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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*August 22, 2021*

*Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 43:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69*

Just a few months before I started my first pastoral call at Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church in San Luis Obispo, California, the Methodist Church in San Luis Obispo that sat high on a hill in the middle of town was completely destroyed by an arson fire early on Easter Sunday morning. Of course, the members of that congregation and the entire city of San Luis Obispo was distraught by such a tragedy. When I arrived a few months later as one of the pastors of the Lutheran church which was located just 2 blocks down the hill from the Methodist church, I heard stories of Methodists in town waking up before dawn that Easter Sunday morning to a cacophony of sirens and looking outside to see flames rising up from their beloved church. When they gathered at the site of the fire, they wondered together, what do we do now, where do we go?

Now, the disciples in the gospel we heard this morning weren't reacting to a fire, but it's possible that they were equally as distressed as those Methodists that Easter Sunday morning. In chapter 6 of John alone they have seen and heard impossible things from Jesus: they experienced Jesus feeding 5,000 people with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread, they watched Jesus walk on water in the middle of the sea toward their boat, and now they hear Jesus say this absurd thing about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. What Jesus said and did was no doubt distressing and confusing to them. In fact, the gospel says in v. 60 that they couldn't accept it, in v. 61 that they grumbled about it, in v. 64 that some did not believe it, and even that there was one that would betray him because of it. And then, as it says in verse 66, "because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." I'm certain that they looked around at each other and wondered the same thing those Methodists did: what do we do now, where do we go?

I wonder if you have had times in your life – perhaps now is one of those times – when life has thrown you such a curve ball that you too have

wondered what to do, where to go. I have been beside myself this week thinking about those in Haiti, those in Afghanistan, who have been uprooted from their homes by an earthquake or an insurgency who must be asking these same questions: what do we do now, where do we go? And I imagine many of us are feeling overwhelmed and nervous once again about rising cases of Covid, even among those who are vaccinated. We are asking ourselves, what can we do, where can we go that is safe?

I think it's appropriate that today, this same day we hear the distress of the disciples and think about the distress of our siblings around the world, that we have recentered our worship space so that we are all surrounding the altar in the middle of these two parts of our memorial garden – the labyrinth and the columbarium area. We've moved the center so that Jesus, the bread of life, is in the middle of all of us. Because that's what Jesus did, over and over again in the gospels, including in today's gospel – Jesus recentered his followers so that no matter where they were, no matter what was going on around them, Jesus provided nourishment and life. Jesus was the bread from heaven, and whoever came to the center, whoever took what Jesus was offering, would abide in Jesus, and Jesus would abide in them.

It seems that Simon Peter was the only one in this gospel story who understood that. When Jesus asked him if he, too, wished to go away, Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." What Peter realized is that the question that the other disciples were asking – the same question the Methodists were asking, the same question those who experience loss ask – what do we do? where do we go? – was perhaps not the right question. Listen again to what Peter asked: Lord, *to whom* can we go? It's not a "where do we go," but a "to whom do we go?"

You see, life in its harshest manifestations – be it evil, the devil, loss, fear – is always going to work to take us away from our center. The ground underneath us may shake – literally or figuratively – and get us off track. Life is going to take us sometimes where we do not want to go. But the promise Jesus gives in this gospel, the promise he makes throughout scripture, is that no matter where we go or what takes us there, whom we go to is what will center us. "Lord, *to whom* shall we go." When we unite ourselves with Christ, the bread of life, God dwells with us and in us and recenters us.

Even Paul in our reading from Ephesians today recenters us around God's promises. Remember, the armor that Paul describes – a breastplate, a helmet, a shield, a sword – this was the type of armor that the Roman soldiers were wearing when they killed Jesus. But Paul says that's it the breastplate of *righteousness*, shoes of *peace*, a belt of *truth*, the shield of *faith*, the sword of the *Spirit* that is really the kind of protection we need. That's a recentering around what's really true. Wherever we find ourselves, whatever life throws at us, we already are clothed with righteousness, peace, truth, faith, salvation, the Spirit. Think about how that can recenter you when you feel unraveled – you already have that kind of protection from God.

There's an ending to the story about the fire at the Methodist Church. The senior pastor of my Lutheran congregation also saw the flames rising up from the Methodist church that Easter Sunday morning and went to the site to provide support. When the Methodist pastor saw him, he asked if they could borrow some chairs to sit outside for Easter worship that morning. Instead, my Lutheran colleague invited the whole Methodist congregation to worship together with the Lutheran congregation, and from that day forward for the next 2 years we shared our building, our altar, our fellowship with the Methodist congregation as they rebuilt their church. No, the Methodists weren't "home," but they were centered around Jesus, the bread of life, who nourished them, abided in them, and recentered them.

In your own life, when you wonder what to do and where to go, wonder instead along with Peter, "Lord *to whom* can we go?" Because no matter where you go, no matter where life takes you, the Lord will always be your center. Amen.