

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Our Bible in a Bible: Us With God

John 14:1-3

This is the final installment of our Bible in a Bible series and for the benefit of our guests and visitors each message has been stand alone. You don't need to be aware of what we've talked about in previous weeks to benefit from the theme of the day. But I do want to retell the story that has provided the foundation of what we've been doing through the Lenten weeks leading up to Easter.

In the south Pacific during World War II the Japanese had a particular concentration camp for allied prisoners of war. Since the Japanese weren't inclined to follow the Geneva Convention articles for the treatment of war prisoners those held captive endured very depressing conditions. The ranking officer among the prisoners came to the commander of the camp with a request for Bibles so the men could observe their faith. For his insolence the officer was sentenced to thirty days in solitary confinement. The rest of the prisoners decided to do something to surprise their superior once he served his time.

Using Yankee ingenuity they gathered dried palm fronds and wove them into notebook sized sheets. They then bound them together into a book and experimented with what could be used as ink. The best candidate was their own blood diluted with whatever it was they received to drink during mealtime. Then they sent out the message to their comrades. *"What passages, psalms, and stories can you recall from the Bible? Our plan is to collect them in the company book we've created."*

Prisoners began to come forward with scriptures imbedded in their hearts and memories. Some they'd learned in Sunday school, others they'd come across on their own for whatever reason. Some had been read at their wedding, others at the funerals of loved ones. Out they came and soon the makeshift Bible was filled from beginning to end. When the ranking officer was finally released the men presented him with the palm paged heavy book. *"What's this?"* he asked. *"We call it our Bible in the Bible for it represents everything we could remember contained in the scriptures."* For those prisoners the Bible within the Bible became something very special to help them through their ordeal.

In putting our own version of a Bible within the Bible together last week I made a case for one of the two foundational messages of Jesus, a message so special we'd certainly want one scripture of that type in our collection. It's Jesus' message of God With Us. It's

told, for example, in the Christmas story that in our lives we have God With Us ... Emmanuel.

To complement that we have the Easter story with the other great foundational message of Jesus that needs to be in our Bible in a Bible for it turns the God With Us words around to assure us that on the scale of eternity it will be Us With God. *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also".*

Us With God, you see, and getting there from the tone of the writer of John's Gospel stirs some of the same concerns and experiences we might feel before embarking on any trip. There is anxiety, "let not your hearts be troubled." But Jesus answers with these assurances: "Where I'm going you're going," "I'll prepare the way and the place," and "Don't worry, there's plenty of room."

In terms of the anxiety, I continue to marvel at and envy many of the senior members of the church who tell me, as one did this past week, "I'm ready, there is no fear." Whether lives have been difficult or comfortable, tragic or filled with joy, or somewhere in between many have said without reservation, "I'm ready, there is no fear." Perhaps it's because they are at the end of a trail we all find ourselves upon. When we are young we're consumed with feelings of invincibility. Death is barely an after thought. Then as we hit middle age and begin to deal with back problems and decreased stamina, invincibility is replaced with vulnerability. We begin to push the prospect of death away by countering with anything from a change in lifestyle to plastic surgery and botox. At some point, however, we move into a state of acceptance. We accept we are no exception to the rule and understand it has been this way for everyone who has lived on this planet and it will be so for us as well. And then somewhere between vulnerability and acceptance we make a choice involving believability. *"Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."* That must be the factor in being able to say, "I'm ready, there is no fear."

It seems Benjamin Franklin had reached that point for in writing to his niece about the death of her father and his brother John, he said, *We are spirits. That bodies should be lent us, while they can afford us pleasure, assist us in acquiring knowledge, or in doing good to our fellow creatures, is a kind and benevolent act of God. When they become unfit for these purposes and afford us pain instead of pleasure, instead of an aid become an encumbrance, and answer none of the intentions for which they were given, it is equally kind and benevolent, that a way is provided by which we may get rid of them. Death is that way. Our friend and we were invited abroad on a party of pleasure, which is to last forever. His chair was ready first and he has gone before us. We could not all conveniently start together; and why should you and I be grieved at this, since we are soon to follow, and know where to find him.*

But in getting to that frame of mind we might need some assurances. If Franklin was saying “since we are soon to follow, and know where to find him,” Jesus says to us, “Where I am going you are going.”

In antiquity, the Egyptians are credited with the first resurrection story and thoughts of an inclusive afterlife. At first it was a possibility for royalty and Pharaohs alone, but eventually the afterlife was something that became accessible to all. Legend says that Osiris was the first Pharaoh of Egypt and that his ways were just and upright. But his brother Set coveted the throne and tricked Osiris into a contest to see who could break free from a box. Osiris tried to escape but Set threw the box into the Nile. His queen Isis found the box containing her husband’s body and begged the Lord of Knowledge, Thoth, to help. Together they created the “Ritual of Life,” the embalming method that allowed all people to live forever.

The story continues to twist and turn until Osiris is brought back to life. He learns that nothing that has died can return to stay in the land of the living. So he becomes the great God of the underworld living and ruling in the shadows. In the Egyptian version the resurrection and afterlife come about for purely selfish and self-centered reasons. The fact that others get to achieve it is an unintended consequence. And even with that, the best they can do is live in the shadows of the underworld. With Christ and the Easter story the details are different. Resurrection is not born from selfishness; it is an Us With God divine calculation. *“I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”*

And along with that assurance to calm our troubled hearts and anxiety a second assurance is Jesus saying, “I go to prepare a place for you.”

In planning a trip one of the things we worry about are the accommodations. Will we have good service and what about the view? A television commercial advertising an internet hotel booking company shows a couple checking into a beach front hotel. The only problem is that their room is on the back side overlooking a cemetery. They should have used hotel.com to prepare the way. While the KJV may use the language of mansions...five star hotels...it isn’t about the place per se, we can’t begin to imagine what lies in the beyond. It’s more about the preparation. If there is one we can trust to do that our hearts will not be troubled.

One of my favorite post-resurrection stories is Jesus appearing to the disciples after they’ve had a disappointing night of fishing. He is standing on the beach and asks, “Did you catch anything?” When they give him some fish Jesus prepares them breakfast. He encourages them saying “follow me.” In one sense it’s his way of assuring...of reiterating... “I’ve prepared the way.” Us With God.

And to also alleviate our anxiety and troubled hearts Jesus says, "In my father's house are many rooms." Don't worry, there is room for all. When my family travels to the Outer Banks we stay at the same hotel at the half way point in Virginia. We make reservations so there is always a room waiting. When our son is being put to bed I'll go down to the lobby and read. In the high point of the vacation season person after person will come in asking for a room and the night clerk asks, "Do you have a reservation?" "No," comes the reply. "Then we're sorry, we're full."

There is a sad biblical parallel to that. Perhaps you've heard of the 144,000. It's a concept pulled from the Bible that only 144,000 people will be allowed into heaven. The rest of us are out of luck. It comes from the Book of Revelation and claims, among other things, that these people will be especially selected from the tribes of Israel. It has spawned a cottage industry of genealogical research to trace people's family trees back to one of the twelve tribes. It also claims that those connected to false churches will be disqualified. The list of those churches is quite extensive and every mainline protestant denomination along with the Catholic Church has reason for concern.

For my own part, I'll go with the words of Jesus rather than the hallucinogenic ranting of the anonymous writer of Revelation. "In my Father's house are many rooms." If we, as Jesus asks, "believe in him," then there is room for all. No reservation required.

If we were to carry a few passages of scripture in our hearts and minds, a Bible within the Bible that we could turn to like those prisoners of war to navigate the waters of life, we might want or more importantly need some words...some Easter Us With God words like these:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also".