work: *The Last Week*, HarperCollins ©2006.

⁵ Borrowed with permission from my Mentor – Rev. Marianne Niesen who preached this in a sermon March 22, 2015 at St. Paul’s UMC in Helena, Montana

This week I invite you to join us the spiritual practice of Holy Week. Come to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday service. To experience the journey Jesus completed, to learn how to follow Christ to Easter.

And lest you think this is your final chance and that God only nudges once, our forbearers taught us one more thing.

God will keep knocking on the door of your heart until you're ready to receive the path of Jesus. No action will save you, no perfect moment in the grocery store will save you, those moments only act to confirm your knowledge that God is there.

Go from this Palm Sunday, choose the parade you will follow and trust that God will provide you more chances to walk with him in your journey ahead.

Shalom my friends, and Amen