

Maybe you remember the 1963 movie *The Great Escape*, which was about British and American captives in a German Prisoner of War camp during WWII. It was based on the book of the same name and highly fictionalized, but if you saw it, you know how riveting it was.

The POWS surreptitiously and cleverly dug a series of tunnels named “Tom,” “Dick,” and “Harry,” and eventually, on the appointed night, 76 escaped, though, spoiler alert, only a handful made it to permanent freedom.

Beyond the dramatic and amazing escapes, there are smaller escapes. Most of us relish our vacations—and I know some of you really relish your vacations! We can get away, escape our usual routines, escape our town, escape the same old same old. “Get away from it all,” as not a few marketing campaigns advertise.

Get away and forget your problems and responsibilities. I’m looking forward to my vacation next month, sitting by Lake Chelan in Central Washington state with my kids and granddaughters.

The appeal of escaping is an impulse that has affected the broader Christian Church throughout history as well. Commentator Thomas H. Troeger gives a nice summary noting

that as far back as the community around John who produced the Gospel of John in the late 1st or early 2nd c., Christians have desired to retreat from the powers that be and, at times, the persecution, to do their own thing, just hang out with one another, sharing stories of Jesus, and bread and wine.

In the subsequent history of the Church, this impulse to withdraw and disengage can be seen throughout the church’s 2,000-year history in

Monasteries,

Convents,

Desert fathers hermits out in caves

Reform movements like the Puritans who came to America

Communal living and utopian groups,

Down to today with various Christian subcultures that work to recreate “Christian” versions of institutions and organizations that, while purporting to be in the world but not of it, but, really, are of the world but not in it!

It reminds me of the lyrics of an early Christian rock musician, Larry Norman, which he surely borrowed from popular sentiment, a sentiment that I'm guessing you've heard:

“What a mess this world is in,
I wonder who began it
Don't ask me, I'm only visiting this planet
This world is not my home,
I'm just passing through.”

While there is some truth to that statement, to the degree that “passing through” means “I'm not engaging the world,” we have a strong contrast to Jesus' words in our gospel today.

Thomas H. Troeger again:

The wisdom of John's sermon,
delivered as the instruction of Christ, is this:

***“it provides an alternative to retreat from the world
without giving in to the pressures of the world.***

Again and again, we read that Jesus and his disciples do not belong to the world that is to say the world's claims do not shape their essential identity faith, and values but at the same time, Christ is crystal clear that ***there is no escape from the reality of the world.***”

Indeed, here in John 17, Jesus says to the Father

“I am not asking you to take them out of the world,
but I ask you to protect them from evil”

A word about the context of John 17 will help us understand what Jesus is doing and saying here. . .

John 17 has commonly been called Jesus's High Priestly prayer. These 26 verses are also sometimes called “the other Lord's Prayer.” As with last week's passage, we are still hearing Jesus' sermon and prayer on Maundy Thursday.

He's on the cusp of Judas's betrayal, a sham trial, the disciples deserting him, physical abuse, and ultimately, crucifixion.

And whether he supernaturally knows exactly what lies ahead or, just knows that as a controversial figure in the cauldron of the Jewish Passover observation

celebration in Roman-occupied Jerusalem, he's "dancing in the dragon's jaws," he rightly could have other things on his mind.

But what, or better who, is on his mind? *His disciples*. Yes, for 26 verses, He sets His own concerns aside and prays for followers, who, as we saw last week, He also calls his friends.

Jesus prays for his disciples, reminding them:
They were given to Jesus by God,
and Jesus guarded and protected them.
But since Jesus is leaving, he asks
the Father to now protect them and guard them.

And he's not just praying for the twelve disciples in the upper room.
In the extra verse I read, did you notice that *you* are in the text this morning?

Jesus prays for those who will follow after his disciples:
20 'I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will
believe in me through their word.
Jesus prays for you and me.

John writes this for the church. . .

And tells the story of how God revealed the truth through and IN Jesus,
Jesus bore witness to the truth of the kingdom of God to the disciples,
The disciples bore witness to the church
The church bore witness to the kingdom of God,
imperfectly to be sure,
For 2000 years,
Which resulted in the truth coming to us,
And those who will hear it in the future,
Will hear it from us. . .

(seems both encouraging and sobering: encouraging that we are the recipients, and sobering that we are the messengers, the workers in the kingdom of God for the next generation!)

My pastor friend Roger put it this way,
There is something remarkably human and unmistakably divine here...
When we don't know how to pray – Jesus is praying for us.
When we struggle praying – Jesus is praying for us.

When we can't pray – Jesus is praying for us.
When we've given up praying – Jesus is praying for us.

And what Jesus is praying for is **NOT** our removal from the world,
not our removal from
 the powers and principalities,
 and chaos and crises,
 injustice and injuries.

Jesus prays for our *protection*. “I ask you to protect them,”
“While I was with them, I protected them in your name,” says Jesus. . .
“Holy Father, protect them in your name.”

What is that protection?

Maybe the protection that Jesus asks for in this prayer, maybe the protection that we pray for, is that God will protect us from the ultimate evil,
 from separation from God,
 from being totally and ultimately alone.

When Jesus prays, “Protect them,” He is praying to protect them from that ultimate aloneness. He is praying that God will never abandon, desert, leave, let go, turn his back, walk away, forget, or forsake His disciples, His friends, His followers, and you...

Even as Jesus approaches the cross, where He cries out about being abandoned by God, He prays that his followers will not be abandoned but will be protected.

So, when Jesus prays for YOU, he is praying to the One who gave you to Jesus. What God has given Jesus, He is not going to take away, or forsake, or abandon.

 You belong to God in Christ.
 You are protected by God in Christ.¹
 You will never slip from the grasp of God.

It makes me think of the image of an astronaut doing a spacewalk
 outside of a space station.

¹I'm indebted for these ideas to the Rev. Roger Nelson.

The danger outside the space station,
where there is no air or oxygen,
is offset by the protective space suit, and crucially,
a tether with an oxygen line coming from the mother ship.

To press the analogy,
Maybe Jesus's prayer here is the oxygen we breathe
and the space suit is the protection that
Jesus prays we receive from the Father.
"I am not asking you to take them out of the world,
but I ask you to protect them from evil," says Jesus.

Chelsey Harmon puts it this way:

Jesus prays for our protection. He prays for our protection so that we may be one, as God is one (v 11). Our unity is a witness to the Trinity. He does not pray that we will be removed from the trials and temptations, from the pressures of the world, or isolated from alternate ways of thinking. Instead, Jesus prays that the Father will protect us from evil and will sanctify us in the truth.

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Yes, there is a time and a place for escape, which is self-care and rejuvenation. But as we live out our faith in Jesus, we are clearly called to *engage in the world*, not *escape it*.

The Christian life is not, fundamentally,
intended to be an escape from the world.
Rather, like Jesus,
we are actually sent into the world,
in the same way that *Jesus was sent* into the world by the Father.

But we aren't sent alone,
We have the very prayers of Jesus
to sustain us,
to give us the strength and courage to
love and live our lives worthy of the kingdom.
May you feel the protective prayers of Jesus this week.

In the name of the F, S, & HS. Amen.