

Easter 7 (B)
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Text: John 17:6-19

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I am happy to be able to say that it has been almost two weeks now since Melinda and I received our second dose of the Pfizer vaccine. Fortunately, we haven't experienced any bad side effects. It feels like one small step toward returning to something like normal, a movement toward not always worrying about keeping ourselves safe from danger. In the meantime, we'll continue to be aware of how to care for and protect neighbors who might have health challenges that make them particularly vulnerable to the worst effects of the virus. For more than a year now, being safe and keeping neighbors and loved ones safe has been near the top of our minds. It really is a lift to not automatically think about looming danger and how to protect ourselves.

Danger looms in our gospel reading for today, but also protection from danger, protection from the very worst danger. It was the evening of Jesus' last meal with his disciples. Judas had already left to betray Jesus to the temple authorities. Later that night Jesus would be arrested and condemned to death. He knew what was coming, although the disciples didn't have a clue. Jesus knew how frightening it would be for them. He knew that there would be a whole world of challenge and danger facing them, not just that night, but also in the future, after God raised him from the dead, and after he sent them out to be his witnesses. And so on this last night that he is with them, Jesus prays for them. It's a powerful thing to consider: Jesus prays for them, and along with them, he also prays for us, for all those who will come to believe through their witness.

Jesus prays, specifically, that God would protect his followers, then and now—protect them, guard them, keep them safe from evil. This can be a very challenging prayer for us to hear, because it raises serious questions: "Where is God's protection when bad things happen?" How many of us, and how many people have we known, who have been faithful people who loved God and were committed to Jesus' way of love—how many have gone through incredibly difficult and painful experiences in life? It might be enough to make us wonder about that protection that Jesus was talking about—whether we can trust it, whether we can count on it! It brings to mind a dear friend of mine named Jim. He was honest, kind, encouraging. He served as council president for his congregation. He also ran his own construction company, but got squeezed into bankruptcy because he tried to live in a way that was consistent with his faith. He wanted to be an ethical businessman, and ended up getting blackballed by the big companies that wanted him to engage in unethical practices, like making kickbacks. And maybe you know someone who has been through something just as bad, or worse.

It's clear to me that the protection we receive from God does not mean we are insulated from things in life that can hurt us. We don't receive some sort of supernatural shield that God places between us and everything that is dangerous, everything that causes harm, like the coronavirus. Instead, it's more like this: as we are immersed in this ongoing life with God—a life that his all about love, a life that is nurtured by prayer and worship and relationships with other

believers and caring for our neighbors—our hearts are indeed protected from evil because we are focused on the things that belong to Jesus: forgiveness, compassion, generosity, humility, putting our trust in God and not in ourselves. As we are being shaped by Jesus' values, our hearts are protected from those things that feed evil—fear, self-centeredness, hate and greed, resentment and entitlement. It isn't like we go through life covered in atomic-powered bubble-wrap that will protect us from absolutely everything. It's more like having an inner Geiger counter warning us that resentment and bitterness are radioactive; greed and being wrapped up only in our own wants and desires are radioactive; being insulated from and indifferent to other peoples' struggles is radioactive. Our faith in Jesus leads us away from exposing our hearts to that sort of stuff, because we're directed instead toward forgiveness and generosity and compassion.

And I've seen that kind of guarding and protecting. For my friend Jim, the years after declaring bankruptcy were tremendously challenging, but I never saw him give his heart over to bitterness or resentment or hate. His life with God protected him from that. I do believe that God protected him from evil and shielded the core of his being and guarded his heart. As a pastor, I am privileged to share with individuals and families through times of grief and loss, and I can tell you that it makes a tremendous difference when there is a foundation of trust in God. It makes us less vulnerable to the power of fear. It doesn't mean we will never be afraid, but trusting God does protect us from the power of fear to twist our hearts and warp our spirits. It can protect us from working our insecurity out on others, lashing out at them and making them our victims. That foundation of trust in God makes us less vulnerable to the power of desire to manipulate us and make us do mean or short-sighted things. That foundation of trust in God, and the ongoing practices that we share as God's people—prayer, worship, generosity, humility, attending to our spiritual life—these things help keep us centered when the storms of life would blow us off course, taking us this way or that.

Jesus puts it this way: we are in this world, but Jesus prays that we will never be of the world. He doesn't mean the natural world, this beautiful creation that God gives us. Jesus means the world that self-centered humanity makes, the world that is all about me-first, and doesn't live in Jesus' way of love. And notice: Jesus doesn't pray for us to be taken out of this human-made world. Instead, he prays that in this world, even when we face things that are frightening or dangerous, our relationship with God will protect our hearts from evil. Our relationship with God will remind us who we really are—we are children of God, who are part of God's great work of love to heal all of creation! Jesus prays that even though we are in this world, it will never have the power to change the core of who we are—because we belong to God.

To live this way—in the world but not of it—isn't easy. It's challenging. It's like swimming against the stream. But the strength to do that doesn't come from us. It comes from God—which is why it's so essential to stay connected to Christ and connected to this communal body that is the living expression of his presence. We don't swim against the stream of our fearful, angry, greedy, self-centered culture all by ourselves. That just sounds exhausting! Instead, we are connected to the risen Christ, and we draw strength from that connection. We receive clarity of vision and purpose from that connection. We feel encouragement and peace and joy

through that connection.

Dear children of God, as you go out into the week ahead, go with great hope and courage, because God is protecting you from evil—every day—not with some kind of supernatural bubble-warp, but through your faith, through Jesus' way of love growing deeply in your heart. Thanks be to God. Amen.