

Lectionary B Easter 7 May 17, 2015
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

God's Strong Grip

I want to tell you a little about Korbin, my youngest granddaughter. Some of you met her a few weeks ago when she came to church with us. She is 22 months old and very active and curious. She stayed with me a couple days last week. And let me tell you, seeing the world, seeing nature and spring time through the eyes of a 22 month old is an exhausting and wonderful experience.

Everything is new and wondrous. From a flower to a blade of grass, to a bug crawling up my leg—everything is a miracle to Korbin. Her eyes become wide with amazement and she exclaims, “Ohhhhh, Papa!” Yes, for some reason she calls me Papa. And that in itself is part of the delightful experience. There are no rules to her, no shoulds and shouldn'ts. This world is here to enjoy, to explore, to delight in. Next week we are taking her to the ocean for the first time. I can't wait to see her eyes light up in wonder of the sand, and the waves, and whatever crawly things we encounter.

Our job, as the adults in her life, is to make it possible for Korbin to enjoy as much of this wonderful world as possible, while protecting her from those things that could harm her. That is the way we help prepare her to grow up and live a productive life in this world.

Is that what Jesus' prayer is about that we read in the Gospel? To understand it is important for us to look at when Jesus prayed this prayer. It came on the eve of his crucifixion, just before his arrest. If we go back to the end of chapter 16 we see Jesus talking to his disciples, trying to prepare them for what is coming. He says, *“I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”*

Then in the first verse of chapter 17, Jesus stops talking to the disciples and lifts his head in prayer. Can you imagine standing there listening to Jesus praying for you? That is exactly what happened. Jesus said this prayer for the disciples and all of us, too. We know this because in in verses 20 and 21, Jesus prays, *“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one.”* That includes you and me.

Jesus is standing there looking up to God in an intimate conversation about our lives in the world. He is totally honest. There is no sugar-coating. This world that God loves so much is a wonderful and horrible place. Jesus knew his crucifixion was going to be terrible for the disciples. And he knew many more trials would be coming for all his children. He laid it out plainly in his prayer for them to hear. Then came his request to God, *“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.”*

What's that all about, Jesus? Couldn't you have prayed, "Hey, God, let's do our children a big favor. Let's take them out of the world so they don't have to go through any of that nasty stuff. Let's just give them the good parts of the world—the "rose colored glasses stuff", how about that?"

But that is not Jesus' prayer for us. Instead, he asks for God's support and protection of us against all the evils of the world.

If you think about it, there are two common ways people think about the Christian faith. Both say that this world can be difficult, painful, and downright crazy. One idea is that when a person becomes a Christian, the world stops shaking and everything makes sense, you've made it. No more troubles.

The other idea is that faith gives you the ability to keep your footing in the midst of all the rough times in this world. This is the promise that Jesus makes then and now to all his followers: that we are not exempt from hard times, but that God is always with us in those stormy times. I know we'd rather have it the "rose colored glasses" way. But Jesus was honest with us. We are here in this world for a purpose. We are here to take care of this world, this big scary world that God loves so much.

There are two terms used over and over in the book of John that we should look at carefully. First of all the word, "give" is used in some form several times. It is used nine times in this passage, seventeen in this chapter, and seventy-five in John's entire Gospel. So what's given? Well, pretty much everything!

Mainly we, Jesus' disciples, are given by God to Jesus. And then we are given the knowledge that God is our loving parent and the word of truth about God's love for the world. And because of that we, the given, are chosen and sent into the world to make a difference. Jesus says in verse 18, "*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*"

The "world", that big scary place. The "world," that is the other term repeated over and over in John's Gospel. John often paints the world as God's enemy. He writes that Jesus says the world will hate the disciples just like it hated Jesus. But it is also the world God loves so much in John 3:16.

Thanks for being honest with us, Jesus. This tough and sometimes painful world is loved so very much by God. And we are right here where we are supposed to be in this world to bear witness to the truth that God loves the whole world, even when it messes up and doesn't follow God's plan or desire.

We know all too well about the difficult times in the world. Let's just look at the happenings the last few weeks. Two earthquakes in Nepal, just a couple weeks apart killed thousands. There was the killer train wreck in Philadelphia, the news of the Boston Marathon bomber being sentenced to death, and I read that a third of the work force for Blue Bell ice cream being laid off after it was found that their products were carrying listeria.

What about close to home. A Notre Dame student falls of a roof and dies a day before he was to graduate. Here in Evansville, an eleven year old girl dies after being hit by a car. And here in our congregation—I don't have to list all the rough patches we have encountered since Easter.

And you know what? We are better than OK. I had a conversation with Theresa Burress this week after I found out she had been in the hospital. She told me she was relying on Isaiah 41:7:

*“Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”*

I answered her back that in this verse from the Message Bible God says, *“I'll have a firm grip on you.”* It's that firm grip that we can count on. We know the world is going to throw us curve balls and our strength, and our witness is in knowing that God's grip on us will never let anything *“separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Here's the plain truth. The world is beautiful and it is treacherous. And God promises to be with us in this world every moment of our lives. This isn't just so we will survive. It is so we will thrive. We become stronger so God can use us wherever we are.

That is our purpose. No matter where we are, at home, or school, or work... and whether we experience challenges or blessings or a little of both, God continues to be with us, strengthening us, and using us to care for each other and this world. That's what Jesus means when he says his prayer is *that we become one as he and God are one.*

That brings up another interesting term used in Jesus' prayer. It is “sanctified” – as in *“sanctify them in your truth”* – that word is the same word in the Lord's Prayer that is translated as “hallowed.” This means that God is actually setting us apart and making us holy in order to serve the world.

That is where Jesus finds joy. When we come here together to worship and be strengthened and sanctified by his holy meal, and then go out during the week showing God's love in our everyday lives. It could be by being a good friend, or listening to someone, or standing up for someone, or doing our best at work, or praying for those in need, or inviting someone to church to hear about God's never-ending love for all people. Who knows? What we do know is that God is at work in us and through us for the sake of this big beautiful, terrible world, and this week we are invited to share in answering this prayer to make Jesus' joy complete.

Let us pray our own prayer:

Dear God, we know your love is forever. We also know this life is beautiful and hard (sometimes both at the same time.) We aren't asking you to take us out of this world, but please support and protect us while we are in it. Please set us apart in the truth we have heard here, that your love is for everyone. We ask that you send us out from this worship service today to bear witness by what we say and do to show your love. Open our hearts to hear you calling us at home and at work, at school, wherever we are, so we will feel your strong grip on us. Help us to share this strong love grip with others. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the one set apart and made holy for us. Amen.