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Preachers who use the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary to guide their schedule of sermons end up dealing with several quirks in that ecumenical product, which seeks to harmonize the old Catholic roster of scriptures with the more modern but still venerable Protestant variations. For one thing, each week has its suggested list of Old Testament, Gospel and Epistle passages plus a Psalm but the Bible's four Gospels must be shoe-horned into that three-year cycle. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke are featured in Years A, B, and C, respectively, John is broken up and scattered throughout the cycle, with passages appearing sometimes in logical places and sometimes at what seems like random.

For example, this morning, as in the last two or three weeks of Eastertide in every liturgical year, we get a small section of the great Farewell Discourse of Jesus which stretches from chapter 13 to chapter 17 of the fourth Gospel. It's a fascinating and occasionally difficult section of a fascinating and occasionally difficult book. The author, who is traditionally identified as the "John, son of Zebedee" who followed Jesus, perhaps abetted by some of his own followers, writes with some of the most striking symbolic language in the Bible, most famously his use of images of light and dark, daylight and night. But the Farewell Discourse replaces the more familiar stories of the Last Supper and Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane found in the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Luke and Matthew. Instead of the most well-known of New Testament symbols, the institution of the Communion meal, we get a sermon. And what a sermon it is! At one point this week, I considered simply reading chapters 13 through 17 and leaving it at that, not offering any commentary. In these chapters we find the story of Jesus washing the feet of his friends, his giving of the "new commandment" of love we remember each Maundy Thursday, the still-challenging announcement of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, the beautiful metaphor of Jesus as the True Vine, his prayer for unity among his disciples and so much more. Don't be surprised if you do come in some Sunday morning to hear me simply read the Farewell Discourse in its entirety – I promise to follow it up, though, with a series of reflections on its meaning. As I said, it is both fascinating and difficult. Its structure is intricate and winding. One commentator I read this week hit the nail on the head for me when she wrote, "Like a Taizé chorus, Jesus' words circle back on themselves, a seemingly endless loop."

But for this morning, I hope you will be satisfied with some brief comments on the passage suggested by the lectionary for this morning, which I read a few moments ago. Despite its setting on the night he was betrayed, this passage seems extraordinarily apt to me for this penultimate Sunday of Eastertide. As we prepare to move from Easter to Pentecost, from the season of the Risen Son to that of the indwelling Spirit, the lectionary committee has given us one of the passages in which Jesus himself points toward this transition. And, appropriately for those of us who remember that Jesus body was broken and his blood shed for us on the first Sunday of every month, we find language in this passage that calls to mind at least one of the deeper meanings of our commemoration, the promise of communion between God and humankind. Jesus gives us promises in regards to these aspects of our spiritual lives plus one more, also very important for us in these trying times: Jesus gives us the promise of peace, not as the world knows it but in the fullness that only God can offer.

John 14:23 picks up in the middle of the Farewell Discourse and, indeed, in the midst of a conversation. One of the disciples, whom John names as "Judas (not Iscariot)," has just asked Jesus a question. The identity of this disciple is one of those little details that have puzzled

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readers for two millennia. Some folks identify this Judas with the man Luke calls “Judas of James,” that is, “Judas the son of James,” or, more likely, “Judas the brother of James,” when Luke lists the twelve apostles in his Gospel and in Acts. Mark and Matthew list a man called “Lebbaeus surnamed Thaddeus” instead and so many readers assume that the two men are one and the same, simply known by different names. I’ve used my middle name all my life and been known by various nicknames in different stages of my life, so I understand well the confusion that can go with a multiplicity of names. Others think this Judas may be the same man listed in Mark and Matthew as Jude the brother of Jesus (and, therefore, the brother of James as well) who is traditionally the author of the little Epistle of Jude wedged into the New Testament between the three general epistles of John and the Revelation. But whoever he was, John remembers him being at that Passover meal and interrupting Jesus to ask, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?”

Jesus answers with two wonderful promises but some have perceived a bit of a challenge along with them: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” The challenge for some is in what Jesus means by “Those who love me will keep my word...” Is Jesus demanding a perfect adherence to all he has taught as a condition for God’s love? While I can understand how someone might interpret these words in this way at first glance, it does not hold up very well to the picture of Jesus John has so carefully constructed throughout this Gospel. This is not the forgiving grace that we know so well from the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in chapter three but rather a new legalism, replacing the Torah given by God the Father with a new code set up by Jesus the Son. But according to Jesus, in words our choir has recently sung, “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” Calling upon the meaning of the word “keep” or “*tereo*” in common Greek usage, Lutheran scholar Brian Stoffregen offer this possibility: “My paraphrase of this word is “hold dear” or perhaps, “consider important”... “Holding Jesus’ word dear,” implies having a positive attitude towards that Word and the Word-giver. That is, *wanting* to hear and obey it out of love for the speaker.” In this, Stoffregen links the idea of “keeping Jesus’ word” with another kind of “keeping” we’ve discussed recently, God’s command to Adam to dress the garden and keep it as well as with the words of the Aaronic Blessing, “the Lord bless you and keep you.”

Jesus’ first promise in this passage then, that God will love those who treasure Jesus’ words, is not dependent upon some sort of hyper-righteousness but on the desires of our hearts. And knowing, no doubt, how easily our hearts are led astray, Jesus makes a second promise to go along with the first. When once we love Jesus and hold his word dear, not only will the Father love us but the Father and the Son will come to us and make their home with us. This is one of the great themes of John’s Gospel, seen as early as the fourteenth verse: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” According to Alyce M. McKenzie of Southern Methodist University, the word “Abide (meno) and its cognates show up forty times in John’s Gospel.” One of those cognates comes up here in the phrase “we will make our home with them.” McKenzie adds, “Abide signifies to stay, to remain, to dwell, to lodge, to last, to persist, and/or to continue.” All of this is to say that our wandering hearts will be bolstered by the ongoing, everlasting presence of God with us.

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This is a point at which we can step back and admire the verbal and logical looping of Jesus' words in John, what MaryAnn McKibben Dana compared to a Taizé chorus. As David Ewart writes, "To be a follower is to have and keep Jesus' commandments / teachings; to keep Jesus' commandments is to love him; to love Jesus is to also be loved by Jesus; to be loved by Jesus is to also be loved by the one who loves Jesus - his Father; to be loved by Jesus and the Father is to abide in them; to abide in them is to keep Jesus' commandments."

This promise is powerful not only because of the way in which it binds us to God. The promise of God's presence is a truly meaningful one. We live in a society in which people have more ways to be connected than ever before. While not very many years ago, we could only be reached by telephone in our homes or offices, now we carry our phones with us wherever we go. While once it took days to reach someone with a written message, now we can read each other's words in near to real time via e-mail, texts or instant messages. We can even talk face to face with only a momentary lag across distance by using Skype or one of the other many teleconferencing applications on our computers or even our mobile phones. And yet, even with all that communication, many people are terribly lonely. We can live lives of isolation in the midst of the storm of electronic communication. But Jesus and his heavenly Father will come and stay with us, out of love, Jesus promises. He will walk with us and talk with us and tell us that we are his own. Oh, love that will not let us go!

And, there is another member in this communion between each believer and God. Jesus promises us his presence and the presence of the Father. He also says, "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each touches our lives and remains. This is the answer to the prayer of the Psalmist which we shared together this morning: "make your light shine within us, so that your presence may be known and your love appear to all people." We have Jesus' promise that through the Holy Spirit we will continually be reminded of his teaching and that we will come to understand it more and more as the Spirit teaches us from within.

Again, this promise may be a bit disconcerting to some. Some teachers use harsh methods. Some memories are painful. One of the peculiarities of my own character, and I would go so far as to call it a flaw, is that I have a hard time summoning happy memories from my past but unpleasant memories, memories of my own failures, generally, come easily and often unbidden. Being reminded of things can seem like a threat. But consider the word that Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit who will remind us and be our teacher. In Greek, it is *Paraclete*; counselor or comforter. This Greek word was not used to describe the Holy Spirit in the Greek version of the Old Testament in use in Jesus' day but a related word was used in one of the most tender passages of the Bible, one to which we still turn today in times of trouble. In the 23rd Psalm, we give thanks for the presence of the Good Shepherd: "For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Comfort, in Hebrew *hacham*, is rendered in Greek by the word *paraklesis*. In calling the Holy Spirit the *parakletos*, surely Jesus was helping us to know that the teaching and reminding of the Spirit within us would bring us great comfort. To return to this morning's Psalm, "Let all of them feel your presence and sing out in the fullness of joy."

Jesus promises us the presence of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Along with this, Jesus promises us love and joy. And, Jesus promises us peace. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I

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give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” The world’s empires promise peace through the destruction of our enemies. They mean peace as the cessation of open warfare. The price for such peace has occasionally been described as eternal vigilance but what it really means is eternal suspicion, eternal enmity, an eternal willingness to scapegoat. What Jesus offers is true peace, the shalom of God. As we know, shalom goes far beyond cessation of war to include wellness and wholeness for all people, confidence rather than suspicion, hospitality rather than enmity. I’m currently making my way through a fine work of theology by Mark Heim, an American Baptist scholar on the faculty at Andover Newton. The book is called Saved from Sacrifice and in it Heim suggests that Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice in order to free humankind from the need and compulsion to scapegoat others in a frantic search for peace with God. Jesus offers us true peace without any need for any more sacrifices of blood. What Jesus asks is not that we die for God or cause others to die but instead that we live lives devoted to God, that we make his life the model for our own. In other words, that we keep his words.

In the beautiful language of this passage, I find that John gives us a very compelling picture of the God who abides with us, who lives in communion with us and who grants us peace. This is indeed the salvation that we experience through Jesus, promised to us in his words here, promised to us in his life and death and resurrection, promised to us in the symbolic meal in which we will partake in a moment. These promises, as with all the words and deeds of Jesus, as with all the words and deeds of Almighty God, should stir within us an active response. We can trust in these promises. We can stand on them. With such a firm base, we can not only stand but we can rise and go. Rise and go. In the verses that follow this passage and conclude the fourteenth chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, “Rise, let us be on our way.” I was listening earlier this week to the grieving, moving and ever-hopeful music of Bruce Springsteen, written in response to the tragedies of terrorism and economic collapse experienced by his New York and New Jersey neighbors in 2001. He concludes the song “My City of Ruins” with the repeated exhortation, “Come on and rise up! Come on and rise up! Come on and rise up!” It was a call to faith. It was a call to hope. It was a call to action. I also thought of the old hymn, “I Will Arise and Go to Jesus.” Do you know it? “Come ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore. Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity, love and power. I will arise and go to Jesus; he will embrace me in his arms. In the arms of my dear Saviour, oh, there are ten thousand charms.” It is a call to faith. It is a call to hope. It is a call to action.

We come first to the table, to receive together, to remember together, to be filled together. But then, my sisters and my brothers, we will go out. We must not go out, my friends, as those who have been defeated but as those who are loved and who are promised peace. We must go out to take God’s love and joy and peace to the world. We stand on the promises of God. From that rock-solid base, we can stand and go and bless all with whom we come in contact. Amen.