

A Place Prepared John 14:1-14

As Iowa eased up on some of its restrictions this past weekend, many places had to prepare to meet new guidelines. Restaurants emphasized outdoor seating, moved or blocked off tables so people would be 6 feet apart, and increased sanitary procedures for the workers. Some places have not reopened yet, because they haven't been able to prepare their places yet. Some are still in process, and aren't sure when they will reopen. Plans for events later in the summer and into the fall continue to be made, continue to be changed, and will continue to be changed until things are under control.

Things were shut down in order to flatten the curve, to give places time to prepare. Social distancing was to make sure there was enough time to prepare places for sick patients, making sure there were enough PPE, ventilators, and ICU beds. It also gave time for more research, for testing on therapeutic drugs and therapies and for vaccines to come further along. But now as states and areas begin to reopen, we'll have to wait and see if the preparations were enough, or how long some of these measures will remain in place.

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear Jesus telling his disciples of the changes that are coming their way. As they gathered for the Last Supper, Jesus tells them many things. He predicts that he will be betrayed. He predicts that the rest of the disciples will abandon him. He predicts that he will die. And then he tells them that he is going to prepare a place for them.

When we hear this passage, we often think of a place in heaven. The King James Version of the Bible translated this promise of Jesus as "in my Father's house are many mansions." We add that to our view of heaven, and think that we get a fancy place in heaven. If the streets are paved with gold and the walls are covered with jewels, then obviously the place we have there will be equally extravagant. And while we may have trouble imagining how all of the mansions are connected and arranged, we think that that's what we've earned. That's our just desserts. Jesus died, rose, and ascended, and even now is fluffing the pillows, setting out the towels, and preparing a place for us.

But the place prepared for us is not just a nicely decorated guest room in heaven. The place prepared for

us is not a part of some escapist fantasy, a place where we'd escape the troubles of the world. No, the place prepared for us is the place prepared for Jesus. John's gospel tells us of several places Jesus would go quite deliberately before he ever moved on up to the heavenly mansions. First, Jesus is meeting with his disciples in the upper room on Maundy Thursday, the place that had been prepared for them. Jesus had sent disciples ahead of him to prepare the room. Then, after supper, there would be the place that Judas knew, the Garden of Gethsemane, the place where Jesus would pray and prepare for what was to come, the place he would be betrayed and arrested.

Jesus would then go to the places prepared for him by our sin. He'd take his place before the pride-filled leaders, Pilate and the Pharisees. Next came the place called Golgotha, the place of the skull, where he would take his place on the cross, receiving the punishment our sins deserve. From there he will go to his place in the ground, his tomb, the tomb prepared for Joseph of Arimathea, but given to Jesus.

That place, the tomb, is where we expect things to end. The tomb is not the end for Jesus. As he said just a few chapters earlier in John, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Jesus' place in the tomb would bear much fruit, because of what it does for us, and for the world. His death defeated death for all who believe in him. His resurrection shows that we, too, will be raised. Jesus prepares a place for us.

Jesus goes ahead of us to prepare a place for us with him, on the cross. Because of that, because of the place prepared for us on the cross, we also have a place prepared for us in the empty tomb. Paul puts it this way when he writes to the Romans, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him" (Romans 6:6-8). Jesus prepared a place for us, so that we can live with him.

One of the songs that goes through my head every time I hear this passage is "That Where I Am, There You..." by Rich Mullins. Rich Mullins is famous for writing

songs like “Awesome God,” but tragically died in a car accident in 1997. Before he died, he’d recorded a demo of what would be his last album. His demo recording was taken, edited, and released both in the raw demo form and with other musicians added in. The final song is based on these words of Jesus, and it’s almost haunting how it begins with the rough demo of Rich alone and then the chorus of friends joins in to fill out the music, to remind themselves and us that Jesus had prepared a place for Rich, and that nothing could separate him from that love.

Because of all that Jesus did, he prepared a place for us with him forever. And that gives us hope. The hope comes not just from the place prepared by Jesus. The hope comes that Jesus has prepared it for you. He isn’t just like a disinterested hotel clerk, preparing a room for whoever will come. He has prepared it for you, with the love of a new groom preparing to bring his bride home.

The hope also comes that it isn’t just a place prepared for you by Jesus. It’s a place prepared for you where you will be with Jesus. In this time of social distancing, the promises of God’s presence with us even when we can’t feel it or see it or touch is very comforting. This passage is often read at funerals or the bedsides of the dying, and in this time when visitors are limited in hospitals and hospice houses, knowing God is there is very comforting. In other times, it’s a reminder that no matter how alone we are in this world, we have a place with Jesus. No matter what your family and friends think of you, no matter how much they hate you or dislike you because of your Christian faith, Jesus will always have a place for you.

Jesus is the one who goes to prepare a place for you in his Father’s house. And if he goes and prepares a place for you, he will come again and take you to himself, that where he is, there you may be also. Through all the moves and changes, crosses and betrayals of life, we have a place prepared for us. What a wonderful promise.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church, Ames, Iowa
5th Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2020