



April 20, 2008

Focus scripture
John 14:1-14

Additional scriptures
Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10

You are the One to whom we may go. You are the place where we find refuge as well as call. Yours are the hands in which we are held in grace. When trouble comes, may we not be troubled. May we trust you, and the way you travel with us. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

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A Place with God

In word and deed and character, Jesus shows us God. In that revealing, Jesus assures us we have a safe place with God. That promise remains secure in times of joyous presence and of troubled absence. Such hope takes shape in the psalmist's trust of God as rock and fortress, and in Stephen's dying graciousness. This is the way, and the One, we follow.

Focus Scripture: John 14:1-14

Two contexts are at work in the focus passage. The immediate context is the time before Jesus' death and resurrection. These verses are the beginning of Jesus' farewell discourse and prayer, a section that runs through John 17. In these words, Jesus prepares the disciples for what is to come. The wider context involves the community to whom this gospel was first addressed. What for them (and for us) does Jesus' "absence" generate? What will their (our) "place" be with God?

The first verse hints that Jesus' absence created anxiety for those first disciples and likely John's community. It is interesting to note that John uses the verb *troubled* three times to describe Jesus (11:33, 12:27, 13:21). Thus, Jesus speaks these words with empathy, as one who knows such distress. The key is not to dwell on the trouble – or in it. Jesus offers the hope and promise of a dwelling place in verses 2-4 as a way to move beyond being troubled. Our place with God is assured in words that describe an ongoing relationship.

Verse 6a offers another in a series of Jesus' "I am" statements in John's gospel. The name God gives at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14) is believed to be some form of the verb "to be" ("I am who I am," "I will be who I will be"). The "I am" statements in John suggest strong ties between Jesus and God. They also point to the ways in which Jesus reveals God ("I am" the bread of life, light of the world, good shepherd). In our text today, *way*, *truth*, and *life* can each stand as separate assertions of who Jesus is. The words also can modify one another. For example: Jesus is the way and truth that lead to life; Jesus is the way that leads to truth and life; Jesus is the true way of life.

Cautions are in order about several elements of this passage. Often in John's gospel, Jesus refers to

God as "Father." The exclusive use of this name for God proves difficult for many. In John, the point of its imagery is intimacy, not gender. Even so, intimacy can be terrifying.

Verse 6b ("no one comes to the Father except through me") is another challenging statement. Is this about Christian exclusivity or about Jesus making relationship possible?

Verses 13 and 14 invite careful consideration. Asking "anything" is not the point. The gift and discipline is to ask in Jesus' name, which invites thought of how the request aligns with Jesus' way.

The gift and role of "place" runs through the other readings. **Acts 7:55-60** recounts how a vision of God is opened to Stephen as he faces death. That vision enables Stephen to offer forgiveness to his executioners. **Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16** uses the image of God's hand to reveal our place of refuge in God. **1 Peter 2:2-10** reveals our place in community, as those graced with the standing of now being God's people.

Stones that build and destroy form an intriguing connection within these texts as well. Stephen is put to death by stoning. The psalmist speaks of God as "rock." The writing in **1 Peter 2** quotes Psalm 118 about a rejected stone now made the cornerstone. How we view and use stones is revealing of our place before God.

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Jesus shows us God, and invites us to trust that in life and in death, our place with God is secure. We need not be anxious. How, and through whom, has our place with God been revealed? If you could offer your "farewell" to your faith community, what would you say about God, about life, about "place"?

