

Rev. Denise Muller
St. Luke's Episcopal Church
Easter 5A

Over a month ago, as we were beginning to shelter in place in our homes, there was an image going around on social media. The caption read, *"Looking at the Map for Some Travel Ideas."* The picture was the layout of a person's house: a couple bedrooms, the bathrooms, the kitchen, the dining room, the balcony, and the walk-in bedroom closets. In this house there were many rooms, and apparently each room could be a weekend getaway! Given the reactions on social media, many people thought this was a pretty clever way to make light of the reality that most of us wouldn't be going on any vacations in the near future because of this pandemic.

Looking at the map for some weekend travel ideas



Our Gospel text today is also about a dwelling place with many rooms. Jesus has gathered with his disciples for the Last Supper, just before he's about to be arrested. His disciples don't have any idea what's coming, despite him warning that something big is about to happen. They didn't understand why he was talking about his Father's house and its abundance of dwelling places. They were confused by his words about going ahead of them to prepare a place for them, and then returning to bring them to that place.

As you listen to the words of Jesus describing God's house with many dwelling places, what image comes to mind? For some of us, we may at first picture God's house in a literal sense. Like God is this mighty building developer constructing a gigantic house in heaven, continually adding on to this mansion as more souls enter into eternity. We might imagine St. Peter greeting us at the pearly gates and escorting each of us to a room where we'll live forever. I suppose for many of us who've been sheltering-in-place at home for over a month now, the thought of living in the same room for eternity sounds more like a curse than a blessing. Yet this is the image in our Gospel reading today.

A more helpful interpretation of this text may be found in the grammatical link between the Greek words for "dwelling place" and "abiding." These promised "dwelling places" are the experience of abiding in God. Just as in the following chapter of John's gospel when Jesus tells the disciples, "Abide in me..." "Abide in me." We are invited to abide in God... just as God abides in each of us... both now and in eternity. Focusing one's attention to abiding in God, draws a person into a deeper sense of God's peace. Jesus bids his followers to come home to God. Dwelling in God's presence, abiding with God, they will find peace.

And let's also recall Jesus' first words in this text: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled."*

Jesus speaks these words to his disciples as he prepares for his own death. He knows his disciples will soon be overcome with grief. They will regret abandoning him. They will fear what the future may hold for them. While they have no idea of what's about to happen, Jesus knows he will soon be crucified. And his disciples will experience fear, regret, and grief.

Anticipating their feelings and reactions to his death, Jesus prepares them to abide in God's peace. Jesus exhorts his listeners to not allow their hearts to be filled with turmoil. To draw their attention back to God. Just as Jesus abides in God the Father and God the Father abides in Jesus, his followers are to abide in God, as God abides in them. He knows how shocking and disorienting his Passion will be for his disciples. They may feel like the world has gone mad. That by crucifying Jesus, the powers of this world have had the final say. How hard it must have been for the disciples to continue believing in Jesus once he was dragged into corrupt courts, condemned by unjust rulers, tortured by soldiers, nailed to a cross, and then mocked by onlookers. How easily these horrific circumstances could cause them to forget his tender, loving words: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled."*

Just as Jesus bids his disciples to not let their hearts be troubled, Jesus says the same to us today. Can we remember, about two months ago, when other places around the country were beginning to close down? When there was this strange threat that existed else where but supposedly not here? When so many people were saying, *"This will just blow over in a few weeks"* and then suddenly states of emergency were being declared? Do we remember how it felt when Arizona's stay at home order went into effect?

Amid this upheaval and disruption in our world and our local community, as we've been living together through this strange, new pattern of social distancing, have we remembered Jesus' words, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled?"*

Have we noticed God dwelling with us during this difficult time? And how do our concerns during this time relate to how we're called to live together as followers of Jesus? Concerns about loved ones throughout our country and around the world? About those whose occupations put them at greater risk for contracting the virus? About folks who are grieving the death of loved ones? Amid our concerns and frustrations in this pandemic, how might we be finding, and how might we be overlooking, God's presence abiding around, among, and within us?

God knows what's happening and what's coming. Lord knows we don't! We don't know how and when this pandemic will come to an end. And in the midst of these unknowns, like the disciples, we are invited to dwell in God. God hasn't abandoned us. God is still with us and continues to work in this world.

How are we to retain or create our awareness of God's presence?

We do this through prayer. Whether it's centering prayer, praying with the scriptures, or intercessory prayer, many approaches to prayer can draw our attention to God's presence with us.

We do this through our bodies. Activities like gardening, singing, going for walks, creating art, or any other physical practice that can open us up to the holiness present in daily life.

We do this through our relationships. Being attentive to one another through phone calls, text messages, and letters. Staying connected with one another. Providing masks, supplies, and other donations to ensure that friends, medical personnel, and vulnerable communities have access to the resources they need for their health, safety, and well-being. All of these works can reveal to us, and those with whom we share them, the presence of God abiding in our midst. Jesus reminded his disciples of this amid their confusion in a stressful and disorienting time. In our Gospel text today, listening to Philip's confusion about God dwelling in the person of Jesus, Jesus responds: *"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves."*

Jesus has revealed the presence of God through not only his teaching, but also through his works of healing, casting out demons, and even restoring life to those who had died. If you lose sight of God's presence at this moment in time, recall the ways God has been faithful and present in the past. Recall the tangible signs when Jesus has been at work in your life. Abide in the peace that those memories can bring. And carry that forward to share that peace as widely and deeply as you can.

God abides with us in this time of pandemic. There are many ways in which we can comfort, encourage, and support one another. There are ways we can pray for, support, and provide for one another. For everyone working to keep necessary supplies stocked, medical facilities running, communities safe, and the vulnerable attended to with loving care. This marks our lives as disciples and followers of Christ. In doing so, we draw our attention to dwelling in the presence of God, in a place prepared for us. AMEN.