

## Sermon Manuscript

Grace and Peace to you from the one who speaks comfort to our troubled hearts, the one who travels the road, always a step ahead of us, and the one who knows all the twists and turns along the way of life, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen!

For the past three days, Joan Campbell, Sybil Dowe, Pastor Bob and I were on the road with about 400 of our sisters and brothers gathered in Tarrytown at the annual assembly of the Metropolitan New York Synod, the regional governing body of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The four of us represented Our Saviour's delegation to the annual assembly, the theme of which was "Faith, Not Fear", which is also the theme of the larger global emphasis celebrating this 500<sup>th</sup> year of what has come to be known as the Lutheran Reformation.

I have to admit, since I lived just a few miles north of the hotel, the road I travelled these past few days was a little bit easier than the ones that Sybil, Joan and Pastor Bob travelled during the three working days of the Assembly. On Thursday, the first day of the assembly, Pastor Bob's road there was choked by frustrating construction delays on the Whitestone Expressway. And yesterday, the wet weather made Joan and Sybil's round trip a bit more treacherous than it had been on the first two days.

New Yorkers know, probably more than most, that roads are the most unpredictable of things we use in our lives each and every day. Weather conditions, traffic congestion, unexpected turns and construction detours are just a few of the things that make roads, even hopeful-looking open roads like the one in the image behind me, not just ways to get from point A to point B, but are pathways into an unknown future, one that often brings with it anxiety and worry about what lay ahead.

Usually, we're on the road so we can get somewhere by a time at which we are expected to arrive. Because we can't really have faith in road travel, the fear of being late, or being caught in traffic has given rise in a very short time to the absolute necessity of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and traffic apps on our smartphones as ways in which we can improve the odds of completing our journey safely and on time. We hope these devices show us the best way to travel, tell us the truth about what we can expect on the road, and preserve and enhance our lives in the process.

It's important to note that our Gospel passage today begins with these words "Do not let your hearts be troubled". Placed at the front of the reading, these words of assurance from Jesus provide a key to understanding the rest of the passage, including the bold claim Jesus makes to be "the way, the truth and the life. They serve, if you will, as a different kind of GPS, if you will, a Grace Positioning System, guiding us through the rest of the reading.

We need to remember that these words "Do not let your hearts be troubled", foreshadow that the verses following must be understood from a perspective of providing comfort and assurance through faith in Jesus Christ, and not for the purpose of perpetuating the fear of being excluded from the mercies of almighty God. Jesus' words are designed to welcome, invite and include, not to judge, sort and exclude.

The disciples are on the road with Jesus, but they are growing concerned about Jesus' mysterious predictions of his own death and of leaving the disciples behind to fend for themselves. As the spokesperson for this anxiety and fear, Thomas admits what all the others are probably thinking – that they don't know how to follow Jesus on this road to the unknown and he asks Jesus to show them the way. To give his followers faith in the face of fear, Jesus says "I am the way, the truth, and the life", staking the claim that Jesus himself is the GPS that guides us throughout the uncertainties of life.

While the key phrase “Do not let your hearts be troubled” serves us as the gateway to understanding the intent of this story, too often the church has in its history seen this passage as justification for a view of God that is tied to sorting or separating God’s people onto one or the other side of a border. On one side of the border are those who adhere to strict systems of belief, or behaviors – those who are “in”, and the ones who don’t quite measure up to those standards – those who are “out”. Those who are in, receive the gift of life, while those who are out, do not.

When Jesus claims himself as the way, the truth, and the life, his purpose for doing so is not to draw a border between the peoples of the world God has loved from the beginning of time, but to enwrap all those who worry about their eternal futures in the assurance that Jesus will walk alongside them all the way to the final border crossing, facing every doubt, every obstacle, every detour and every turn with the promise that our hearts never need be troubled.

Perhaps this narrow, and all too common view of Jesus claim comes from a misunderstanding of the Greek word “HODOS”, translated most of the time as “WAY”, but in the context of road or journey, marking Jesus’ promise to walk with us on our journey of doubt and fear for the long haul.

The HODOS therefore is not the way defined by a stated belief system, or a method of discipleship that meets some standard of holy approval, but rather it is an acknowledgement that on the uncertain roads and journeys of life, it is faith, and not fear that accompanies us on the road, on the HODOS, as we walk with Jesus on the path to truth and to life. The way of Jesus is a way of welcome, of hospitality, of generosity and of joy – of faith, and not fear.

“Faith, Not Fear” is an excellent choice of theme for these times of commemoration, not just as an easy-to-remember slogan that encapsulates our core values as Lutherans, but also because it connects today’s faith movement with those first reformers half a millennium ago. What we fear may look and sound different than what people of the late middle ages would have feared. And, how we express our faith is far more diverse, and I would say richer, than it was 500 years ago.

The fear that Martin Luther faced in his time was marked by a border, and the anxiety of a people living on the border between death and eternal life, wondering if they could ever be good enough to take the road across that border and find an eternal home with God. Luther faced this fear with a faith that inspired him to risk his life to proclaim what he learned to be truth, that Jesus Christ had built a road to provide a way across that border, so no one would have their hearts troubled about the way to eternal life.

Today’s people of faith face a fear that too, is marked by a border. Xenophobia, or fear of the stranger is in essence a condition of anxiety marked by borders which define who is in, and who is out, who has access to resources and who does not, and in many cases who dies and who lives.

Our fear of those who may not look like us, sound like us, eat like us, or dress like us is every bit as paralyzing a fear as the worry about trying to earn a place in heaven. But it is also a fear that we can face in faith. The faith which inspires us to proclaim the truth that Jesus Christ is the way across every border, every line of protection we draw between us and someone who is different, every wall we build to separate those who have life, from those who do not or we think perhaps should not.

And while these manifestations of fear sit as bookends at opposite sides of 500 years of history, they are connected by another troubling element – that perhaps the most dangerous aspect of fear is that it can be commoditized and organized for use by powerful interests who benefit from a life with well-defined borders.

In the time of Luther, fear was used to coerce people, some who were quite poor, that money given to the church could result in an erosion of the border between death and eternal life. The church's proclamation of the grace of God, was withheld from those who did not pay for the privilege, the people and their fears were held for ransom by a powerful monolith, one with a voracious appetite for power. Instead of comforting and inspiring faith in the troubled hearts of a fearful people, the church capitalized, most literally, on perpetuating those fears.

And today, this rising fear of the stranger has become the modern currency of the powerful. Taking full advantage of the people's perceived need for protection from dangerous people from foreign lands seeking new life, powerful interests have succeeded in coalescing this fear and building a government committed to raising walls and making the borders between haves and have nots, sick and well, native and immigrant, even more well defined than before. And sadly, large parts of the church of Jesus Christ have aligned and supported this new form of extortion.

Our keynote speaker for the Synod Assembly, The Rev Dr. Javier Alanis gave two inspiring presentations of life along a different road which crossed the border between his family's native Mexico and his home just across the border in the small town of San Juan, Texas. I don't have time today to even summarize the experiences he and his family had across generations of border crossings, but one story stood out for me as a lesson of what it means to live by faith and not by fear.

Dr. Alanis called the border a third space, a space which is marked by fear – fear of getting across, fear of what is behind you, perhaps forcing you to cross, and fear of what really is on the other side if you can cross over. Even though his family had been living on the US side of the border for many years, they had much family on the Mexican side of the border just a few miles away. The border became a place where fear resided on the road travelled by the family.

But while living on the border meant living in a space marked by fear and troubled hearts, Dr. Alanis told a story of his father who opened a small grocery store in the town of San Juan, Texas, and of how that store served the community, including those who regularly crossed the US/Mexican border. Dr. Alanis was raised in that store and learned how his parents' faith was lived out in the context of border life.

He talked about how his father taught him the values of service and hospitality in dealing with customers, how the practice of generosity in service always gave the customer a little more than they paid for and how his father trusted his customers by giving credit to all of them, and never harassing them for payment, often writing off debts instead of alienating a customer. These faithful values were hallmarks of a business that stood for 50 years in this small border town.

My friends, there are many reasons we can use to justify our fears, and the borders which those fears can cause us to draw, assuming they will protect us from harm. But Jesus says to us "Do not let your hearts be troubled". It is faith and not fear that will guide us along the long road ahead. A road along which Jesus is always present with us, showing us the truth about living faithfully, and the abundant life we get to experience along the way. AMEN!