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Lesson: Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; John 14:1-14

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Years ago, someone asked me if I had the chance to witness firsthand only one event of Jesus' earthly ministry, what event would it be? Ooo... there are so many options, aren't there? Perhaps it would be the feeding of the multitudes. Or a healing. Many people would jump at the opportunity to see his resurrection, and I'm certain far fewer people would choose to see his torture and crucifixion. There is no right or wrong answer to this exercise. My answer was none of those scenarios I mentioned, however. I responded that I would just like to travel with Jesus one day along with his followers, then finish the day by settling in with them for an evening around a small fire. Such a day would touch upon my enjoyment of campfires and the stories we tell around them. Even more, though, such a day would give me an honest look at how those closest to Jesus got to know him best. The stories they'd share together. The songs they would sing. I would see which middle eastern plants he'd grab to season a fish he'd cook over the campfire. After supper, I'd witness him using his tongue to work out the food stuck between his teeth while he patiently listened to Simon and Andrew retell that same fishing story for the umpteenth time. After the customary bedtime routine, Jesus and the rest of us would gather close for warmth and get settled under our blankets for a night's rest. We'd be safe with him there. He would be our refuge.

“Refuge” is an interesting word to ponder of late. Often I have associated with ‘refuge’ a sense of bliss and contentment. Home is often called a refuge. Yet for two months our homes have been figuratively barricaded, and we have pulled up our

draw-bridges high above the moats that surround what have suddenly become our fortresses. That is the image of 'refuge' that comes to my mind now.

"In you, O Lord, I seek refuge." That is how our psalm today begins. "That is a nice sentiment," I've always thought, and I indeed sought to place my trust in God. However, I've always been able to live my life with a sense of relative invulnerability. Now, being confronted daily... hourly... with the reality of how vulnerable each of us is forces me to reorient my understanding of 'refuge' in scripture. The whole of Psalm 31 is about finding refuge in God, yet it does not define refuge as the absence of troubles. Refuge instead, according to the psalmist, is something that sustains us through troubles. For example, verse 21 of this psalm gives thanks to God for being a refuge when we are like a city beset under siege.

Then Jesus begins today's gospel lesson with this doozy: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Read the room, Jesus. All kidding aside, it is me who has failed to read the room. Specifically, the upper room on that Thursday evening when Jesus made this statement. In the verses immediately prior to this, Judas has exited the room to begin the process of handing over Jesus; Peter was told that he would deny Jesus three times before the night is over; Jesus has said to those in the room that he is leaving them to die. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Could it be that these words of Jesus were not spoken in bold confidence, but with a quivering chin because he understood the gravity of all that was happening? This statement was a call to believe in the trustworthiness of God, even though the world outside of that room was growing increasingly bleak. Jesus then disclosed that with the Father there are many places to abide, places to find refuge with the Father. The disciple Thomas then asks, "Lord, we do not know where

you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

I need to admit that I've only ever understood that statement one way. I've always read this statement through an escapist lens. What I mean by escapist is that I've only understood this as saying Jesus is the means to reach the Father, who happens to be off from here, removed from our troubles, separate and transcendent. I question now whether the escapist lens is the only lens to understand what Jesus is saying here, let alone whether that lens is the best lens. When Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” I wonder if we are meant to hear that like a two-way street. That through the passion he is about to endure, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life for the Father to come and abide with us in our troubles. That by his passion, Jesus is the way for the Father to encounter us in our struggles. That by his passion, Jesus reveals the truth of God's goodness and love, showing us on a cross how God will never quit or abandon us. That by his passion, Jesus offers the life of the Father, the only thing capable of breaking the bonds of sin and death.

I can understand how some people place their hope in being able to fly away from the mess of this world. They think it is best to abandon this world for some heavenly abode far removed from here. But scripture tells us from beginning to end that God will not abandon this world. The fact that God so loved this world that he gave his only Son for it leads me to place my hope in Jesus. Through him God enters this world to abide with us -- to be our refuge in the midst of this world's troubles -- and in order to redeem this sad mess of a world.

Jesus continues his response to Thomas by saying, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip then says to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus replies, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” At that point, I’m sure everyone in the room thinks back to all of their experiences with Jesus. Yes, they think of his teachings and the healings, but also:

- They think of the way he would pick certain plants to season that night’s fish supper.
- They think of that habit Jesus has of using his tongue to get the food unstuck from between his teeth.
- The stories he’d tell around a fire.
- The songs he’d sing with them.

In those things are they supposed to have seen the Father? Yes. But what about understanding God as distant and remote? Should they now see God the Father as one who appears in the common and ordinary? Yes. And if Jesus is the way for the Father to come close to us, does that mean that through Jesus God has become our enduring refuge in a world of troubles? Yes. We in Jesus, Jesus in God, God with us.

Jesus’ call to not let our hearts be troubled is good news for us for one reason alone: the one who said these words soon found himself in -- literally -- a hell of a lot of trouble. But if he has been to hell and back for us, then we can know that in this moment, God is here. Through Jesus, God is with everyone during these times of trouble. Through Jesus, God is a sure and certain refuge for us all.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

Alleluia and Amen.