

“Finding Our Way”  
August 2, 2020

Isaiah 26:1-9  
John 14:1-6a

This past Thursday morning I heard that churches across the country were planning to ring their bells at 11:00 Eastern Time. The bells would ring for 80 seconds, honoring the eighty years of the life of John Lewis as his funeral began in Atlanta.

We, of course, do not have a bell in our church tower, so I quickly found the old handbell that we use during worship on Maundy Thursday and at 10:00 went out the front door of the church and let the bell toll for 80 seconds. As far as I could hear, it was the only bell ringing in downtown Iowa City and my guess is that most people driving by had no idea what I was doing or why.

Still, it seemed a small but necessary action on behalf of our congregation to honor such a great and tireless leader.

Along with many of you, I joined the rest of our nation in following Congressman Lewis’s final journey from Alabama to Washington, DC, to Atlanta. In DC the road took him by monuments and buildings important to his life and career: past the Memorial to his mentor, Martin Luther King, Jr., to the Lincoln Memorial where both King and a young Lewis spoke on that hot August day in 1963—Lewis’s speech apparently so fiery that he was asked to tone it down, and finally to the United States Capitol, where he was honored in the Rotunda.

It was an amazing life’s journey.

What struck me most, however, were those images of the horse-drawn hearse carrying his body over the bridge in Selma named for a racist and the site of some of the worst racial violence in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The first time Lewis tried to cross that bridge in Selma he was beaten and nearly killed by State Troopers. The last time he crossed, Alabama State Troopers, acting as an honor guard, saluted.

The arc of the universe is indeed long—and it does indeed bend toward justice.

We journey on roads that take us to unimagined destinations, through unexpected turns. The path is never as clear while we walk it as it is in looking back.

So when Jennifer Holiday improvised on “Precious Lord Take My Hand” during the funeral for John Lewis last Thursday, she was, in some way, singing for all of us who are tired, weak, and worn. She sang: “We don’t know what will happen tomorrow... We don’t know which way to go.”

Such feelings echo the words of Thomas Merton that we prayed earlier in our worship: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.”

As people of faith we recognize that the obvious and certain path is not the one we travel. We are people who choose to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ, recognizing that we can only see a short distance down that path.

We speak in our church covenant of the ways of Jesus Christ, “known and *to be made known* to us.” I’d never heard that phrase before I came here—the ways of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us—perhaps it is unique to our Church Covenant. But it has become a touchstone for my own faith.

Like everyone in our congregation, I know something of the Ways of Jesus Christ. And like everyone in our congregation, I recognize that there are still Ways to be made known, even as I seek to be aware of and open to such revelations.

In our uncertainty, we turn to the Gospel of John and see once more its unique picture of the final meal that Jesus shares with his disciples as the shadows lengthen before his arrest and crucifixion. In those crucial hours Jesus eats with the disciples and washes their feet. He teaches them and prays for them. He speaks of his relationship with his followers that will continue after his death. And he tells them: “Do not let your hearts be troubled...where I am, you may be also.”

His words cause more confusion than comfort for Thomas, who blurts out: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” We might ask the same question in our own time, when all roads seem in disrepair and all maps seem outdated.

How can we know the way?

Jesus answers: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*”

The poet, W.H. Auden, end his oratorio *For the Time Being* with a confession and an imperative: “He is the Way. Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness; You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.”

The Way that we seek, even now, is found in the One who says: “Follow me. Come, draw near. Walk along for a while. Watch what I do.”

When we follow Jesus, then, we find ourselves going to the places where he goes. With him we meet the people he meets. Those places, those people often turn out to be nothing like what we have known or what we would expect. As we follow along we start to see that Jesus is the One most “unlike” our understanding and expectations.

We follow Jesus to the place of prayer, a place apart from the noise of the world, apart from the quickly changing demands of our quickly changing lives. How hard it is to follow to such a place! But we watch as Jesus pulls back and invites active souls to slow down for a time.

We follow Jesus to places where healing is brought to our world. The ministry of Jesus was one of healing and restoration, of saying “No” to the powers of destruction—and more importantly, of saying “Yes” to all that gives life. Where there is brokenness, there those who are following Christ will be found.

We follow Jesus and encounter all sorts of people. He eats with sinners and outcasts—is there no one that he will not love? He speaks a message of the nearness of the reign of God to the poor *and* to the rich. No person, no group is excluded from the love that approaches.

We follow, not just along familiar paths but most of the time down ways still to be made known.

The novelist E. L. Doctorow said that “Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” Now, far be it from me

to tell members of *this* congregation how to write a novel—or any kind of book. But those words also suggest what *life* is like for us as people of faith—and really, what life is like for all people. We don't see—and we don't even propose to imagine—the entire road. We move forward as best as we know how— not seeing very far ahead and depending always on the grace and forgiveness we find in God and in others—and even in ourselves at our best and most compassionate.

Jesus was not the end, but the beginning. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus was the start of God's involvement with creation in a new way. The light of God is still dawning on this world, showing life in a new way. That is our hope, our faith, even when the path is hard to see, especially when the path is hard to see.

John Lewis offered his final word to us this past week in an op-ed printed in *The New York Times* on the day of his funeral. As he looked around in the new things that were coming into being in his final days, he rejoiced with us that: “Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world you set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity.”

And he concluded: “That is why I had to visit Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, though I was admitted to the hospital the following day. I just had to see and feel it for myself that, after many years of silent witness, the truth is still marching on.”

We don't see the end. We don't see very far down the road.

But we, too, can give thanks that as we follow in the Ways of Jesus Christ, as we travel together, along that same uncertain and unfamiliar path the truth is marching on.