**Acts 1:15-17, 21-26**

**1 John 5:9-13**

**John 17:6-19**

The classic children’s story, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, was written under the pen name of Lewis Carroll. The author’s real name was Charles Dodgson and he was a mathematician. He spent his career at Oxford University lecturing in math. Dodgson was also a deacon in the Church of England. His two vocations make for an interesting combination – math and religion. Both can be concrete and rigid; both can be speculative and metaphysical. Given Lewis Carroll’s dual background, the fantastic things his characters say aren’t really that fantastic after all, as when the Queen of Hearts tells Alice, “It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.”

Interesting! Memory that is not bound by time: a memory that recalls the past – of course – but recalls the future as well. I wouldn’t begin to ponder that from a mathematical perspective, though I know scientists are doing just that. I can approach it from the perspective of spirituality where time is fluid. After all, we believe in the Communion of Saints, or the great cloud of witnesses. These are people who have died but are still somehow with us in the present and the future. In the spiritual realm, time isn’t time as we know it.

So I don’t have any issue with the words of Jesus in today’s gospel being for us now. I don’t have any issue with the idea that Jesus prays those words for us now given the plasticity of time. He prays to the Father, “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but to protect them from evil. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” Jesus is praying this for us now.

“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.”

This prayer of Jesus has been commonly paraphrased as “be *in* the world; not *of* the world.” We live in this world that God has created and loves, but Jesus wants us to avoid belonging to it; don’t be *of* it. Yet this is the very world we are called to serve. We are asked to make it a better place because that’s what Jesus did. We live in a trippy kind of tension where on the one hand, our community of faith is alien to the world and on the other hand, our community is constantly being sent out to serve this alien world.

Wouldn’t it be a lark to create our own little world, inside the church, where we can take refuge from everything else? This is an age-old temptation. We share it with our earliest forebears in faith who had even more cause to wall themselves off – given their likelihood of being served as dinner to the wild beasts of the Roman Empire. In our own trusty, isolated enclave we would not have to deal with a hostile world; we could luxuriate in the presence of Jesus and do little more than celebrate him.

Be *in* the world; not *of* the world. Being in the world is no easy matter. Aren’t so many of us exhausted from the world's ceaseless violence and corruption? Isn’t that compounded by our frequent sense of despair over making a difference?[[1]](#footnote-1) Our particular part of the world – modern Western societies – has its own remedy: tranquilize your anxiety by doing more; be more; accumulate more. If your frenzy hasn’t reduced your anxiety, you are not being frenzied enough!

What a vicious paradox. We think we’re anxious because we *aren’t* doing enough; don’t have enough; or don’t have the latest and best. Our world has taught us that when there’s a new feature for cellphone users and we don’t have it, we are inferior. We are out of step. Get with it! What’s the matter with you? That’s one way the world has insinuated itself into us Christians – who belong to a different world. It is all the more alarming because it’s invisible. We no longer face horrifying death by fierce animals in the Roman coliseum. We face something much worse: living-death. Soul death.

Unless you’re facing imminent destruction – like your house is on fire and you’re in it – being anxious is a life killer. It sucks our souls dry. Anxiety is the indelible stamp marking us as belong to this world; being *of* it. In contrast, one of the things you notice when you’re around a truly grounded spiritual soul is the peace and calm that radiates from him or her.

To indicate how useless anxiety is, author Max Lucado tells how one man dealt with it. He worried so much that he decided to hire someone to do his worrying for him. He found a man who agreed to be his hired worrier for a salary of $200,000 per year. After the man accepted the job, his first question to his new boss was, "Where are you going to get $200,000 per year?" To which the man responded, "That's your worry.”

Jesus says don’t be anxious. That’s it. That’s all he says. Without preamble; without offering a 12-step how-to program, he says don’t be anxious. Now he does provide an illustration. He points to the birds of the air. They don’t sow or reap or gather into barns; yet the God of all goodness feeds them. And if anyone ought to be anxious it’s a little bird. Hummingbirds can consume 100 percent of their body’s weight in sugar water every day, in addition to as many as 2,000 insects! Just to stay alive.

Hummingbirds are *in* the world. They are not *of* the world. The created world hints at how we can be spiritually balanced. The words of Jesus point us in this direction, too. Jesus himself is the answer to anxiety. The more we become like him – fully God-centric – the less we have to worry about.

God wants a life for us that is "rooted in the values of God's world," not in the values of this world. What God wants for us is eternal life, which according to today’s readings does not mean some spiritualized form of immortality. Eternal life is full life, now and in whatever form life will take after this existence.

Our second reading says that those who "believe in the name of the Son of God have eternal life." This doesn’t mean that we believe now and have eternal life later. Knowing Jesus is eternal life. Communion with God in prayer; in worship; in service is the non-anxious life. It is life fulfilled and eternal.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We know this. We all treasure this way of life. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here this morning – we’d be out in the world. We would be both in the world and of it. But we know the “Jesus way of life” is an incomparable alternative to whatever belonging to the world entails. Life without something bigger and better than our own little selves is the very definition of anxiety.

We know this. But we all need reminding. By reminding one another of the deeper currents of life in which we wade, we remain resolute and unafraid. After all, “It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.”

1. Kathryn Matthews, “Sermon Seeds May 13, 2018--Seventh Sunday of Easter Year B,” <http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_may_13_2018>. Here she quotes Tom Troeger from *Feasting on the Word Year B, Vol. 2.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Bartlett, “Commentary on 1 John 5:9-13,” Working Preacher, May 24, 2009: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=313 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)