

“Freeing Jesus: Way”

Psalm 86:8-12; John 14:1-7

5th Sunday of Lent

Message for April 3, 2022

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As we consider the many ways to understand “way,” we hear in today’s Psalm echoes of what we’ve explored over these past weeks: references to “Lord” and to “teacher,” as well as acknowledgement - through praise and devotion - of the friendship that is available to us.

Through this language, Psalm 86 offers different entrance points into our relationship with the Divine. This week among our online worship groups, we noted that we each have our own way of finding Jesus; shaped by our perspectives and experiences. We each have our own journey, and on that journey, we can free Jesus from who and what we think he is, what we understand him to be saying and how we perceive what he was doing as he ministered to people a couple of millennia ago, and the ministry that continues to be available to us.

Many of us can relate to the Psalmist who asks God, “give me an undivided heart.” We are often divided in our hearts, yearning for wholeness. We want peace in the world and struggle to put into action what is asked of us in making peace. The same can be said of grappling with issues of climate change and social justice. Yet, that wholeness is available to us as we walk the way of God: “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth.”

This psalm is a prayer that speaks to both the highs and the lows – praise and petition – feeling in turn, both hopeful and helpless. In the book, “Freeing Jesus,” Diana Butler Bass talks about walking the labyrinth. She writes, “The way of Jesus is the way of love. It is also a labyrinth, a ‘meandering purposeful path, from the edge to the center and back again.’ Although I adore the poetry of Isaiah, poetry repeated by Luke - ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.... The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth’ (Luke 3: 4-5; Isa. 40: 3-5) - life and faith do not work that way.”

What is the way of Jesus? Butler Bass tells us, “The Jesus way is full of switchbacks, spirals, and unexpected turns; mystery, paradox, unknowing, unsaying. Whenever you think you are near the center, the path suddenly veers in a different direction, and you find yourself again at the edge of the way. No wonder Jesus says, ‘Follow me’ and ‘I am the way.’ But for a guide, you might never find a path, even if sometimes you are only following breadcrumbs he left behind.”

Today’s reading from the Gospel of John reveals the words of Jesus as he addresses the disciples. In the previous chapter, Jesus gathered with the disciples in the Upper Room for the Passover meal. They were aware of the conflict between Jesus and the authorities, and the danger those conflicts presented. Yet, as he told them what was to come: the upcoming betrayal, his death and resurrection, they understandably became overwhelmed with fear and confusion.

As Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” he reveals who he is and why he came to walk among us. Diana Butler Bass notes, “...Jesus uses these terms to explain how he embodies a way of being in this world so close to the heart of God that God can be known in and through Jesus.” We are provided an opening to know God more deeply through Jesus.

Diana points out that the disciples are buffeted between fear and love. They are afraid of losing their dear friend, teacher, and companion. They do not want to be separated from Jesus, and his words are frightening them. What are they to do? Where is he going? What does he mean that those within their tightknit circle will betray and deny him?

Jesus assures them that such estrangement and isolation will not have the last word. “Do not be troubled...there are many dwelling places...I prepare a place for you...I will come again and take you with me...I will keep you safe...I will show you where to go.”

When we hear, “No one comes to the Father except through me” I think we are hearing so many other voices who have uttered those words that they drown out the voice of Jesus. Diana Butler Bass reminds us that this is not a threat, but rather, an invitation. She writes, “There would be no way *except that* the love of God has made a way. God would be distant,

unavailable, separated from us *except* for the way, the way that is wide open to those who trust. Invitation, not exclusion.”

The way that Jesus reveals, the way we are being led, the way that we are called, pulls us onto a path that will bring us closer to the Divine – not with judgement, not with violence, not with shame – the way/the path is wide, not narrow. Along our human journey, we get lost along the way. The Holy One knows where we are and who we are. Jesus shows us the way – by walking his own path so faithfully, the path is illuminated for us. Amen.