

## **HOLY LAND**

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

John 14:18-23

July 8, 2018

Sometimes in life, we go through trying times. During such times it's not unusual to feel worn out and even discouraged. This can happen to us as individuals, as families and also as a congregation. As I look back over the past several months, we as a congregation have experienced the death of several dear friends in Christ, and we miss them. Sadly, we also said goodbye to one who had worked among us in ministry for over 15 years. As we continue to look around us we might also wonder where other brothers and sisters in Christ have gone, not the ones who have died or moved away but the ones who have just disappeared. The general decline in overall attendance and the lack of income to cover our expenses place a burden of discouragement on our hearts.

Of course, it hasn't all been discouraging. Many of us have had meaningful and joy-filled experiences that have touched our hearts and lifted our spirits. Our lives as individuals and as a church are definitely not all doom and gloom, but that doesn't mean those awful feelings don't seem very overwhelming at times. But during times such as these, it's important to remember that our faith is one of hopeful expectation; our God is able to take that which is sad, discouraging and life-less and bring forth new life and hope. Our faith offers us great encouragement, but it's also true that getting away can give us a different perspective and can even lead to spiritual renewal.

So, on this summer weekend right after the 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday when many have chosen to be at the lake, cabin, camp ground, or away on some other scheduled vacation, I propose a getaway for all of us who have chosen to gather here today. For the purpose of lifting our spirits and giving us a different perspective, I propose we take a spontaneous trip. Now I know some of you are thinking, "Who will feed the dog and cut the grass?" But let's not worry about such things right now, let's just focus on our trip. Because we are a church, I am of the opinion that our trip should be God inspired and led – in other words, it should have a holy sense about it.

Since we just left behind a National holiday week, a natural choice might be to hop on a bus and head to Washington DC. While there we could see the war memorials – WWII, Korean, and Vietnam. I've seen them all, and they are each inspiring. The Lincoln Memorial is a remarkable place – on one wall beside the statue of Lincoln is the Gettysburg Address and on the other wall is his second inaugural address. I always find the reading of those words inspiring. Then there's the National Archives where the Declaration of Independence, Constitution and other historical and truly significant documents in our country's history are housed. There is Arlington Cemetery – Kennedy's tomb, the changing of the guard, and all the flags we would see displayed on the graves. All of these and other sights and memorials bring to our mind the courage and sacrificial spirit of those who came before us. In the midst of such a trip we may just feel as though we are standing on Holy ground. And it could be that such a Holy Land trip may be exactly what we need to inspire us on a mid-summer day such as this.

Of course, there are other trips we could take and other Holy Land on which to stand. We could head to Cleveland Hopkins and hop on a plane to London. We could visit some of the places where John Wesley preached, the place where his heart was strangely warmed, and the Wesley Chapel that became the heart of the Wesleyan

movement and eventually the Methodist church. We could ponder for a bit on Wesley's statement, "The world is my parish," and I think we might just be inspired by how Wesley took the gospel out from the tall steeples and carried it into the fields and the coalmines, the corner pubs and the shipyards blessing the lives of those people who felt forgotten, neglected and excluded from the church of that day.

We could then board a plane to Germany to reflect on the life and contributions of Martin Luther. Luther was a remarkable man of faith who took a strong stand against what had become a corrupt church as he threw himself into reforming it. From there, we could head to Rome. All of us could profit from a visit to Rome, the center of the Christian church for centuries. From there, the flame of faith was kept alive during hundreds of years when life was filled with darkness, disease, and despair.

Greece would also be a good and holy destination. I really would like us to stop in Athens and take a little time to visit some of the places where Paul preached and where he started churches. He was not real successful in Athens, but while there he preached up on the hill named Areopagus, near the Parthenon. We could go up there. Somebody in the group could read from Acts 17, the sermon of Paul in Athens, then we could run down to Corinth. One of you could read 1 Corinthians 13: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal." Maybe we could take some time to get on a bus and run up to Philippi far to the north in the mountains, where Paul started a church. What a wonderful church that was! "I thank my God every time I remember you... (Phil 1:3) said Paul. He also said to them, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." (Phil 1:21) What a remarkable letter Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. We could go there and then somebody could read Philippians to the group for our devotions – it is only four chapters so I think we could sit and listen that long.

Then we could travel on to TelAviv, into Israel itself, into what many people officially call the Holy Land. We would go from TelAviv down to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born – we would need to bend low as we enter through the door of humility at the Church of the Nativity. Then we could head way up north to Nazareth, where he grew up, became a carpenter, and where Luke says at the age of thirty he left home to begin his ministry of teaching and healing. We could make our way over to the town of Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus later resided and where he conducted much of his ministry. We might walk from the site of the synagogue ruins over to the house of Peter like Jesus did on that day he healed Peter's mother-in-law. (Mark 1:29-31) Perhaps we could then go across the Sea of Galilee in a small boat and experience what that would have been like for Jesus and his disciples. Then we could turn southward through Samaria and stop at Jacob's well where Jesus talked with a Samaritan woman. We would continue traveling south, and as we neared the city of Jerusalem we would descend from the Mount of Olives, and take a little time as we pass through the Garden of Gethsemane to reflect on Jesus' agonizing prayer and arrest in that place. From there, we would enter the great and holy city of Jerusalem – the place where Jesus ate his last supper before he was tried, crucified, buried in a tomb, and then raised from the dead.

What a trip that would be – walking where Jesus walked – visiting places where some of the great preachers and reformers of the church taught and inspired others! I think such a Holy Land trip might lift all our spirits and inspire us. But I know that some of you are worried about the dog and others are concerned about the cost of such a trip. Therefore, I have an alternative plan. I invite you to a Holy Land trip by taking your Bible sometime this afternoon and going somewhere quiet where you can

sit alone, either inside or outside, and read the text for today from John 14. This text is part of Jesus' farewell speech to his followers. He was addressing his disciples who were worrying about what they would do if Jesus was no longer with them. They were questioning how they would ever be able to get along when his holy presence was gone from their midst.

In fact, one of the things that really bothered those first readers of the Gospel of John was that they were no longer living at a time and place to know Jesus in human form, and they strongly felt his absence. The Gospel of John was written well after Jesus' death, and the people of that day wondered, "What about us? Is ours only a second hand faith? Do we have to keep our faith alive by just reading about it in a book? Do we have to live all of our lives on a thin diet of fond memories of what used to be when disciples were actually able to walk with Jesus, hear him teach, see him heal?"

Those first readers of John's Gospel were thinking about that, and so Jesus emphasizes in verses 16-17 of the fourteenth chapter of John that he is not going to leave them "orphaned, but will come to them." The Father will send an Advocate, the "Spirit of truth," and this spirit will "abide with you," in fact, it will actually "be in you." There will be no loss of power or presence, because wherever you are, the Holy Spirit will be with you always.

Then Jesus said something else in verse 23, something I think many people forget, he said, "Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." Just a little earlier in chapter 14 Jesus said, "I am going to prepare a place for you;" often we focus on the promise of that heavenly future place. But in verse 23, Jesus emphasizes that he and the father will come and make their home in us, and so we become the place Jesus is preparing. Which means that wherever we are – here, there, anywhere – if we are there and God is in us, then that place becomes Holy Land. That place becomes sacred not because of us, but because of God's presence in us. I wonder if it might be possible today for each of us to claim that promise for ourselves and to be that Holy Land for one another and for all whose paths we will cross in the week ahead.

Might we actually take some time today to enjoy and appreciate and live our faith? Might it be possible to hurry, scurry, and worry less, so that we can instead focus on the One who takes up residence within us? If we look closely at our daily lives, we may discover lives that are so filled and complicated by other things that there's not actually much room for God. Making room inevitably means getting rid of some of that other stuff, because how can the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit dwell in you and me if there is no room? According to Jesus, this making room involves acknowledging God's love and keeping God's commandments. It happens as we worship and pray, as we tell the truth and serve others. It happens as we make someone else's life better and more abundant because we stopped by, left a note, made a call, took a gift. This is so easy and yet so difficult to do well and consistently in our over-crowded lives.

I have no doubt that a trip to the Holy Land would be inspirational, but we don't actually need to leave this community to have a Holy Land experience. What we need to do is claim Jesus' amazing and inspiring promise – "The Father and I will come to you and make our home with you." (Paraphrase, vs. 23) God is right here, in us and among us. We are God's Holy Land! May it be so to the glory of God! Amen.