

SERMON TITLE: "A Biblical Road Trip: A Highway to God"
SERMON TEXT: John 14:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 30, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Laura did some pretty intense wind damage to Louisiana on Thursday night. In the days and hours prior to landfall, authorities along the Gulf Coast were sounding the alarm and trying to get people to move out of harm's way. Those residents who took the warnings seriously clogged highways and interstates. Due to COVID-19 requirements for more social distance, storm refugees had to spread out farther than normal, causing some to ride on buses for as many as four hours to find emergency shelter.

If people didn't evacuate in time, their pathways could have been impeded by traffic, fallen trees, or water. In advance of the storm, Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards warned that "flooding could close parts of Interstate 10, which is about 30 miles north of the coastline." It turned out that Texas wasn't hit nearly as hard as Louisiana, but before that was a sure thing, the mayor of Port Arthur, Texas, put the need for evacuation in clear terms. He warned his city's residents, "If you decide to stay, you are on your own. I will not put my [emergency rescue] people in harm's way. If you stay," he said, "it is you and God."¹

Hit the highway now, or pray to God for your safety. Or preferably both.

During this month of August, we here at Ogden First United Methodist Church have mostly been staying safe by remaining close to home. But, because home can get a little bit boring, we've also been adventuring out on some biblical road trips. Many of you will recall that we have traveled along Isaiah's scenic highway to hope, tagged along with Ruth and Naomi on a highway to home, observed the Good Samaritan on a highway to service, and caught up with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on a highway to understanding. Today, we have one final road to travel. Using John 14 as our guide, I invite you to explore with me "A Highway to God."

1—WINDS THROUGH THE INDWELLING WAY OF JESUS

According to Jesus' words to his disciples in John 14, a highway to God is characterized, first of all, by how it winds through the indwelling way of Jesus. The dialog between Jesus and Thomas is all about this way to God. In verse four, Jesus says, "And you know the way to the place where I am going." In verse five, Thomas replies, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Then, in verse six, Jesus responds, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

"I am the way." Can you imagine being one of the disciples and hearing Jesus say that? We would probably stand there just like they did, scratching our heads and wondering what Jesus meant. Jesus had already explained and demonstrated this so many times before. And, yet—just a *little* exasperated—Jesus had the patience to wind through this indwelling way one more time.

Today, it helps us to *re-wind* to the beginning of John's Gospel. In chapter one, the Gospel writer prepared us to travel the way of Jesus by stating, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived [or dwelt] among us" (vv. 1, 14). In John's theological understanding, Jesus was co-eternal with God from the very beginning, and Jesus was fully engaged in the process of Creation. And then, when the time was right, God sent his only Son Jesus into the world, in the human flesh of the world, to dwell here with us, as one of us. That word translated "live" or "dwell" literally means "to pitch his tent" among us. Whatever kind of experiences humans were having, so was Jesus, even if that meant being born in a barn.

Then, in John chapter 14, this idea of dwelling comes up again in verse one. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me," said Jesus. "In my Father's house are many dwelling places." In verse three, Jesus indicates, "Where I am, there you may be also." It's kind of like a foreign exchange student program. Jesus came here to live with us for a temporary time. And, now that Jesus has gone back home, he's inviting us to go there and live with him. Fortunately, his offer is much better than ours ever was. Jesus is inviting us to dwell with him forever in his Father's spacious house. Jesus has laid out the map for us. A highway to God winds through Jesus' indwelling way.

2—TRAVELS THROUGH THE TEACHING TRUTH OF JESUS

According to John 14, a highway to God also travels through the teaching truth of Jesus. When Jesus said, “I am the way, the *truth*, and the life,” he was reminding Thomas and Philip and the other disciples all that he had taught them over their years in ministry together. Remember, Jesus was saying, the truth of the first great commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mk 12:30). At that same time, Jesus had taught them the second great commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk 12:31).

No doubt, Jesus was hoping his followers would recall his truthful teaching that “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Mt 20:16). Jesus wanted his disciples to recall that “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness sake, for they will be filled.” Jesus hoped that they would hold on to the truth that they should “love [their] enemies and pray for those who would persecute [them]” (Mt 5:44). Jesus wanted them to remember his teaching that “my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21).

And, of course, at this time when Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for his own departure from them, Jesus hoped they would recall what he had said to Mary, when her brother Lazarus was dead in the tomb. Jesus’ truth to her that day was, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet will they live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn 11:25).

Now, here in John 14, when his disciples seem troubled and confused, Jesus tries teaching them more about the truth of his relationship with God. Jesus explains that he and the Father are so closely united that, by seeing and knowing Jesus, his followers have already seen and known God. This concept isn’t complicated. Finding your way to God isn’t hard. You won’t go astray if you just keep things simple by focusing on Jesus and Jesus alone. God the Father is present and glorified in Jesus the Son.

Today, we might ask about other world religions. Don’t Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism also teach that they provide faithful paths to God? Yes, they do teach that. And that’s OK. I

don't think we need to read Jesus' words in John 14:6 as being exclusive of other faith traditions. When Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me," I think he was just trying to give his confused and overwhelmed disciples some fail-safe instructions. There might be some other ways to reach God, but we can be sure that we won't get lost if we keep traveling in this lane. For us, a sure highway to God travels through the teaching truth of Jesus.

3—LEADS THROUGH THE LIFE-GIVING WORKS OF JESUS

Of course, not every truth that Jesus conveyed was taught in words. Some lessons are most clearly taught by the observation of deeds well done. In John 14:8 and following, when Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus speaks of both his words and the life-affirming, life-sustaining, life-restoring, and *life-giving works* of compassion and strength that God had done through Jesus. In verse 11, Jesus says, "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."

Maybe a review of those life-giving works that God the Father had done through Jesus would help. In just the Gospel of John, Jesus had turned water into wine, healed a paralyzed man, fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish, walked on water, healed a man who had been born blind, and raised Lazarus from the dead. When the Jewish authorities once criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus replied to them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (Jn 5:17). In other words, God was busy working mercy, grace, and healing through Jesus; and by seeing Jesus, others were able to see the life-giving works of God who was dwelling in him.

In fact, said Jesus, those who believed would not only see the works of God *in him*. But soon they would also see God at work *in themselves*. In case you didn't absorb the power of Jesus' words, let me draw your attention to John 14:12. There Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

The way to God isn't just in the truth that God dwells in Jesus and Jesus in God, or even in the works that God accomplished through Jesus during his years on earth. A highway to God also leads us to continue Jesus' ministry today, working together through the local congregation and the world-wide body of Christ. Think of all the good that Christians have accomplished over the centuries and millennia with schools and hospitals and food banks and homeless shelters. Think of the billions of people who have benefitted from God's life-giving works through missionaries, preachers, Sunday School teachers, and everyday Christian folks who allowed God to do those works through their hands and feet and voices. Think what good we can continue to do in the name of God and in the footsteps of Christ. Without a doubt, a highway to God leads through the life-giving works of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Last week I saw a cartoon in *The Christian Century* magazine. The cartoon was a depiction of St. Peter checking someone in at the pearly gates of heaven. The person was the civil rights activist, U.S. Congressman, and faithful Christian servant John Lewis. The conversation bubbles showed John Lewis saying, "I got into good trouble." To that, St. Peter replied, "Then you've come to the right place."²

A highway to God delivers us to the right place, too. And, like John Lewis, we can be sure we're on that good highway if it winds through the indwelling way of Jesus, travels through the teaching truth of Jesus, and leads through the life-giving works of Jesus. So, what are we waiting for? Let's get traveling on a highway to God!

¹ <https://weather.com/news/2020-08-26-hurricane-laura-texas-louisiana-evacuations-preparations>

²Toles, c. 2020, *The Washington Post*, as found in CC, 8/26/20, p. 8.