

“Take Heart”

The Fifty-First in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 16:25-33; Zechariah 13:7-9

The Passover celebration is over, and the time has come for Jesus to depart from the upper room. Throughout his last moments with his disciples, Jesus has been preparing for them what he knows is sure to come—his crucifixion, death, and burial. In the famous words of John 3:16, John describes Jesus’ messianic mission as the chief sign of God’s love for a lost and fallen world. God will save all those who trust in Jesus. Several verses later John declares that Jesus brings the light of God (the truth) into the world. Sadly, however, the world rejects this light (Jesus) because people prefer to remain in darkness (unbelief) rather than have their sinful deeds exposed. In fact, Jesus warns his disciples that the world (which in John’s Gospel refers to the way non-Christians think and act) will hate them, because the world hated Jesus first. And so before Jesus departs, he reminds the disciples that even though the world will hate them, and that in the world they will experience many difficult trials and tribulations, nevertheless, Jesus has overcome the world, and that he will indeed cast out its ruler (who is Satan). Jesus will overcome the world not through the manifestation of raw supernatural power. Jesus will overcome the world and cast out its ruler by dying upon a cross and then being raised from the dead on Easter Sunday.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of John, and we now come to the end of that section of the Upper Room Discourse (chapters 13-16) in which Jesus gives his final instructions to his disciples. Jesus’ time with the disciples is nearly up, as Jesus’ three-year long messianic mission now draws to a close. Because his disciples are struggling with the news of Jesus’ imminent departure, as well as questions raised by the new information given them by Jesus, Jesus has delayed his fateful walk across the Kidron Valley to an olive grove known as Gethsemane as long as he can. Jesus knows that after he arrives in Gethsemane, he will be confronted by Caiaphas (the Jewish high priest), who will be led to Jesus’ location by Judas, one of the twelve who will betray him. Jesus will be arrested, and then he will face trial before the Sanhedrin, then before Pilate (the Roman governor), before being put to death the next afternoon as the Passover draws to a close with the slaughter of the Passover lambs.

Throughout the Upper Room Discourse so far, Jesus has alluded to the events soon to come using the language of an Old Testament prophet—his words are packed with echoes from Israel’s prophets (especially from Isaiah). In the closing section of chapter sixteen (vv. 25-33), we find Jesus’ final words of exhortation to the disciples, this time centering in his promise to overcome the world which hates him enough to put him to death, and which will hate all those who follow him (those who trust in Jesus). Jesus encourages his discouraged disciples by informing them that he *“has overcome the world.”* Accepting this truth will require great require faith on the part of the disciples. Before Jesus overcomes the world, it looks very much like the world has overcome him.

Having given them all the information they can process, the time has come for Jesus to do the single most important thing he can do for his struggling disciples—offer what is known as the high priestly prayer on behalf of the disciples, and all those who will come to faith in him. Our Lord’s high priestly prayer (found in John 17) is truly remarkable, and much like the prologue to the Gospel (vv. 1-18), Jesus’ prayer very effectively summarizes the major themes of entire gospel. Lord willing, we will spend several sermons working our way through John 17 and the details of our Lord’s prayer on our behalf.

As we close out the 16th chapter of John, Jesus explains why he has been giving them their final instructions in such a cryptic manner—speaking much as an Old Testament prophet would do. Jesus told them just moments earlier in verse 12, *“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”* Jesus knows this evening is tough going for the disciples. He also knows that they are having a hard time understanding all of the things which he is teaching them in their final moments together. This is evident by the nature of their questions.

His words are difficult, because Jesus is introducing them to things they have not yet considered, but need to know before Jesus departs. Among these are the revelation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity—there are three divine persons who are the one true God. Jesus also explains to them why they must not understand the future of Israel and God’s messianic kingdom in geopolitical terms, typical of Jews of that day. Jesus’ kingdom is spiritual, not political. And then finally, Jesus explains why it is good that he depart from them, so that Jesus will send them the Holy Spirit from the Father (the Helper), who will enable them to understand the things which Jesus has already revealed to them (throughout his messianic mission), the things he has revealed on this their last evening together, and then those things yet to be revealed after he departs from them.

In verse 25, Jesus explains to them why he has been speaking to them in such a cryptic manner. *“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.”* At first glance, we might assume that Jesus is speaking of the words he just spoke to the disciples in verse 16: *“a little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.”* We read in verses 17-18 of the disciples confusion regarding what Jesus has just told them. *“So some of his disciples said to one another, ‘What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father’?’ So they were saying, ‘What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.’”*

Or perhaps, Jesus is referring to his statement in verse 21, where he just used the labor/birth analogy which is found throughout Israel’s prophets as a reference to difficult trials—*“when a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.”* Jesus’ point is that very soon terribly difficult circumstances will arise for both himself and the disciples. Yet, Jesus also assures them that the final outcome will be so much better than they can even begin to understand, that the difficulties they are about to face will soon be forgotten in light of the victory secured by Jesus.

Jesus is speaking of his impending death (labor) and resurrection (birth) as establishing the pattern of the Christian life. The trials and tribulations of life in this fallen world, precedes the overwhelming joy of the next (eternal life). Jesus also has told them that in *“that day,”* (i.e., the new era of redemptive history established by his resurrection from the dead), the joy of which he is speaking will be a present reality for the people of God. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, from the time Jesus leaves the disciples to go and prepare a place for them (his ascension) until the day he returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new, those who trust in Jesus will indeed experience the joy Jesus has promised. As he tells them in verses 23-24, *“truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”*

Jesus used figures of speech drawn from the Old Testament throughout the entire discourse (what is known as prophetic idiom—the language of prophets) because his hour has not yet come. Now that his

hour is at hand, and he will be leaving them, sending them the Holy Spirit, Jesus will no longer use such figures of speech, but will speak directly. I “*will tell you plainly about the Father*” he says. This change in the manner of his speech is tied directly to the shift in redemptive history about to take place. The reader of John’s Gospel may think to themselves, “why doesn’t Jesus just tell them that he is about to die and then rise again from the dead?” But Jesus already has done this very thing. As recounted in Mark 9:30-32, “*they went on from there [the area near the Mount of Transfiguration] and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.’ But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.*” Jesus spoke directly of his death and resurrection, but the disciples were frightened and confused by his words.

It is important to consider that fact that the disciples are listening to Jesus tell them these things before his death and resurrection are established facts of history, to which they are eye-witnesses, and with which the readers of this gospel were already well-familiar. But these things had not yet happened on the night of the Passover celebration. Such things did not in fit with the expectations of the disciples—the reason why understanding Jesus’ words was so difficult for them. Given Jesus self-revelation as Israel’s Messiah, including his mastery of the Old Testament and ability to perform miracles, and even to raise the dead, the idea that Jesus’ ministry would end in his death and resurrection absolutely made no sense to the disciples. Such a thing was beyond their wildest expectations.

To a man, the Rabbis of Jesus’ day tied the coming of the Messiah to Israel’s return to national sovereignty (freedom from Roman military occupation) and a restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Such expectations did not fit with another line of Old Testament messianic prophecy such as that in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in which a suffering servant will deliver God’s people from sin, or as even we read in our Old Testament lesson (Zechariah 13:7-9) of a stricken shepherd whose sheep will scatter. Jesus came to deal with human sinfulness and to overturn the curse of death. The disciples’ expectations were far too short-sighted, and like the rest of Israel missed the bigger picture of which Jesus is speaking. Rome is not the problem. Adam’s Fall is.

Because the disciples did not understand Jesus when he spoke to them about his death and resurrection directly, and then were afraid to ask Jesus about it further, this explains why throughout the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus speaks as an Old Testament prophet would—not only to demonstrate that even in the hours before his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus was still fulfilling messianic prophecy, but Jesus knows that once these events of which he is speaking have occurred and the disciples see him alive (in his post-resurrection appearances), then the Holy Spirit will bring all of his words to their remembrance, and help them understand the things yet to be revealed. Jesus knows that even if on this night they do not truly understand, very soon it will all become clear to them.

Jesus goes on to tell them in verses 26-27, “*in that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.*” As we have seen, when Jesus speaks of “that day,” he is speaking of the new reality brought about by his death and resurrection, and through the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This is the age of the new covenant established in the blood of Jesus. This is the age in which we walk by faith and not by sight, but are, nevertheless, indwelt by the Holy Spirit and united to Jesus (who has ascended into heaven) through the means of grace (word and sacrament), through prayer, and through our incorporation into the body of Christ (the church—the true Israel). In that day (the current age in redemptive history), the disciples will know the joy of which Jesus is speaking, because they will ask these things of the Father in Jesus’ name.

There is a difficult reality here which the disciples must understand. Jesus has promised to give them whatever they need, if only they ask the Father in his name. But if they must ask the Father for these things in Jesus' name, it is only because Jesus will have departed from them and gone to the Father, and is no longer physically present with them. Jesus' point is that the disciples must understand that he will not leave them on their own to fend for themselves. They must understand that the Father loves them, precisely because the disciples love Jesus (the Father's only-begotten son), and then are to ask for their needs to be met in the name of the Father's beloved son.

As we learn from the rest of the New Testament, when Jesus ascends into heaven to take his place at the right hand of the Father to rule and reign over all things (Jesus' session) Jesus will serve as intercessor for the people of God who pray to the Father in the name of Jesus. Paul writes in Romans 8:34, "*Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.*" The author of Hebrews tells us of Jesus, "*consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them*" (Hebrews 7:25) And then John himself will later tell us in the first two verses of second chapter of his first epistle, "*my little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*" Jesus' ascension establishes his role as the only mediator between sinful men and women and the Holy God.

According to Jesus, it is because God loves his people in and through his Son, through a bond formed by the blessed Holy Spirit indwelling those who believe in Jesus, that Jesus intercedes for us whenever we pray to God, in the name of Jesus, asking him for the things we need. It is clear that this is one of the great privileges which Jesus secures for his people upon ascending into heaven. The disciples must know that the Father loves them, because the Father loves the Son, who intercedes on behalf of his people (but only for his people). This is a strong line of argument pointing us in the direction that God loves all those whom he has chosen in the Son, those whom he intends to redeem through the blood of Jesus. No non-Christian can know or experience the love of God in this sense.

This is yet another reason why it is good that Jesus ascend into heaven, so that he might intercede for us when we pray to the Father in his name, thereby establishing for us, and confirming within us, the Father's love. This is what we mean, in part, when we speak of particular redemption. Jesus does not merely make salvation possible, and then leave it up to sinners to fend for themselves. Jesus saves all those given him by the Father, and then upon ascending into heaven, Jesus sends them the Holy Spirit (who indwells them), and then intercedes for them (when we pray to the Father). Does Jesus intercede for people whom he does not intend to save? Or does his intercession on behalf of sinners secure their salvation when his saving merits are applied to them? Obviously, it is the latter.

As Jesus wraps up his instructions, in verse 28 he tells the disciples, "*I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.*" Here, in a single sentence, Jesus reveals the purpose of his messianic mission, as well as why it must now come to an end. He has been sent by the Father to accomplish the salvation of the people of God. As we read in John 3:16-17, "*for God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*" Jesus (who is the eternal word, and who enjoyed the eternal inter-Trinitarian love and joy with the Father, and Holy Spirit) came to earth to accomplish a very specific goal: to die upon a cross so that whoever believes in him will be saved from the wrath of God which is to come upon the whole earth.

Because Jesus is about to do that very thing—suffer and die upon the cross so that those who have been given eternal life will believe in him—his mission will be complete. Jesus will have fulfilled the Father’s purpose in sending Jesus from heaven to earth. This mission not only entails Jesus dying for sinners, in their place, bearing the wrath of God in his own flesh, but in order to fully redeem sinners, Jesus must also rise again from the dead. He must do this as proof that his death did indeed take away the curse, and he must do this to redeem sinful human nature. This is why, once having accomplished his redemptive mission, Jesus must then leave the disciples and return to the Father. It is in his role as ascended Savior and mediator of the covenant of grace, that Jesus sends the Holy Spirit who applies the redemption which Jesus has accomplished, to those whom God intends to save.

After giving them this “purpose statement” (to use a contemporary term), the disciples acknowledge that Jesus knows all things. *“His disciples said, ‘Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.’”* By professing that Jesus knows all things, they are, in effect, declaring that Jesus is the supreme revelation of God. If we wonder about what God is like, we look to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Having reached the point where they claim to understand the things which Jesus has been telling them (yet they really do not), the instructional portion of the Upper Discourse comes to an end. The disciples state that Jesus knows all things, and that they have no more questions to ask. More importantly, the disciples confess to Jesus, *“we believe that you came from God.”*

Given the things about to happen to that one whom they have just acknowledged as coming from God and who knows all things, and in light of the shock they will experience when Jesus is arrested, undergoes trial, is crucified, and then dies and is buried, the disciple’s profession of faith will be sorely tested. It is clear that they trust Jesus in so far as they are able, but they do not know as much about Jesus and his mission at this point as they think they do. Even though Jesus is speaking plainly, and they know he is speaking the truth, and even though the light of the truth is beginning to dawn, they still do not grasp the fact that Jesus is about to die. Jesus’ hour has come. Their hour has come as well. The time of testing is about to begin. And so Jesus asks them directly, *“do you now believe?”* Jesus knows that everything he has just told them, and everything they have believed will be put to the test the moment Jesus is arrested and when the disciples suddenly realize that what is happening to Jesus might just happen to them. Fearing for their lives, within 24 hours, they will go into hiding.

Jesus foretells of events to unfold just hours away. In verse 32, he tells them, *“behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone.”* The disciples have professed their faith in Jesus. Peter has even proclaimed that he is willing to die for Jesus (John 13:38). But Jesus knows the fear that is about to seize them all, an event which is also foretold by Israel’s prophets, in this case the prophecy in Zechariah 13:7-9, our Old Testament lesson, in which the prophet proclaims the word of YHWH regarding the fate of the messianic shepherd and his disciples. *“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me, declares the Lord of hosts. ‘Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones. In the whole land, declares the Lord, two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The Lord is my God.’”*

In this remarkable prophecy, we read that YHWH will strike the shepherd (the one closest to him), and in doing so refine his people as one refines a precious metal. In alluding to this prophecy in verse 32, Jesus adds, *“yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.”* Just as Jesus will not leave his disciples on their

own—which is why he is sending the Holy Spirit to them—so too the Father will not abandon Jesus in his hour of trial. Jesus will be stricken of God. He will bear in his own flesh that wrath of God which should rightly be directed toward us. When YHWH strikes the messianic shepherd his flock will flee, as the disciples will do when Jesus dies at the hands of the Romans. But when all of these things come to pass, Jesus knows that YHWH will not desert him, for as the Psalmist declares in verse 10, of Psalm 16, “*for you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.*” YHWH will be with Jesus even in death. And Jesus will be with his disciples, when he appears to them alive and includes them as members of his spiritual body (the church) through the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

As the “discourse” portion of evening comes to a close, Jesus leaves the disciples with an important word of encouragement. He tells them in verse 33, “*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*” If Jesus’ disciples are to be characterized by their love for one another, which stands in sharp contrast to the hatred God’s people will receive from the world, then in order to resist the temptation to fight back against the world, the disciples must know that peace is possible for them in the midst of such inevitable hostility. Jesus explains to them that one of the reasons he has given them all of this new information, is precisely so that they would have peace of God, in the midst of the hostility coming from the world. This kind of peace is something only Jesus can give, for as he told them in John 14:27, “*peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*”

Jesus is blunt in his words of caution to the disciples. Although he will give them peace in the midst of their trials, Jesus tells them, “*in the world you will have tribulation.*” The Greek word for tribulation is used elsewhere in the New Testament in regard to those woes which characterize the last days (the entire period of time between Jesus’ ascension into heaven and his second advent), as well as in reference to the persecution which believers will face. In other words, because the world is a place of fallen sinners, life will be difficult (at times), and believers must endure it. But in the midst of this tribulation, Jesus promises us his peace, as well as his joy. This is his gift to us through the work of the Holy Spirit who bears his fruit in our lives, fruit which includes, “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*” In the midst of a fallen world which hates us, and which is filled with the trials and tribulations, Jesus will enable us to love one another, and to live in peace with God and with our neighbors—these things are among the fruit of the Spirit.

The reason why the disciples are to have such hope (to “take heart”) is also given by Jesus. “*I have overcome the world.*” Although Jesus speaks as though he has already won a great victory over the world by completing his messianic mission, he speaks this way because he knows what he is about to do through his death and resurrection. When Jesus dies and then rises again from the dead, he will cast out the world’s ruler (Satan). When Jesus dies and rises again, he demonstrates God’s love for sinners, and as the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world removing from us our guilt and shame. When Jesus dies and rises again, he overturns the curse, which is death, breaking sin’s hold upon God’s people.

Yes, we will experience tribulation in the world. Life will be a perpetual struggle against sin (both our own, and that of the world) and a struggle against death (with all of the maladies which plague us). The world will remain a place of hatred and tribulation until Jesus returns. But whenever the gospel is preached, the cross of Jesus and his empty tomb repeatedly shout out to us the wonderful and encouraging words of Jesus, “*take heart; I have overcome the world.*”