To Whom Can We Go?

Psalm 13, John 6:66-69

Buckingham Church

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“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart?”

These words of the ancient singer of Israel have been echoed down the years by so many people. For some people, the words come because of a medical diagnosis, or because they can’t get a diagnosis or can’t get treatment. For some people, the words come because someone loved is in trouble or pain. For some people, the words come because they don’t know where they will sleep at night, or where they will get food. For some people, the words come because they are afraid of an abuser.

I have also heard people say these words when they feel that not only God but God’s people, the church, and their families have abandoned them. When they feel condemned and outcast because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. When they feel their struggles because of racism are ignored or minimized or exacerbated by the church. When, by its words or actions, the church tells people they are “less than” because they don’t give as much money or are young or have new ideas.

The poet Robert Frost famously said, “Home is where when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” But, sadly, that is simply not true for too many people in the homes where they grew up and in the churches that should be home for anyone and everyone. Sadly, they discovered that the blithe “all are welcome here” that almost every church declares, simply is not true in all cases. They feel abandoned not only by people, but by the God they had been taught to love and trust. Which is a very lonely place to be. Simon Peter’s question of Jesus, which here is a testimony to his faith, has a very different resonance for people who have felt rejected by or unwelcome in a community of God’s people. “To whom can we go?” becomes a cry of despair very much like “How long, O Lord?”

Here’s where we need to remember that the reason people left following Jesus, the reason he was killed, is that he did and said all sorts of countercultural and controversial things, including welcoming people fully into relationship with him whom others rejected and standing up for their rights to be treated as whole human beings. Lepers. Gentiles. Women. The poor. Foreigners. People who had made mistakes in their lives and sought a relationship of healing and hope.

In a moment we will be singing the great Isaac Watts hymn “O God Our Help in Ages Past.” The first verse describes God as “our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.” Isaac Watts wrote these words in 1719. He was a pastor in the Independent (think Congregational) Church in England, and a law had just been passed that would increase persecution of his church, in effect making the Anglican Church the only legally sanctioned church in England. Those who held different beliefs or worship practices were shunned, sometimes jailed, considered deviant. Watts wanted his folks not only to make a stand against such persecution, but to understand that God was with them, a shelter in a storm and the very personification of “home.” It is a hymn meant to be sung by those feeling on the outside of society, and it is kind of ironic that it has become co-opted so that it is sung at many national services of remembrance or “official” government sacred events (for example, it was sung at the service in the National Cathedral after 9/11 and at President George Bush’s funeral). It’s easy for the church to get tamed, domesticated, co-opted by the powers that be, so that we forget we were formed by outsiders for outsiders to be a shelter from the stormy blast and a home on earth that mirrors the eternal home we are promised, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Statistics tell us that the majority of Americans no longer see organized religion as “home.” Too often it is seen as a vessel for exclusion and judgement and not a place of love and care for the wounded and storm-tossed. Too often it is seen as a place where you are expected to conform to everyone else rather than a great mosaic of people making a beautiful picture out of variety.

For me in my life, the answer to “To whom can I go?” has been Jesus, for a very long time. Not always has the answer included the church, however, when it does not do a very good job of embodying Jesus in our place and time. Friends, I hope we can think and talk together often about how we can truly live into our call to be the place where people discover that the one they can always go to is God, because they see how we enflesh the kingdom coming on earth as in heaven. To whom can we go? Buckingham Church. Wouldn’t that be awesome? Because there truly is no place like home. Amen.