

The way the lectionary gives us our gospel text is a little unusual. It's an answer to a question, and we don't have the question.

So, we'll back up a step. Judas—and the narrator is careful to let us know that this is not Judas Iscariot—has just asked “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?”

Tough question—and a question that many of us would like a clear-cut answer to. Why us and not those others? Why us and not our neighbors or friends who either don't seem to know Jesus, or who have rejected Jesus, or who struggle with questions that seem to keep them from Jesus? Why us and not them? Or maybe for some of us, some of the time, why all these others and not me?

A tough question, and a good question.

So what we have in our reading is Jesus' answer to that question.

And as is typical in John's gospel, Jesus never answers the disciple's questions in quite the way they might like, or we might like. Jesus doesn't tell them what they want to know, Jesus tells them what they need to know.

And as we think about Jesus' answer, it's helpful to put it in context.

This conversation is part of a larger section in John's gospel that is known as the “final discourse.” Jesus has shared his last meal with the disciples, washed their feet, seen Judas depart for his betrayal and told Peter of his coming denial. Now, having told them he is leaving, he knows they are nervous. In our text he tells them not to let their hearts be

troubled or afraid. The word that is translated afraid, though, has the sense of a cowardly fearfulness. So Jesus' response intends to deal with their fears.

Secondly, we have the context of John's writing of the gospel. Scholars believe that John was writing for a community of Jewish followers of Jesus. These were followers who had originally been a part of a synagogue, and who had expressed their belief in Jesus as messiah within the synagogue. But at some point they had been kicked out of the synagogue and are alienated from that community of faith. John is writing to a community who believe, but who are also afraid and who have many questions—particularly that question about why they believe but others don't—their friends, neighbors, and their families even.

Jesus doesn't answer the question the way that Judas, or John's gathered community, or we might like. But he does give an answer that we all can cling to.

Jesus promises them three things.

First, that those who love Jesus will keep his word and that God will love them and that God and Jesus will come to them and make their home with them. This idea of God making a home with us is related to the same word that so often in John's gospel is translated abide. God will come to us and God will dwell with us. Not sometimes, not partially, but permanently, indestructibly and continually. You can trust that the home that God makes to dwell with each of us is substantially built and made to last—but also strangely portable, to go wherever our particular journey's take us, both literal journeys and those journeys of faith.

Jesus also promises that God will send the Holy Spirit who will teach and help us remember all that we have learned. So the process of knowing God and growing in

relationship with God is ongoing through the power of the Spirit. When it comes to loving Jesus and keeping his words, the promise of the Spirit is a promise of help. This would have been especially welcome news to John's community, a community marginalized and exiled from the larger community of faith.

And finally, Jesus promises his peace. To a anxious and frightened community he promises a peace that is not the peace the world gives, but a peace he alone can give. It's a peace that is the constant and assuring presence of God. A peace that can bring strength and comfort to a troubled heart.

These are the ways that Jesus assures worried and fearful disciples. These are the ways the writer of the Gospel of John brings a word of hope and comfort to a community that has been exiled, and these are ways that we can cling to when we have questions that seem unanswered, when we feel alone, when we worry about those we care about. Jesus promises an abiding presence, Jesus promises the teaching and reminding that the Holy Spirit brings and Jesus leaves his peace. Strengthened by these promises, we can listen for God's guidance and follow God's calling, even in the midst of our questions.

In this Easter season, our first lessons each weekend have been from the book of Acts. Appropriately, we hear how those disciples, formerly frightened and huddled in the upper room, are able—strengthened by God's presence, the teaching of the Spirit and the peace of Jesus—to go out from that upper room and across Jerusalem and points north and east to spread the good news of Jesus.

Today's lesson tells of a particular missionary journey for Paul, Timothy, Silas and perhaps others. If we look earlier in the sixteenth chapter, we hear that they were traveling through Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to go

into Asia. Then they wanted to go to Bithynia but the spirit would not allow that either so they headed down to Troas. During the night in Troas, Paul has this vision where a man of Macedonia calls him there, pleading for help.

So this group takes off heading for Macedonia from Troas to Samothrace to Neapolis and on into Philippi. Not at all where they intended to go but where the Spirit called them to go.

Then once in Philippi—which as a Roman colony would not have had a synagogue within the city limits—they made their way down to the place where people gathered to pray. But once there they didn't encounter the usual male leaders of the Jewish community. Instead they meet up with Lydia, a gentile follower worshipper of God. Lydia is not only a woman, but an unusually powerful and wealthy woman. We know this because she is a dealer in purple cloth, and purple cloth was only worn by upper levels of society. Not only this, but she is the head of a household, which would have been extraordinarily unusual,

Every step of the way, in even this short bit of text from Acts, we find the Holy Spirit guiding the work and way of Paul and his colleagues as they proclaim the word of Jesus. Go here, not there. Meet this person, not those people.

I couldn't help, when reading this story, be reminded of a book I am in the midst of reading. This book tells the story of the author, Patrick Dobson's trip on foot from Kansas City to Helena, Montana. Initially he sets out because he is frustrated with his job and his work and is afraid that he has forced himself into the same kind of life he saw his father live—very unhappily. So, because he has always been drawn by the great plains, he develops this particular plan. The day he is supposed to set out he goes out the door

and walks several blocks, then gets cold feet and comes back home, not sure at all that this is the right thing. But, getting his nerve up, he sets out again the next day. It took a bit for me to get into his story, but then I was just captivated by the stories he told of the people he met, and how he allowed those people to determine where he was going to go and when he would get there. If it were me, I'm sure I would be so task driven that I'd say, "Nice to meet you, but I need to be on my way as I have to get to the next city tonight." But Dobson would stop somewhere for days, or go see something someone wanted to show him, would go sixty miles out of his way (which on foot is a lot of miles...) and would even go back places he had already been.

In the end, the most formative part of the journey for him is the people he meets and the relationships he develops, as he finds people across the country with yearnings just like his and all variety of responses to those yearnings. In fact, one of those people he meets tells him, " You go on and keep being someone people like to meet... I mean that... Walking into people's lives does more good for them than they do for you, though it doesn't always seem that way. This trip you're on, it's not all about you, regardless of whether you know that or not,"

Dobson, who I think from my reading is perhaps an agnostic, allows himself to go where he is guided and all along he ends up trusting the process of putting one foot in front of the other and the overall good will of the people he meets.

We have so much more than that, though. Because we, like the disciples and those members of John's community, have the assurance that God will make a home with us. We have the promise of the Holy Spirit, who will continue to teach us and who will help us to remember all that we have heard, and we have the peace that Jesus gives. A peace

which is so much more than the world can give. And with all those things, we can trust the Holy Spirit to guide us, learning to live with questions that don't have quick or easy answers, learning to put aside our own agendas to listen to and respond to God's will for us, learning to lift our lives to God's care and direction.

And trusting God's abiding presence, we will be strengthened through unexpected relationships, through those people who help make God present in our lives, through those places we never expected to go, yet somehow find that we are able to live the life God calls us to. And in the midst of that, we may find answers to our questions, or we may just learn to keep our questions as travel companions along the way.