

# A God With Wounds

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on May 11, 2020; Easter 5  
John 14

---

What does Christian comfort and hope look like in a moment like this?

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” says Jesus. “Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

When I was a little kid, I was not a good sleeper. I was always worried about something. But instead of counting sheep, my preferred strategies of self-soothing were to lay in bed and contemplate my future career as an NBA player or to work through various designs for the mansion I was promised I would receive when I went to heaven. In this latter endeavor, my primary concern was not square-footage or architectural style but rather how to best arrange the various sport courts I would have to have; whether to put the basketball court on the first floor for easiest access since it was my favorite, or to put it in the penthouse since that would be coolest. How many tennis courts would I need. I wondered whether or not in heaven it would be possible for a swimming pool to go on one of the middle floors.

This is a silly example but in kind it represents one very common strategy for hope and comfort in the face of hard times—one, I would guess, we’re all hearing on a daily basis right now. You could call it the “Deal with the difficulty of the present by thinking about the future” approach to anxiety. It’s not just people talking about heaven necessarily—that’s just a kind of Christian version—but it is lots of people saying “Don’t worry, everything is going to be better eventually.” “Soon things will get back to normal.” Cope with the pain of today by thinking about potential of tomorrow. This is one way to interpret Jesus’ words in John 14.

The only real problem with this strategy is that it doesn’t work very well. The hope and comfort it offers is flat and fleeting, which is because we don’t live in tomorrow. We live in today. And today is the day that is painful. Now is when I am experiencing this trauma. To stand here today as your pastor and tell you not to worry because everything is going to be better someday feels cruel, whether I am appealing to an eventual deliverance from this virus in this world or the heavenly rest of some distant day. Even though we are physically isolated from one another, I see our community in pain today. I see you in pain.

A sobering number of us have already lost loved ones—some to COVID and some to other frailties completely unrelated—but no matter the cause the pandemic is forcing all of us to grieve in cheapened and bizarre conditions. A socially distanced funeral, of which we have already had one, is just as peculiar as you can imagine. Many more of us are suffering other more regular life hardships and anxieties privately because we feel too embarrassed to even mention to one another because we know so many others are suffering so much more—the canceling of a child’s birthday party, or a wedding or a vacation; a marriage struggling in the pressure-cooker of lockdown, surgeries delayed indefinitely leaving you to live in indefinite discomfort, parents struggling to relearn sixth-grade math. I see the heavy burden of loneliness many of you are carrying—the

struggle to learn and endure new technologies of connection only to find them hollow and exhausting; the struggle to avoid lapsing into previously conquered addictions with no in-person meeting of accountability to attend; the struggle to find motivation to do anything at all. I see you tired essential workers, thanked often but still not paid well. I see many of you afraid for your parents and grandparents. For your employees and friends. For your future.

“Don’t worry someday it will all be better” is not all that helpful today. This is not Christian hope or comfort.

The other problem with the “deal with today by thinking about tomorrow” strategy is that it’s a bad reading of the Bible, and of our Gospel passage for today in particular. Remember when and where in Jesus life he is saying these words. He is in the Upper Room with his disciples giving his farewell speech. It is the last thing that happens before he is crucified—and he knows it’s coming. There is, in fact, every reason for their hearts to be troubled. Which is to say, when Jesus says he is going to prepare a place for them, he doesn’t have in mind escapist fantasies of heavenly paradise, he has in mind his own suffering and death.

In the early 16th century, there was a monastery in Isenheim, France, near the German and Swiss borders, which specialized in hospital work. A German artist named Matthias Grünewald was commissioned to paint a giant altarpiece for the monastery’s chapel. The central panel depicts the crucifixion (and is printed in your service bulletin to look at). I hesitated to share it because this image has a reputation for being one of the most brutal depictions of the crucifixion in the history of art. But its brutality contains within it a beautiful message of Christian comfort and hope.

It is this: If you can bear to study the image, you will notice some strange things about the body of Jesus. Not only are his hands and feet grotesquely contorted, but his skin is almost green and it’s covered in spots. The green color is not due to the aging of the paint. Grünewald was trying to make a theological statement. The monastery hospital had a specialty in caring for two kinds of patients: those suffering from the plague and those suffering from a particularly gruesome skin condition called ergotism, the symptoms of which were that it made one’s skin gangrenous, deformed, and spotted. So when the monastery hospital patients came to pray and receive the Eucharist, they saw a God that had the same disease they did.

This is the first thing Jesus means when he said he goes to prepare a place for us: He makes our wounds his wounds. The first place he must go is Death. Those suffering in the monastery hospital could not be guaranteed the comfort of tomorrow, but they could be shown that their God suffered alongside them today. That is the first word of Christian hope and comfort for today. God is not up there sitting at the entryway to your heavenly mansion that has a swimming pool on the third floor waiting to welcome you once you’re through with your suffering. Jesus is not waiting for us in the future. He is not sitting on the sidelines until this whole coronavirus thing is over so he can then sweep back in and claim credit for its eradication. God could easily have stayed above the entirety of the human fray. But in Jesus we see God’s radical decision to experience human suffering and pain from the inside out. The pain and suffering that exists in this our body of Christ is felt in the body of Christ. That’s how God wins. God is suffering with you.

There’s a second part to this message of Christian hope and comfort. Grünewald’s altarpiece was a complex piece of furniture. It can be unfolded. And when you unfold it, which they would do in the hospital on feast

days, you would behold the image of the resurrection that you see on the cover of your bulletin. (Look at it now.) There's a lot to say about this image but one thing stands out among the others—Jesus is holding up his still wounded hands for all the world to see, only now they have been transformed into radiant resurrection glory.

God's promise in Jesus is not that we will be rescued from being wounded, but that he will make our wounds his wounds, and that he will then transform them into glory. This is where true Christian comfort and hope are found.

We can't promise that things are going to go back to normal. But that is not a bad thing. Like I said a few weeks ago, "normal" is not a state God or the Church have ever had an interest in preserving. With our God, the future is always bigger than the past. Whatever wounds the world inflicts upon us in this season will only become that which God folds into the story of our redemption. Do not let your hearts be troubled. God in Christ has gone ahead of us into the very heart of suffering and death itself, so that as we walk closer to suffering and death ourselves, God in Christ comes only closer to us.

This coronavirus only accentuates a vulnerability that is always with us. We are wounded creatures. Always vulnerable to more wounds. And bound for death. But we worship a wounded Savior. Who feels our pain from the inside out. Who makes our wounds part of his very being. Who dies our death with us. And from the inside out delivers us unto glory. Unto the Father's house. For there are many dwelling places. Where we will rest and feast and sing and dance and play basketball unto the end of the ages.

Amen