

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 23: 1-6
SECOND LESSON: John 17:6-19
May 12, 2024

“Fear No Evil”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

If you feel like the New Testament reading from John’s gospel this morning was leading you in circles today, there is a reason for that. Stylistically, it was. Passages in John have been compared to a labyrinth or meditation. They circle around the same themes again and again, weaving back and forth. Westerners are used to straight line thinking and arguments. This is a very Eastern form of communication. These words are designed to be mulled over and meditated on.

The timing of this prayer is immediately after the Last Supper but before the trip to Gethsemane. Judas has come and gone. The betrayal has begun. And Jesus pauses to pray for his disciples. He is about to face the cross, but he thinks at this moment of what that will mean for his followers. Who will protect and guide them when he is no longer there? We might consider it unnecessary for Jesus to ask for God the Father’s protection over his followers, but it was important to put it into words. A lot of the words we speak are not necessary in a functional sense but are necessary in an emotional sense.

The words of this prayer would have been spoken in Aramaic. Virtually all teaching in the New Testament that we have from Jesus is a translation. Jesus would have known Greek, but the common Jewish people of the time spoke Aramaic. Even the Hebrew scriptures that they used in the synagogues were translated into Aramaic in small collections called targums.

The gospel of John was written late—the latest of all the gospels, likely in the 90s. The apostle John lived to a very old age, most likely in Ephesus and he had a gathering of followers around him. Now if you are the type of person to be inclined to look these things up on the internet you will discover that there are people who write with apparent absolute certainty that the apostle John went to Ephesus and then was exiled to the Isle of Patmos for years where he wrote the book of Revelation, and then returned at an extremely advanced age to write the gospel of John. But it is highly unlikely that the author of Revelation was John the apostle. He simply identifies himself as John the elder, and John was a very common name. And the two writings could not be more different in nature.

Revelation is written in some of the worst Greek in the New Testament. It was clearly produced by someone with very little by way of education. The gospel of John is some of the best Greek in the New Testament. It is elegant, grammatically correct and poetic. Could the apostle John have produced either? Very unlikely in the first case and impossible in the second. There is,

however, a logical explanation, at least for John's gospel. John had gathered around him a group of followers with a much higher level of education than he possessed. It has been suggested, and it makes sense to me, that the gospel of John was produced by a committee—a group of young men who heard John's teachings from Jesus in Aramaic and sought to translate these words as faithfully as possible into Greek. As for the circular style—that would fit Jesus, John and his scribes.

I propose that these are the words of Jesus translated from the Aramaic, words that were spoken first by an elderly man who was a direct witness to the events. There are numerous themes woven throughout. We begin with things that are "given." The word "given" occurs nine times! The Father gave the disciples to Jesus, the word has been given, Jesus has been given to us. The name of the Father has been given to protect us. All of this and more has been given. The "world" also appears throughout, although not in a positive way. In this context the world is a hostile and dangerous place. Jesus says, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world. . . the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world."

The world is both a dangerous place and a mission field. It is a place where we need protection, but where we have a job to do. And we don't have just human enemies, but a spiritual enemy. And where is the evil one's first point of attack? We can find it right in Jesus' prayer: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one."

The best way to destroy the church is to divide the church. The devil doesn't care what we argue about, as long as we are arguing. One church had a heated 45-minute argument over whether or not to purchase a brown or black filing cabinet. There was a fight over which picture of Jesus to put in the foyer, a petition to have all church staff clean shaven, and a dispute over whether or not the worship leader should have his shoes on during the service. Last I checked Frank was wearing shoes. In one church, some members even left because another church member had hidden the vacuum cleaner from them! But regardless of the issues, when we get right down to it, people leave churches because they get annoyed at other people. And some just keep right on going traveling from church to church. But every last church is filled with the same fallible personalities. At a pastor's gathering I was at recently one man was recounting a friend telling him that he could hardly wait to get out of his present very dysfunctional call and into his next church. My friend quipped, "So you can change one dysfunction for a new one?"

The truth is that the devil wants nothing more than for us to not be one. The evil one knows that a house that is divided cannot stand. The threats facing the first disciples went far beyond human personalities colliding with each other, however. They were following a savior who was about to be crucified. Their faith could literally cost them their lives. We are incredibly blest to live in a time and place where that is not so. But while being a Christian is

not illegal, acting like one still can be. There are churches trying to feed the homeless being told by their local government that they are not permitted to do so. They're allowed to worship, and that's it. Feeding the homeless brings down the tone of the neighborhood. So they are quietly committing civil disobedience. There are churches who are told that they are not allowed to house the homeless. So they carefully rotate them every week between congregations. But of course, by way of contrast, we are all aware that there are some Christians who claim they are being persecuted because they are not allowed to persecute others. Cries of "poor me" can ring hollow. In any given situation people can be arrested for doing the right thing and people can be arrested in order to grandstand and show off. This is not the case in other nations where being arrested means being locked up for years and disappearing into a world of darkness and torment. Standing up for the truth in Russia or Iran bears a different cost than it usually does in 21st century America. I say usually, because we have our own pockets of hidden darkness.

BEING a Christian has no cost in America. LIVING like one can. We can sit quietly in our pews and anger no one. But that also accomplishes nothing. Actually living our faith will bring opposition, and it doesn't have to be dramatic. It's part of our very being to run contrary to the way things are in the world. Being kind to that one person in the neighborhood who everyone else hates will not win us any friends, but Christ expects it of us. Taking the part of the one being bullied and acting to protect them will invite being attacked ourselves. And sometimes we will even be attacked by other Christians. Not everyone wants to see the rainbow of welcome on a church building. This June we will be doing an event for Pride Month. I can guarantee you we will hear about it from well-intentioned souls telling us we are all going to hell.

We want the world to be a safe and happy place. We try very hard to make the world a safe and happy place for our children. But the world is not a safe and happy place. The horrors of what is happening at this very moment in Sudan, Congo and Gaza should make that clear. Children are dying as we speak. Evil—both human and supernatural—is at work around the world. Our job is to stay in the world but not of the world, to recognize the evil but not to be overcome by it.

Jesus prayed for us. He prayed for the disciples and all who would follow. He prayed for our unity that we would not be tricked by the enemy into fighting each other. And he prayed for our safety in a world that is hostile to his message. Being opposed by the rich and powerful is almost a sign that we're doing it right. In the next few months as we explore what our ministry in the place means, let us not give in to fear. Instead, let us be faithful. Amen.

Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

John 17:6-19

⁶ "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. ⁸ For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ⁹ I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. ¹³ "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.