

Sermon – John 17:6-19
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7 Easter – Year B
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“No Escape”

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

1. When I was a child, green and yellow bumper stickers were all the rage in Wisconsin. No – not green and gold, although those were popular, too. These green and yellow bumper stickers, which you might remember, were part of a tourism campaign. They read, “Escape to Wisconsin.” It was simple invitation, invoking images of camping and fishing, of taking it easy for a while well the rest of the world continued to turn. It was an invitation to escape, to get away, to forget about your cares. I was somewhat confused by this as a child, for two reasons. First, it seemed that most of the bumper stickers were on cars that were already in Wisconsin. These people had already made it – to whom were they issuing this invitation? But the second thing that I couldn’t understand as a child was the notion of escape. Oh, I liked a good vacation as much as the next kid. But escape? That’s an idea for adults, we who know what a dangerous, wearying, worrisome place the world can be. Whether we’re looking at the evening news or our bank account or ourselves in the mirror, escape can start to sound pretty good. This world, it seems, might just be a pretty good place from which to get away.
2. All of which makes Jesus’ words today seem a little disappointing. Jesus is about to go away. Our reading today from John 17 is from the night before his death. But the church has traditionally positioned these words on this Sunday after the celebration of Jesus’ ascension, his return to the Father. And

what does Jesus say in the middle of this prayer? “I am no longer in the world, but they (you!) are in the world.” This makes for a much less attractive tourism campaign: I get to escape, but you’re stuck here! With the world and its woes?

3. Such thinking, however, demands that we give into a misunderstanding with a long history; namely, that this world is somehow flawed beyond repair and so God has sent Jesus to save us by removing us from the world, shielding us from its cares and promising us a heaven, out there somewhere. As with most flawed theologies, there’s just enough truth here to get us into trouble. Because of course God desires our well-being; in this prayer to the Father, Jesus prays for our protection. And of course heaven is promised to us, God’s reign in which Jesus will be all in all, and all things will be set right by the God who refuses to have it any other way. But it is precisely because of these things that our lives are now to be directed in just the same direction as was Jesus’ life: not away from the world, but toward this world that God loves so much. So much that the Son of God was sent to bring us life abundant and eternal. And this is the word of hope that we need, for otherwise we are in danger of seeking escape in all the wrong ways – ways that lead away from abundant life. In seminary, one of my Old Testament professors had rather gleefully taken scissors to one of those Wisconsin bumper stickers, cutting and rearranging words and letters so that it read, “I sin to escape.” But within the joke on his office door there was truth; for how often do we engage in sinful, self-serving, self-damaging behavior to try to escape this world? It never works, of course. Which is why true freedom always leads us out of ourselves, toward the world and toward one another.
4. So it is that we no longer need to seek escape from this world because in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, we have been given freedom from sin, death, and the devil – the only things from which we needed to escape. Christ has rescued us, but having saved us, he now sends

us. Back into this world as emissaries of the Kingdom. Back into this world as those who are sanctified, set apart, and empowered by God's own Spirit. Back into this world, as those who have been made one with God so that we might be one with one another – not drawing apart but growing closer together as a human family. And back into the world as those for whom Jesus prays. Jesus, now seated at the right hand of the Father; Jesus, with cosmic authority; this Jesus prays for us, hold us lives – our cares and concerns, our work and our witness – before the very heart of God, so that we can live freely and without fear. So that we can bring the Jesus with whom we are one into this world that he loves.

5. Perhaps you've heard the old story of a music teacher named David Storch, which I first heard told by the preacher, Tom Long. Mr. Storch had checked out a copy of the score for Handel's "Messiah" from the Brooklyn Public Library. Due to a clerical error, however, the transaction wasn't recorded. As far as the library's records were concerned, it should have been there. Unable to find it, the librarians finally recorded it as missing. Mr. Storch brought it back in due course and placed it upon the counter, at which point the librarian – in very un-librarian-like fashion – shouted out, "The Messiah is back! The Messiah is here!" For a moment, every head turned toward the circulation desk in anticipation, until they realized that instead of seeing the Son of God descending, it was just a rather sheepish looking music teacher.
6. As we move now from Ascension to Pentecost, we hear Jesus' prayer for us – a prayer that we would be protected and kept safe specifically for the purpose of bringing the ever-present life and love of the Messiah into this world. He's not missing, after all. It only feels that way from time to time. He shows up this morning in a feast that fills us with his presence, so that we can bring his presence into this world. Jesus has entrusted us with the word of hope from another world that is needed in this one – the world he loved

enough to die for, the world for which we now live. No escape necessary.
You're just where Jesus needs you. Amen.

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