

Grounded in Grace

John 14:25-27; John 20:19-23

March 22, 2020 – Lent IV

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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We're continuing our Lenten sermon series about how our faith tradition, which we talk about each Sunday morning, impacts and shapes our lives the rest of the week, beginning on Monday morning. When we planned this sermon series several months ago, we had no idea of the circumstances in which we would actually be preaching it. The days through which we are living, not only as a congregation, nor even as a country, but as an entire world – days when people need to stay home, day when the coronavirus pandemic has upended our daily lives and routines, affecting businesses and restaurants and gathering spaces, closing schools and stopping sports, focusing our attention on what many of us previously thought were harmless things like touching our faces, or boring rituals like washing our hands.

So many of us are having an entirely new experience of human vulnerability and fragility, how quickly life can change, and how social gatherings – which have been fundamental for so many of our interactions, not to mention for the lives of faith communities – now can actually undermine our well-being, which is why we have suspended our in-person worship and groups here at Lewinsville. Life has changed quickly in lots of ways.

Today is the 4th Sunday in the season of Lent, as we are moving towards Holy Week and Easter. The eagle-eyed among you will have noticed that, though we are in the 4th Sunday of Lent, one of our two Scripture passages today comes from the *Easter* narrative of John 20.

This is perhaps one way you can know that we have deviated from the revised common lectionary during this sermon series.

But before you get too worried that the lectionary authorities are going to come and press charges, we may remember that, as Dan Thomas reminded us in our Wednesday Bible Study this past week, each Sunday – even the Sundays during Lent – is understood to be a “little Easter.” A fun fact, which some of you may know, is that the 40 days of Lent, between Ash Wednesday and Easter, do not actually include the Sundays. There are actually 46 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, because the Sundays don’t technically count. At this point, some of you are opening your calendars to check me on that, and to count the days between Ash Wednesday and Easter. We’re going to continue the sermon, and you can pick it back up and join us when you finished counting.

Our texts today are about the Holy Spirit and God's presence with us. What our two texts today are teaching us – the one from John 14 and Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, as well as the one from John 20 and Jesus' resurrection appearance – is that, *whatever may happen to us in our future, we are not going to be alone.*

And if we ever needed a reminder that we are not alone, it is right now. Right now, when we are sequestered in our homes and apartments. Right now, when this sanctuary is empty, and we are having to imagine your beloved faces as we are speaking and praying. Right now, when people are being laid off and having work canceled. Right now, when businesses and organizations are having to make agonizing choices about how to continue their work while keeping people safe. Right now, when the compassionate thing to do towards others is to stay home and avoid physical contact with each other, so that we do not put each other at risk. Right now, what these texts are teaching us is that *you are not alone*. Even if you are sitting in your room by yourself, and have not seen or been in the same room with another person for days now, you are not alone, because God is with you through the power of the Holy Spirit. This will never change, no matter what may come.

The text from John 20 strikes an unusually powerful chord with our experience right now. The disciples have locked themselves in the house out of fear. In their case, they're not afraid of being exposed to the *coronavirus*, they're afraid of the religious authorities coming after them because they are affiliates of Jesus, who has just been executed as an enemy of the state. But they have locked the doors to keep the threat out, just as we are closing our doors and keeping our distance to keep ourselves safe.

But their fear does not keep Jesus away, and neither will ours. Jesus comes and stands among them and offers them his peace. Jesus gives them his peace multiple times, perhaps because he knew that they, like us, might have a hard time accepting it the first time. In precisely the same way, our fear does not keep Jesus away from us. The circumstances of our lives may be fearsome and scary, but those circumstances do not keep Jesus away. He comes into your life and into mine, stands with us, and imparts to us his peace, over and over.

And then, he breathes on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. This is another remarkable point of contact with our current circumstance, when we are having to keep 6 feet away from other people so that we cannot breathe on each other. This offers us a remarkable devotional practice, which is that when you close your eyes in your prayer life, though you are needing to keep away from the breath of others, you may imagine that the gracious Spirit breath of Jesus is falling upon your face, over and over, renewing you, giving you new life, equipping you for your life of forgiveness, and giving you all the sustaining power that you will need in the days ahead.

John 14 teaches us that the Holy Spirit is with us, right in our daily lives, to remind us of Jesus' words, to help us call to mind the particular words that we need

to hear in a particular moment. And what the words of Jesus intend to bring us – no matter what trouble we are facing – is a steady, grace-filled peace. “My peace I give to you, and I do not give to you as the world gives.” The world gives to you, but only if you can afford it. The world gives to you, but only if the world thinks you’re good enough. The world gives to you, but only if you’re cool enough, or important enough, or part of the right group or party or tribe. But Jesus gives to you purely out of his grace. We are grounded in grace.

Friends, we are living through a most challenging season. It seems likely that this crisis – as with most crises – will call forth the best in us, and it may provoke the worst in us. We may see others, and we may be tempted in our own lives, to engage in acts of hoarding or panic or great anxiety. We may see others, and we may be tempted in our own lives, to attack people or demean or stereotype others, out of our own great anxiety and fear.

But we will also see, and we may be summoned in our own lives, to acts of wisdom and compassion. We will see, and we may be summoned in our own lives, to acts of generosity and patience and neighborliness. This time is creating great difficulty and distress, but it will also open up and generate new patterns of daily life. And there may well be opportunities during this time of enforced isolation from each other, to discover the spiritual fruits that are borne in times of solitude. When the rhythms of daily life are slowed down out of necessity, we may be able to cultivate new rhythms and new patterns in our days. And I don’t only mean that we may have more time to walk the dog, although it does seem that dogs may get more attention than under normal circumstances.

But during this time of enforced isolation and less activity, we may find that we have time for silence and quiet prayer, in ways that we did not have before. This can be important, for while it is the case that the peace of Christ comes to us without our needing to earn it, it is also the case that we must actively and consciously receive that gift into our lives. Spiritual growth does not happen automatically; our ego patterns and various compulsive behaviors are far too ingrained for that.

During this time, we can consciously give time to sitting still and being aware of God’s presence. Start with 5 or 10 minutes of this, and perhaps over time, work up to 20 minutes. We can feel Jesus’ breath upon our face. We can let go of the 10,000 different thoughts and worries that spring up, allow them to float past us, and give our attention to the presence of God right in the midst of our fears and concerns and situations. If we build that kind of a daily practice into our lives during these weeks of physical separation and isolation, we may find that we can begin to make a habit of that, which we can carry forward when this crisis has passed.

Friends, you and I are grounded in the grace and peace of Jesus Christ, and Christ’s grace and peace come to us by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves around us and through us, and as we open ourselves to it, the Spirit deepens and extends our roots down into that grace. Christ’s grace and peace are the ground upon which

we live, they are the ground in which our lives take root, and they are the ground upon which we stand as we face all of the challenges of our days. To God, and to God alone, be all praise, honor, and glory, now and forever. Amen.