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In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? (John 14:2, RSV)

"Let not your hearts be troubled," says Jesus. And yet there are a lot of troubled hearts in this world. I meet some of them at my Pastor's Booth. Humanity comes streaming by my booth, and most people are happy, glad to say. They do not need spiritual help, they do not desire pastoral conversation, at least at this time in life. But some of those passersby do have troubled hearts. Sometimes they sit down at my booth and begin to cry.

We each have our own story. We each have our hopes and dreams, sorrows and setbacks, fears and disappointments. What I do in my Pastor's Booth is to listen to some of the troubled hearts in our city and to answer back in an encouraging way by speaking of Jesus.

This is something we can do for one another. You do not need to be clergy in order to take some time to be available to others, to listen to them, to sympathize with them, to pray with them, and to offer whatever encouragement you can that you believe to be true.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, the disciples are troubled. They are about to face the worst time of their lives. Just a few verses before our reading, Jesus has told his disciples that his time is running out:

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. (John 13:33, KJV)

Peter objects that he will go wherever Jesus goes:

I will lay down my life for thy sake. (John 13:37, KJV)

But Peter is wrong, as we know. Jesus tells him about his upcoming threefold denial of Jesus, before the cock crows, and of course Jesus is right. Then Peter's heart will be troubled. The hearts of all the disciples will be troubled. Jesus anticipates this and strengthens them for the hard times ahead:

Let not your hearts be troubled; (John 14:1, RSV)

In our Lord's words of consolation, we can see a three-step sequence of reasoning. First, Jesus reminds his disciples of God. Second, he reminds them of himself, the only begotten Son of God. And third, Jesus speaks of heaven. He speaks of mansions in heaven. Let's consider these three steps.

First, remember God.

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in *God*... (John 1, RSV)

This amounts to the exhortation that we should not yield to despair, nor permit our neighbors to fall into despair if we can help them. We should not imagine that there is no hope, no saving of us. We should not permit ourselves to imagine that life is meaningless. We should not take the unbelieving stance of regarding ourselves and others as nothing more than biochemical sequences. We should believe that life is precious and of eternal dignity.

"What is God?" That is the simple but profound question raised by Martin Luther in his *Large Catechism* (1529). Luther's famous answer refers to the heart, to the human heart:

That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.

To be a human is to believe in *something* – something that makes sense of things, something that permits us to believe that what is going on in our lives is not some random, meaningless sequence of events. So we believe in something bigger than ourselves, lest we end up in the madhouse. Luther is saying that whatever that is, whatever our heart clings to and entrusts itself to, that is our God.

So, our Lord's first step in comforting the troubled conscience is remind us of God. There *is* a God. You are not trapped in meaninglessness.

Next, Jesus invites his disciples to not simply believe in God, but to believe also in him:

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in *me*. (John 14:1, RSV)

Here we shift from the question, "What is God?" to the question, "Who is God?" In a way, that is the truly interesting question. We all believe in God -- that a human life might be possible for us. The important question is not, "Is there a God," but that, "Who is your God?" Jesus invites us to connect God with him, with Jesus. Classical theology puts the point this way: Jesus is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. This rule means at least this much: When you think of God, think of Jesus. When you think of the meaning of life, think of

Jesus. When you think of eternity, think of Jesus. When you think of morality, think of Jesus. When you might fear that all is lost, remember Jesus, and in remembering him, be reminded that life is better than it looks. Life is better because life is in the hands of Jesus, and he is a really good person.

The third step is the main one with which I want to linger this morning. In the third step, Jesus would have us look ahead. At present, our eyes and our hearts might be preoccupied with the joys, pressures, disappointments, and dwindling years left to us. But Jesus would have us lift up our hearts toward something ahead of us. Jesus says that in heaven there are many rooms. You will not be left homeless there. There are plenty of rooms in our heavenly Father's house. When young Mary the mother of our Lord was heavy with the Christ Child, there was no room for her and for Joseph in the inn. But there will be room for you in heaven, for in our Father's house, there are many mansions.

Jesus says that he goes to prepare a place for us. And so we come to all three steps in our Lord's consolation of the troubled heart:

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in *God*, believe also in *me*. ²In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that *I go to prepare a place for you*? (John 14:1-2, RSV)

When I was a boy reading my King James Bible, our text spoke of "mansions." Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many mansions." (John 14:2, KJV) The underlying Greek word there, *monai*, speaks simply of rooms or abiding places. But I believe that the old King James Version translates the word right when it speaks of "mansions." We should think of these apartments as beautiful and glorious, for they are part of the heavenly Father's "house," and wherever our God is, there is beauty.

Furthermore, I would not deprive the poor ones of this earth of faith in mansions – not simply mansions for rich people, but especially mansions for *them*. In this expensive town, if we have a home, we are blessed. On a cold and rainy day, we cannot help but look at the homeless ones huddled on our sidewalks and pray that they will find homes. It is good to have somewhere to go, to close the door behind you, to rest your head and to regain some strength in life.

Even the poor of the land usually have some kind of home. But that home might be a lowly and stressful thing. There are people the world over living in windblown shacks, in neighborhoods where there is gun fire, in buildings where it is hard to get a good night's sleep because there is noise and turmoil nearly all the time. No! I would not deprive a weary humanity of mansions. Jesus consoles his troubled disciples by speaking of many rooms in his Father's house. Let those rooms be mansions, I say.

Jesus says that he is going on ahead to prepare a place for his disciples. One of the old preachers said that the way in which Jesus prepares a *place* for his disciples is to prepare his *disciples* for that holy world. He does that by sending the Holy Spirit to move them along into more beautiful and full lives. That will soon be our subject, on Pentecost Sunday.

Meanwhile, let's finish up by taking a look at a living example of someone who was consoled in the manner of which Jesus speaks. I mean St. Stephen, the church's first martyr. We read of him in this morning's First Lesson, from Acts 7.

His opponents become enraged at him.

⁵⁴Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. (Acts 7:54, RSV)

We human beings are capable of that: we are capable of becoming enraged, swept along by a frenzy. It is just that when we do that, we risk taking leave of our rationality and our feel for the truth. Those who stoned Stephen no doubt felt that they had a high principle on their side – the rule that one ought not to blaspheme. They were convinced that Stephen was taking the holy name of God in vain, and they were determined to stop him, with stones. I wish they had been more patient. Maybe they wished so too, once the deed was done and they had calmed down.

In any case, imagine them in their rage. They look at Stephen with hatred. They grind their teeth against him. They want this world to be done with the man.

Meanwhile, Stephen does not so much look at them – the ones who mean to kill him – but rather at Jesus. You and I can look to Jesus with the eyes of faith and sacred imagination. But Stephen seems to have been blessed with a stronger vision than that:

⁵⁵But he [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God;

Here we have all three steps at once. Stephen faces the stones unafraid. His heart seems not to be troubled, for he sees “the glory of God,” he sees “Jesus standing at the right hand of God,” and “gazes into heaven.” Jesus has died. He was crucified. Yet Stephen sees him in heaven, ready to receive him.

Sometimes, when people come to my Pastor's Booth with their heavy hearts, I can think of little more to do than to take their hand, to pray with them, and to tell them that things are going to get better. That last part – about things getting better: that is not a toss-off line for me. That is not some idle dream. That is the stone-cold truth: When you are troubled in heart, do

not let your troubles so overwhelm you that you think that things will never be good again. They will be good again, because your story is not yet done, and Jesus is not yet done with you. Nor is he done with our world and the things that are discouraging for you at this time in life. Jesus is risen “with healing in his wings,” as the Bible says. He is well-able to take charge of the circumstances of your life. He can arrange and rearrange and coordinate and organize things so that life will work out for you according to the love he has for you, which is a great love indeed.

“Come unto me,” Jesus once said. And Stephen has come unto him! That is all any of us can ask, and in the end we will find it beyond our deserving or even our dreaming: that we should come unto God, befriended by Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.