

Sermon – John 17:6-19; Psalm 1
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
7 Easter – Year B
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“Joy in the World”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

1. We learned at a young age to listen for the sirens, particularly at this time of year. Northeast Wisconsin is not exactly tornado alley, but we would have our share of close calls each summer. While my brother and I might chance a quick glance out the front door (or a longer look from the driveway once we were older), we would quickly make our way to the basement with our mother. We'd turn on the battery-powered radio and scan the AM dial for news, making sure we had flashlights and candles at the ready in case the power went out. Which it did, from time to time. We'd sit on the couch, the minutes passing slowly, wondering what was going on in the world up above our heads. My memories are faded, but I recall my mother's strong, comforting presence. Holding me. Reassuring me that everything would be okay, that she would protect us. As a parent, I've learned something about words spoken in such moments. The promises spoken to our children are also prayers lifted to our heavenly Father, for we know that while we would do anything in our power to protect the ones we love, we also know that some things are simply beyond our power to control. Mom couldn't have stopped a tornado, although I'm sure she would have tried. But she made me feel safe, loved, protected, even while this world's winds whipped about us.

2. We live in a dangerous world, and not simply because of storm systems. This world is in open rebellion against its Creator. Jesus, the Word through whom the world came into being, is clear-eyed in his assessment of this world, by which he means not the rocks and rivers but our cosmic turn to idolatry and sin, our thrall to the evil one. So, on the night before he submits fully and finally to this world's destructive violence on the cross, Jesus prays for those who will be commissioned to fulfill his purposes after his resurrection and ascension. "And now," he says, "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." *Protect them in your name.*

3. Note that Jesus does not say, "As I am coming to you, Father, please bring them with me, that they might leave this world behind." Perhaps we wish Jesus would offer such a prayer, would make such a thing come to pass. Goodness knows we would all like to escape. This pandemic, even while it loosens its grip, has held us in its grasp for so long. We have sought to protect ourselves and our communities through uncertain times with ever-changing guidance. Beyond sickness, there is violence. In what seems like an endless cycle, the people of the Holy Land seek protection while inflicting violence upon one another in the midst of a conflagration that threatens to engulf the innocent who cry out for peace and protection. Beyond violence, there is division. We find ourselves living not just in this world *with* one another, but in different worlds *from* one another, as people become ever more ready to embrace their preferred vision of the world, regardless of its connection to reality. The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously quipped, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." Our current political reality seems dedicated to upending this observation, with many preferring to create facts out of thin air, all evidence to the contrary. Sickness, violence, division. Frankly, it can all be exhausting, and who can blame us for wanting an escape hatch to a different, better world. But there's one more

piece of the puzzle that needs to be acknowledged, for the problems in this world are not simply *out there*; they are *in here*. In me, and in you. In the sin that continues to draw us further from God and further from one another. In the ways we perpetuate or benefit from this world's rebellion. In the ways we drive deeper the wedges that separate humanity and sow the discord in which the evil one does his best work. Even if we were to escape, would we not bring the same problems with us?

4. Our hope is found only in this One who prays for us on Thursday and dies for us on Friday. We are joined to his death, undertaken willingly for our sake and salvation, that we might also be joined to his life. Where once we were severed branches, now we have been grafted onto the vine who is the risen Christ. We are given a unity we could never achieve among ourselves, gifted to us by the Christ who makes us one despite ourselves. We find ourselves planted like trees whose roots reach deeply into the flowing waters of eternal life. These roots not only feed us; they connect us to this world, keeping us here because it is precisely in this world that Christ needs us.
5. Perched in the mountains above the evil land of Mordor, Frodo turns to his friend Sam and says, "I don't like anything here at all." Everything around them is accursed, blighted. Sam, in this scene from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, replies, "And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started." He goes on to muse about how the heroes in old tales must have had many chances to turn aside, but they didn't. The friends take comfort in the old stories, and even more in their friendship. Fate has led them to a difficult, dangerous spot. But they are not alone. The witness of those who came before them keeps them on their path. Their presence with and for one another keeps them safe. They know they could choose to turn aside, to escape, but in the knowledge that they have been chosen to bring light and life back to a broken land, the choice is already made. These hobbit

heroes know that the only path to a better world goes directly through the broken world in which they live.

6. So, too, are we sent, not *out of* but *into* this world. For even though the world has turned its back on God, Jesus does not turn his back on this world that God so loves. He gives his life within this broken world to bring a new creation into being, a world for which we wait but that is also made manifest in our midst. Jesus speaks of those who follow him as those who keep his word. Jesus' Word, his *logos*, is nothing other than Jesus himself. We are made safe, protected, by keeping the One who is already keeping us safe. This does not mean, of course, that we will be kept from all harm in this world, but it does mean that nothing in this world can ever truly harm us. We, after all, already live on the other side of death. Of what can we truly be afraid? This morning (at 11:00), Rory will be baptized into Christ. He will not be given a false promise that everything in his life will be easy from here on out, that he will be protected from any and every possible bad thing. By no means. But Christ promises to be with him always, calling this child to live already on the other side of death so that he can also live fully the life set before him now, here, today. Rory is sent this day into the world as a child of God whose identity is secure in the world to come. But Rory doesn't go alone; he goes with you and with me, his fellow sanctified sisters and brothers in Christ. We go together, forgiven of the sin within us and strengthened to resist the sin around us.

7. Protected, held safe in the arms of God, we find rest and renewal. As Tom Troeger writes, we discover "a sense of Christ's presence that will allow us to live vitally and faithfully in the world, not owned by it, but fully engaged with its needs and wounds and energized by the truth of God's word, by the truth who was sent into the world that we all might have a more abundant life here and now." Friends, we may yearn for escape from this world, but there is no way out for us yet. This is where God needs us. But if we cannot yet leave this

world, neither can we escape the God who is with us, the God who, for the sake of the crucified and risen Christ, forgives us and gives us life, who promises that not one of us shall be lost and who brings us into his joy even now. We are forever held safe in the arms of the God who will never let us go. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.