



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

I Am the Way, Truth and Life

John 14:1-14

It must be obvious that the hymn we just sang, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” is one of my favorites. I keep a record of the hymns we sing during worship, and since my arrival here we have sung this hymn 39 times, tying it with “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty,” as the second most sung hymn over the past fifteen years. The leader is “O Lord, You Are My God and King.” Hymn selection is one advantage of being the preacher, because according to our Book of Order, she or he gets to choose them. On the other hand, please know that I am always open to suggestions and if you have a favorite hymn or two or a dozen, please let me or Jennifer know and we can squeeze them in when they fit the occasion.

Recall the words the opening words of our first hymn: “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.” That certainly defines one aspect of God, but raises the question, how can we human beings know the immortal, invisible God only wise? We are mortal, God is immortal. We are visible; God is invisible to the eye. God is pure wisdom; we are so ignorant. How can we know and understand God who is so undefinable vast, wonderful, holy, and different? The fact of the matter is we can’t. We cannot know God unless God chooses to reveal God’s self to us, and then we can only know what God chooses for us to know.

I don’t know about you, but I am most uncomfortable around people who think they have God all figured out. When asked a question they know the answer, for they have studied God all their lives and they know God pretty well.

I just don't know God that well, but the good news is we can know what God chooses for us to know about him. I really like the second verse of the hymn, "Nor wanting nor wasting, Thou rules in might; Thy justice like the mountains are high soaring above, Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love." The old Scottish preacher Walter Chalmers Smith used the language of poetry to remind us of three aspects of God, which God has chosen to reveal: His justice, His goodness, and His love.

How do we know this? How do we know, for example, that God is love? Well, even this preacher knows the answer to that question. We know God's love because we know Jesus. Maybe this is why Fulton Oursler wrote the book which was made into a movie, "The Greatest Story Ever Told," for what greater story can we know than the story of God's love made known to us in the person of Jesus Christ?

I'm not smart enough to understand everything about this wonder. Thus I am not able to explain how God was in Christ, or how we believe that in the person of Jesus we have an individual who is 100% human while at the same time being 100% God. How did God do that? I don't know, but God being God did it. I do know that there was something about Jesus, his character, his compassion, his power, his depth of understanding the human heart that made people, when they experienced him, say, "He makes me think of God." But more than that, when we are in the presence of Jesus Christ we are in the presence of God, and in Christ we see the glory of God.

There have been some people in my life that just being around them makes me want to be a better person. There is something about them that make me think of God. There may be somebody like that in your life. Well, can you imagine being in the presence of someone who was twice as good, as the person who makes you a better person? How great would it be to know someone four times the person of whom you are thinking? Now consider Jesus, I would say he is a thousand times that. Now I'm sure that is bad theology when we talk about the infinite nature of God, but when Jesus lived

and walked on this earth those who followed him knew they were in the presence of God.

One day Jesus went up on a mountain and was transfigured before three of his disciples. I don't know exactly what that means. As a matter of fact I am afraid that if I admit any more of my ignorance you may want to fire me and get someone up here who knows what they are talking about. But Jesus was transfigured, and in some way Peter, James and John saw Jesus in all his glory. Then they saw Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus, and to the shock of the disciples they overheard these three, Jesus, Moses and Elijah talking about Jesus' death. And then Jesus came down the mountain, and for the rest of his ministry Jesus prepared the disciples and his followers for the day when he would be taken.

On one occasion, during the last week of his earthly life, maybe in the context of the upper room on the night Jesus was arrested, Jesus said this to his disciples who were absolutely bewildered at the thought of Jesus dying. It is our Scripture lesson for today, John 14:1-14

¹“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In 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? ³And 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. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

I hope you can hear it in the response of Thomas and Philip that those who knew Jesus were afraid of what was to come. They were afraid that Jesus would be taken from them. They had been drawn into such a close bond with Jesus that it was painful to think of a separation from him. Consider the close

bond between parent and child. Think about it from the parent's point of view for some children are all too ready to break the bond, but how painful is it when there is a separation of parent and child? You help a child pack their car to go off to school, and they, with great excitement cannot wait to begin their new adventure, and as mother and father watch the car drive off they are too choked up to speak. They just turn around and walk slowly into the house and look for a tissue. We are all painfully aware that the closer the bond the deeper the pain. And the bond between Jesus and his followers was deep.

I will never forget the day Sally and I drove our oldest son Mark to Texas Tech. We helped him unpack his stuff, stayed with him as long as we could, but eventually we had to drive away, leaving him at the university. I could not drive far, and pulling into a bank parking lot, Sally and I broke down and wept. The closer the bond the greater the pain of separation.

One preacher had the most peculiar notion, if you can believe it, and you can laugh at him if you think it appropriate. He actually thought, he actually thought that the people in his congregation had such a deep bond that they missed each other when they were absent from any gathering of the church. He understood that if someone missed church it had to be because they were either called out of town or they were sick, for why else would they miss? When someone missed church and he knew they were not on a trip he was so concerned about their health that he would call them to see how they were doing. It never occurred to him that they might have just been fishing, or picnicking, or sleeping late, or playing golf, or on the lake. He actually thought that Christian people have such a deep bond that if one member is absent the rest of the body felt that absence. Tell me that it is not true, that church is only a matter of whether or not we feel like getting up and going today. Tell me that we are a family with a bond so deep that we all feel the pain of separation.

I believe this is a church family, and I hope that our prayers for each other, our concern for one another, our love for each other and for our Lord unites us even within our political and social differences, and I long for the day

when every member of this church would feel so close to this family that not one of us can go missing without the rest of us noticing.

Speaking about the pain of separation, the disciples were about to face the most painful separation. It's the parting that comes due to a death. The degree of pain that comes from separation is intensified greatly when the pain comes in the form of a death of one we love.

As a pastor, I am often called upon to bring comfort when all I can really do is remind us of hope. If one is suffering great pain over the loss of a loved one, it is a tribute to the great love that was shared.

As time moves on fewer and fewer remember the name Peter Marshall, maybe the greatest Presbyterian preacher of the 1900's. He was called into the ministry when he lived in Scotland, then after coming to America he served churches in Georgia before moving Washington. Following World War Two, he became the chaplain to the U.S. Senate.

On one occasion he was asked to address the cadets at West Point. What an honor! And he looked forward to the experience. As he searched for what God would lie on his heart to speak about, he decided upon the topic of death. And, boy, he got into a lot of trouble! He got letters from faculty and parents questioning why on earth he would speak about death. After all most of the young men in his audience were only 18 to 22 years old. Why did they need to hear about death? They were the blossom of the country, the finest in the land.

West Point never invited him back. But what Marshall was trying to say was that death does not care about age. Death does not give one whit about how old a person is. Separation caused by death can happen at any age.

One evening driving home to Coleman, Texas from Abilene, I came across death and I was the one who was there before the police or ambulance arrived. It came in the form of a drunk driver who did not make the bend in the road. Death came in the twisted steel and broken glass of a head-on

collision. The drunk driver had a broken leg, but otherwise survived in pretty good shape. But for the young driver of the smaller car, death came quickly. She was only seventeen years old.

A fourteen year old youth in the church I served in Coleman jumped into a jeep with some friends and when they sped off the driver lost control. The jeep rolled over. No one else was hurt. She was only fourteen years old, energetic, enthusiastic, excited to be alive, her whole life in front of her, killed instantly when her neck broke. Death snatches young and old at any time. Death will even slip its icy fingers into the nursery where a sleeping child simply stops breathing. Some of you know the pain.

The closer the bond, the greater the pain of separation. And there was Jesus, taken from his friends at Gethsemane and led to a cross. And the pain of separation is made greater when you consider the way a person dies. “Grandma was 107 years old, lived a good life, she just went to sleep, and everyone gave thanks for God’s mercy.” Then there is Jesus nailed to a cross – stripped naked in front of everybody. There were the vulgar mouthed soldiers hurling insults. Others mocked him, made fun of him. “Jesus you saved others, can’t you save yourself.” He was hanging there naked in public view, and he died.

The pain of separation is intensified by the character of the one who dies. I understand that in Gulfport, Mississippi, there is an epitaph on a tombstone that reads, “Here lies the body of old Bob Dent; he kicked up his heels and to hell he went.” Something tells me that there was not a lot of pain caused by the death of old Bob Dent. But think of Jesus. He never turned his back on a human need. Never did he say an untrue word. He included everyone who would come. His character had a profound affect upon the pain of his separation from those who loved him.

Jesus knew the pain his death would cause his friends and his family. But he knew it was coming so he told them often about the counselor that would come. Trying to soften the blow, he told them in our Scripture text

today, **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust me. In my Father’s house there are many rooms, and I go to prepare a place for you. And I will come again and we will be together and nothing will ever separate us again.”** But for now, during our separation I am sending the Holy Spirit. He will be with you. He will lead you into the truth. He will guide you. He will make my words known to you.

Well, at the time I don’t think Jesus succeeded in comforting his disciples. I mean, look at their response. “We don’t know where you are going. We don’t understand anything you are talking about. What does all this mean?” Well, the Holy Spirit had not come yet, but the day came when they understood. But the coming separation was most painful.

On Good Friday the separation came. Then came the resurrection, but Jesus left again, this time at the ascension in a more glorious way, but Jesus was absent, and remember the closer the bond the greater the pain of separation.

As we consider the separation of Jesus from his followers, I was wondering, have you ever felt the distance of separation from Jesus Christ? Have you ever felt the way Jesus did on the cross when he cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Why have you left me? I’m sure we all have. There are those times when it feels like God has pulled back. I don’t for a moment believe that God has actually removed his presence. God the Father was there with tears when Jesus died.

I heard the story of a minister who was born without arms. It was a horrible birth defect. His mother had to dress him, feed him, take care of him, but the day came when his mother realized that she would not be around forever. So she came into his room and said, “After you get dressed, your breakfast is on the table.” “Well, mama, you know I can’t get dressed; I don’t have any arms.” “No, you get dressed, and then go feed yourself.”

That boy screamed, threw a temper tantrum, yelled for help, and as he got hungrier and hungrier he decided that he was not going to get anything to

eat until he got dressed, and he was not going to get dressed unless he figured out a way to do it. It took him almost two hours to get dressed. Then he walked to the kitchen and spilled a gallon of milk as he figured out how to use his legs and feet to prepare and feed himself a bowl of cereal. Later he found out that his mother was always nearby. She was only as far as the next room, weeping.

I know there are times when we feel God has distanced himself from us, but God is always there, and sometimes God is weeping. When you are going through those times, those times when you cry out to God and you feel your prayers are just bouncing off the clouds, what do you do? How do you handle those occasions when you feel abandoned?

Well, one thing we have is our memory. Remember the good times when you felt the presence of God at work. Remember the promise that God does not leave you alone, you are not an orphan, and God's spirit is present whether or not you feel his presence. Remember those times of profound worship. Remember the Lord's Table. Remember that you are baptized into Christ Jesus. Remember the old songs and hymns that strengthen your faith, and remember the words of Scripture.

Thomas, wanting to know the way to this peace, told Jesus, "We don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Jesus said, "**I am the way, the truth and the life.**" There is not a literal path to follow, no road less traveled by, but there is only Jesus. He is the way to peace, his the way of hope, and he will never, ever leave us even as he prepares that place in his Father's house for us.

I cannot imagine today how people of no faith survive, especially our young people who grow up and don't know any of the great hymns of the faith. They cannot quote a verse of Scripture. Oh, they know every level of the latest video game by heart--all 274 levels of tricks and maneuvers, but cannot tell you one verse of Scripture. How will they ever make it? Things may seem easy now, but one day they too will experience the pain of separation, and

how will they cope? It frightens me. But that is why we are here this morning. We are making memories, we are learning Scripture, we are affirming the presence of God in our lives. We are a family, and together we follow in both good times and painful times the one who is the way, the truth, and the life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.