***A PLACE FOR YOU***

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Texts: John 13:33-14:10 and Psalm 90:1-2

As we make our way through these pandemic days most of us are living under some form of order to *shelter in place*. Just two months ago we had no idea what that meant, but now we know its meaning all too well as we have learned the ABCs of *shelter-in-place* at the school of COVID-19. In this part of the country we are blessed to have pretty good *places* in which to *shelter*. We have open spaces and parks nearby in which to run, walk, bike, or sit without fighting a crowd. Many of us have beautiful spring views out our windows, and porches or patios on which to relax and soak up the sunshine and fresh pollen-drenched air. If you had to pick a place in which to shelter for a spell, you could do a lot worse than this Valley!

At the same time, we know that many folks ordered to shelter in place have no good place to shelter. On the PBS Newshour this week there was a story about homeless people in New York who were sheltering on relatively empty subway cars; when the city began closing the transit system at night to clean the subway cars the homeless had no *place* to go but the streets. In our community, homeless folks have landed at Valley Mission, in dorms at Mary Baldwin, and in rooms at local motels through the generosity of community funds to give them a safe place to shelter in this pandemic. There are many others in our nation and world whose homes are in high density areas shared with so many other people that there is no real shelter from the virus; in crowded apartments and nursing homes, overcrowded refugee camps and prisons, densely-packed shantytowns and slums there is no safe place to go. An order to *shelter in place* is helpful in this pandemic only if you have a safe *place* to *shelte*r.

As we move out from *shelter-in-place* orders to some kind of reentry into the wider world, one of the key components will be finding a *safe place* to which to go. What seemed like safe places three months ago seem much less safe now; considerations of social distancing, sanitized surfaces, use of face coverings, and density of interpersonal contact are now factors to be considered. That is true for us as we contemplate how to make this a safe place in which to gather for worship again. *What should we d*o – *or not do?* *Can we sing? How do we maintain social distancing?* *What must change?* These are important questions to be answered before we open the doors and welcome you all back to worship together. Some things will have to change, at least in the short term, for contrary to the irresponsible preachers and pseudo-prophets out there, Jesus is not the only safeguard we need in order to make this a safe place to worship these days.

In the midst of this focus upon shelter-in-place and safe space, these words from Psalm 90 and John’s Gospel offer a helpful perspective. “*Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations*,” sings the psalmist. “*From everlasting to everlasting you are God*.” The psalmist reminds us that the *place* in which we shelter amid the challenges of life is with God. It is not a physical place but a spiritual space, a relationship in which we live. Our place is with God, and God’s chosen dwelling place is with us. We are not abandoned, not alone, for God dwells with us! No matter how great the peril, how isolating the virus, how difficult the diagnosis, God is with us! Our dwelling place, the place in which we live and breathe, is always with God. To shelter-in-place with God is to know that we are never alone!

Jesus expands upon that promise in his farewell discourse with the disciples; he tells them that he must leave them to go to a place where they cannot go in order to prepare a place for them in God’s house. In so doing, he offers assurance that our dwelling place with God does not end when we draw our last breath. We continue in relationship with God, continue to be loved by God, continue to have a place with God for all time. Like the dwelling place of which the psalmist sings, the *place* of which Jesus speaks is about relationship, not geography. Our *place* is with God because God has chosen to have a divine dwelling *place* for us and with us.

“How do we get there?” asks clueless Thomas. “We don’t know the way!” “*I am the way,” says Jesus. “I am the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” In essence Jesus tells the disciples to look to him, not just to what he taught them but to what he showed them in his life, death and resurrection, to his very identity as the messiah and Son of God. *Follow that w*ay, he seems to say. *Follow me*. That way to a place with God is a path, not just for disciples, but for the world. Jesus isn’t trying to limit the way to God, but makes clear that the way he embodies is a path for all people, a way that he is blazing to bring the world into right relationship with God and lead them to that dwelling place with God.

It is no wonder then that early followers of the risen Christ were called “The Way” – not Christians or Presbyterians or Jesusites or Jesusians – but “followers of the Way”. On the Damascus Road where he was blinded by the light Saul who became Paul was seeking to arrest “*any who belonged to the Way*.” After his conversion Paul was preaching in the synagogue in Ephesus until some “*spoke evil of the Way*.” In the temple in Jerusalem Paul described himself as “*a persecutor of the Way*” before his conversion, and standing before the governor in Caesarea he admitted that he worshiped God “*according to the Way*”. Even Felix the governor is described by Luke as being “*well informed about the Way*”. That was who they were, those early Christians; they were part of a movement known as the Way who followed the way of the risen Christ to that place with God. Two thousand years later we are the next generations of those who belong to that Way.

Taoism also identifies a Way; it claims there are many deities, but its ultimate principle, Tao, is non-theistic. As one writer describes it:

*The literal translation of Tao is “way” or “path.” It is associated with a life of simplicity, quietude and harmony, both in relation to the natural world, as well as in our interactions with social/political institutions. Being a man or woman “of the Tao” means being attuned to cycles of change; being consciously aware of our place within the web of Life; and acting in the world according to the principles of* [*wu wei*](http://taoism.about.com/od/wuwei/a/wuwei.htm) *– naturalness, ease and spontaneity.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

In Taoism as in Christianity the “Way” is central to life. That description of the Tao in many respects echoes the path which Jesus encourages us to walk – a path of simplicity, harmony, and awareness of our place within the larger web of life. But the unique claims we make as those who belong not to Taoism but to the Way of Jesus are these:

there is just one God, the Lord, who is the Creator of heaven and earth, the Sustainer and Redeemer of all things; and

in Jesus Christ God is revealed to us uniquely, for he is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

In making those claims we affirm that the Way we follow is the unique way Jesus showed us. To know Jesus is to know God, for in Jesus we see God at work in our midst leading us on a path of love and self-sacrifice, a path of faith and faithfulness, a path we walk confidently without fear or trembling.

Jesus comes to teach us by his words and example so that we may walk in that righteous way. But he also comes to ***be*** the path so that by his life, death and resurrection we may be restored to right relationship with God. He is the way for all people, for by his action the whole world is offered the way into right relationship with God. “*Making and restoring relationship is in the nature of God*,” writes Samuel Wells.[[2]](#endnote-2) When Jesus says there are many dwelling places in his Father’s house he is saying that there is room for all of us to be in right relationship with God, to have a place with God, to be at home with God. It is said that “home is where the heart is.” Well, our hearts are at home with God. In the words of Martin Luther, “God is what you hang your heart upon.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The way of Jesus is hanging your heart there upon God; loving God with your heart, soul, mind and strength; and trusting God with your life.

Jesus offers that way as a balm to the troubled hearts of the disciples and to us. The disciples were troubled by Jesus imminent departure. Two thousand years later our hearts remain troubled in the midst of this pandemic and a suddenly collapsing economy; they are troubled by a suspicious spot on a CAT scan, the death of a loved one, a broken relationship, another racist attack in Georgia, or the reality of climate change. To anxious disciples of every age, Jesus says, “Do not let you hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe all in me.” Do not be afraid. Do not despair. Do not worry. For, you have a place with God! Jesus, whose own heart will be troubled as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, offers these words as a balm for our anxious souls. The way away from anxiety, away from the trouble of troubled hearts, away from the panic of a pandemic is the way of Jesus that offers a place with God in life and in death. Hang your hearts there, all you with troubled hearts; shelter-in-place with God, and be at peace. Amen

1. Elizabeth Reninger, Taoism.about.com [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, Eerdmans Publishing:2017, p.149 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cynthia A. Jarvis, *Feasting on the Word: Year A*, Vol.2, Westminster John Knox Press: 2010, p.467 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)