

“The Way”

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

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One of the things which dogs my life sometimes is anxiety. If I let my mind wander, it's amazing how fast sometimes it can go into worry mode. I'll be going along all right and then, boom, all of the sudden my mind will fixate on something. Take for example the other day when the kids from the Playschool were here singing. While all of y'all were enjoying their spirited performance, I was fixated on one little boy coming dangerously close to one of the candles. When something like that happens, the next thing you know, whatever it is I'm locked in on becomes overwhelming. Presently, my great and recurring worry is having our kids learn to drive. For obvious reasons, that one worries me as it does any parent, I'm sure.

That stuff happens to me and I don't think you could make the case that I have an anxiety disorder, rather my mind is just prone to worry, I think. But, as a society, we're becoming more anxious with each and every passing year. In 2021, for example, we saw a 25% rise in the rates of depression and anxiety. That, in a way is understandable in that 2020 saw the rise of COVID in the world, causing a lot of completely understandable worry and fear. But that large spike might make us look past the steady increases that we've seen through the last several decades. For reasons which are debatable, one thing remains clear, anxiety is rising across the US. Some might argue that the rise in worry has a secular cause, that the internet or some other facet of modern life is just upsetting the applecart in ways we don't yet understand. I think the culprit is much easier to find. Isn't it interesting that in the same years that we've seen increases in anxiety rates, we've seen decreases in the number of people reporting faith as a steady component of their lives? That is to say that as we've seen the largest rise in anxiety rates while we've also seen a decrease in the number of Christian adherents. Those two are too conspicuous not to link. Faith is often a wonderful antidote to anxiety problems.

Which is exactly what Jesus Christ draws our attention to at the beginning of this passage from the Gospel of John. It's a passage most often read at funerals, what with its' talk of many mansions in the Father's house. But, in reality, John 14 is actually good advice for the living. Jesus speaks these words to what's likely to have been a rattled group of disciples and apostles. They're worried because of what Jesus Christ has just announced – that soon, He'll be gone. On top of that, they're sure to be distressed about their behavior at dinner. Do you recollect what the apostles do during the Last Supper? They bicker and argue with each other about who will be greatest in the Kingdom to come. They're foolish words, really and ones that are sure to be ringing in their minds as they continue to listen to Jesus. Not only that, these men and women were likely aware of what happened to followers of failed Messiahs. Seven times before Jesus, men came and claimed to be the One. Seven times previously both those men and their followers ended up on Roman crosses, dead. To be with Jesus had thus far been a wonderful thing, miracles seen and performed and all that. But now, things were getting serious and Jesus himself was talking about being gone.

It was sure to have been an anxious time for everyone involved. That's why Jesus' words here are so important for us to hear. *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me.”* Jesus speaks a word of comfort into the anxious hearts of all His gathered apostles and disciples. He also issues them a command but the rendering of this command into English misses a certain nuance. You see, the grammar of the passage in the Greek has this set up as a fulfilled conditional. It really ought to read, *“Because you believe in God, believe also in Me.”* That is to say that the first part of the sentence makes the second part assumed. It means that because the apostles and disciples believe in God, they will also believe in Him.

Which is one of the reasons why our anxieties about eternity ought to come way down. As I've said before, what the Bible teaches us is that Jesus chooses us, not the other way around. While it may feel like we're the ones doing the deciding, what the Bible puts forward is that we choose God because God first chose us. “Before the foundations of the earth” that's what we read in Ephesians. And I don't know about you, but I sure wasn't here at that point so I think it's fair to say that Jesus picked me long before I had the capacity to pick Him. That is to say that we don't fear for our enteral hereafters because of what God in Christ has done for us.

And Jesus Christ even goes on to assure us that there will be many mansions in his Father's house. I say mansions because that's the King James language. Although it sure can be hard to read at points with its older version of the English language, it sure sings at points. Nowhere is that more evident than in this passage where it reads that there are many mansions in the Father's house.

What Jesus Christ tells His apostles is that they have nothing to fear, in this life or the life yet to come. Jesus words of comfort only match what the Bible habitually says. Well over 365 times in the Word are we told not

to fear. **Isaiah 41:10:** *“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Psalm 23:4: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Psalm 27:1: “The Lord is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid.” Deuteronomy 31:6: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you.” Luke 12:7: “Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”*

I could keep going. For the rest of this service, honestly, I could simply read Scriptures that talk about not fearing anything this world can throw at you because the Lord your God is with you, in and through the storms of life. The Bible goes out of its way to provide ample ammunition against anxiety for people with faith. But what does it mean to have faith?

Jesus Himself is going to tell us more about that as the passage moves forward. He tells us that He Himself is the way, the truth and the life. Adding that no one comes to the Father except by Him. And, again, this is a section where the translation doesn’t really reveal all that the text is telling us here. Here, again, there is embedded in the language the assumption that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life and you already know that because you are following Him. That is to say that this isn’t a Scripture that we should go out and beat people over the head with, rather it is meant in the same vein as the rest of this material. As a comfort to us in times of distress. What Jesus Christ tells us though is that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. I remember being younger and trying to figure out this thing called life that someone once told me that a person could tell a lot about you by the way you walked. Well, I took that literally (it was probably meant figuratively). So, I began to be very focused on how I walked. Like, literally, I practiced walking what I thought would be the “Jason Bryant” way.

I wanted my “way” to be unique and convey something about me that people could not ignore. How I thought I would do that by the way I walked is pretty comical now as I look back on it but, hey, I was young. But the truth of the matter is that, at parts of my life, I’ve tried to walk my own path, one unencumbered by faith in the Lord and, well, it hasn’t always worked out so well for me. But I think we all do that on occasion, don’t we? At sometimes in our life our faith is our guiding star and we’re following Jesus all the way. But, on other occasions, we rebel, we cut our own path in this life. And if your history is anything like my own, good things don’t always happen, at least not the way we expect them to.

But Jesus assures us that He is the Way. What does He mean by that? Well, He means that we ought to model our lives after Him and not try to cut our own path in this world. But what does it mean to be like Jesus?

Well, to begin with, it means being humble. Is there any word our society likes more than pride? I mean, it’s plastered everywhere at times during the year. What’s interesting to note is how much pride is excoriated in the Word. But Jesus’ way is the path of humility. After all, He didn’t have to come and take flesh. And, even if He did, He could’ve come as a king or a conquering hero. He didn’t. Jesus came in an unassuming form to peasant parents. Was raised without ceremony and ostentation. Then, when the time was right, He took on Himself the sin of the world for us and for our salvation. All very humble things.

Not only was Jesus humble, He was dedicated to His father. In fact, Jesus was perfectly faithful to God. His substitutionary righteousness is the means by which we claim our salvation. That is to say that it is because of Jesus’ faithfulness to God that humanity’s burden has been lifted. We can’t be perfectly faithful to God and now, because of Jesus Christ’s atoning work, we don’t have to be.

Yes, Jesus was humble and faithful. Those are the ways that we will be when following the Way of Jesus Christ. What is the Way of Jesus? Hear these words of Scripture to get us closer to the meaning. **Psalm 1:5-6:** *“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” Proverbs 15:10: “There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way; whoever hates reproof will die.”*

One of the surest fire ways that we can know that we’re following the Way is that we are in the Word. Why? Because Jesus tells us, it is the truth. Jesus Christ is the Word of God and the Word of God in Scripture points exclusively towards Him. Thus, we find in the Scriptures truth. I think this is the hardest part of being a Christian these days, affirming the truthfulness of the Word.

First, let's get one thing out of the way, the Bible isn't a science book. Isn't supposed to be read that way. Rather the Bible presents God's truth to us in a way that we can understand. The Bible provides for us in a manner that we can find useful, helpful at times in our lives when things are difficult.

The Bible presents God's truth to us and it is a truth to brook compromise. Nowhere in the Word does it ever say something to the effect of, "and, should you not like any part of this, feel free to change it to your liking." Believe me folks, I've looked for that verse but in all my readings thus far of Scripture, I've never found it. That's because it's not there. In fact, what is there suggests the opposite. **Hebrews 4:12:** "*For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*" **2 Timothy 3:16-17:** "*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*" **Psalm 119:89:** "*Forever, O Lord, Your Word is firmly fixed in the heaven.*"

Forever the Lord's Word is firmly fixed in heaven. And it is truth, God's truth which makes it truth with a capital t. I know, such talk of the Bible as truth is a little alarming. After all, you may have heard that there's some crazy stuff in there, mean-spirited stuff. I encourage you to read the Bible to see for yourself. It is all understandable in context and there is nothing horrible in there. There's certainly nothing in there that, if you were to accept it as truth, that would all of the sudden make you a mean person or someone out to hate others. In fact, it should have the opposite effect. Reading the Bible should make you more like Jesus – humble and faithful and more importantly, loving to everyone. What the Bible shows us clearly is that we ourselves are sinners who habitually fall short of the Glory of God. But, thankfully, it goes on to tell us that we are yet loved by an omnipotent, Grace-filled God. But because we ourselves aren't perfect, we don't expect others to be. Thus, when we see people sin, our inclination isn't to condemn but rather to pray. Did y'all get that? Our first inclination isn't to condemn but rather to pray for the people we find that are out of whack with God's will. That is because, as Christians, we're to recognize that we're all out of whack with God but that God, in his loving kindness, has chosen to love us nevertheless. And that's Good News.

But Jesus saves the best part for last, doesn't He? He tells us, I am the life. This life has two dimensions – the limited and the eternal. What do I mean by that. Well, in one sense, our lives are limited. Because of sin, there is a day when everyone of us here will die. What Jesus suggests is that in this limited time, He is the way to find an abundant life. Earlier in John, Jesus tells us that. In 10:10 we read, "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*"

Abundant life is a life filled with joy and contentment. I know so many people enjoying this abundant life right now and they're all great Christians. I see the smiles on people's faces. I've witnessed the grit which emerges in tough times. I've seen the capabilities of these people and they are extraordinary. And I'm convinced, these aren't super-humans. They are instead Christians who are experiencing the abundant life Jesus talks about by the power of the Holy Spirit. One parishioner really stands out. She was from a former congregation, so I don't think she's known here. But her story is an inspiring one. One day, very suddenly, this woman's husband died. It was entirely unexpected and, as you can imagine, this woman was devastated. When her grief became unmanageable, she found a program called Griefshare. Griefshare is a Christian support group for people who have lost loved ones. Well, during her time in Griefshare, Nancy felt a calling, a calling from the Lord to help others. So, she came to me and suggested we start a Griefshare group at the church I was serving. At first, I was a little reluctant. After all, I didn't feel I knew so much about grief counselling. But Nancy was so adamant, I couldn't help but go along. The next thing you know, we've got several Griefshare groups going. Those were to be a Godsend for me. Soon after starting Griefshare, my life was touched by loss as my sister died very suddenly. It was in Griefshare where I started putting the pieces of the puzzle back together again, so to speak. During the course of her work with Griefshare, Nancy has made many friends and positively affected many lives. She is truly a great example of someone leading an abundant life in Jesus Christ.

But it isn't just that we're called to lead abundant lives here. There is also an eternal dimension to our lives. Jesus tells us that there are many rooms in his Father's house as a reminder of what awaits us in the undiscovered country beyond our graves. There is eternal life yet to come for the faithful. I once heard someone say that they wouldn't want eternal life that it would get boring. Oh, how small-minded those people are. Eternal life, in which we aren't beset by sin, is going to be glorious and wonderful and, I guarantee, never

boring. What makes me so sure? Because God is infinite. Never to be exhausted. That means that there will always be something more to learn about Him. So eternal life will never be dull or boring but will instead sparkle with joy and contentment for all eternity.

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