

*Sunday
Devotion
March 22,
2020*

Find a quiet place by

CALL TO WORSHIP from Psalm 46
God is our refuge and our strength,
an ever-present help in distress.

Though the earth trembles,
and mountains slide into the sea,
we will not fear.

Waters may rise and roar,
and mountains shake at their surging;
but the God of hosts is with us--
our stronghold, the God of Israel.

Even if nations are in chaos, and kingdoms fall,
God's voice resounds; the earth melts away.

Yahweh is with us;
the God of Israel is our stronghold.

Come! See the deeds of the Most High,
the marvellous things God has done on earth;
all over the world, God has stopped wars--
breaking bows, splintering spears,
burning the shields with fire.
"Be still! and know that I am God,
exalted among the nations, exalted upon the earth."

Enter this worship with thanksgiving
for the Most High is with us;
our stronghold is the God of Israel.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Lord of heaven and earth, I come into your presence with thanksgiving and praise for the way in which you have revealed yourself.

Through Jesus Christ, your Son,
your people have come to know and love you;
we have seen your love and mercy in action;
we have caught a glimpse of your heart,
and we have heard the call to follow.

Continue to reveal yourself as I worship.
May your Holy Spirit open my mind and heart to your presence here
and to the word that you have for me this morning.
I long to meet you here, and to know you better.

In the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Savior. Amen.

SCRIPTURE As you read the following passage, what words stand out to you? What don't you understand? What words do you want to hold close? Why might these words have been important to the author? To a loved one? To a stranger? Who would you want to share these words with? Why?

Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

MEDITATION

There's an old Peanuts comic strip that showed Linus holding on to his familiar blanket. The caption read, "Only one yard of flannel stands between me and a nervous breakdown." Know someone who can relate?

There's a story I read about a young mother describing a terrible day she had experienced. The washing machine broke down, the telephone kept ringing, her head ached, and the mail carrier brought a bill she had no money to pay. Almost to the breaking point, she lifted her one-year-old into his highchair, leaned her head against the tray, and began to cry. Without a word, her son took his pacifier out of his mouth and stuck it in hers. Know someone who can relate?

Ok, maybe you don't have a toddler handing you his/her pacifier nor do you have a yard of flannel, but do you find yourself in need of either of these or some sort of something to calm your weary battle fatigued soul? Sidebar – Joann Fabric is open to curbside delivery, in case you are interested. I'm not sure how that works with social distancing. Maybe this is what the NBA players are doing to pass the time. You open your window and from six feet away, they lob your package through the opening. Or, in a similar manner, the hockey players do a slap-shot with your purchase right into your car. Perhaps this could be a career move for many of our sports players who are looking for work.

But before you go running out to the store, let's think about this. In all seriousness, I imagine more than one of us right now are looking for a security blanket or a pacifier of sorts to ease the tension and anxiety that either we ourselves are feeling or others who are not all that far from us (at least 6 feet away). So let's all take a deep breath and turn to Jesus. The passage from Matthew does just that and offers us comfort. Here, Jesus invites all who are weary and carry heavy burdens to come to him and find rest. Rest. Doesn't that sound wonderful! Jesus' words are a balm to the ears of people whose

lives are anxious and frantic as they desperately look around for an arm to lean on or a heart to care about their deepest longings. Know someone who can relate?

“Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden.” In the past there has been a stampede to churches, people coming to Jesus when our nation has been experiences some sort of disaster. Church attendance increased during WWII, the Gulf War and 9/11. It also has seen an increase right after natural disasters like hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes.

When there has been great upheaval and uncertainty, a place people have often turned to has been the church. On 9/11, my eldest daughter was attending NYU. On that day her 9:00 class was dismissed immediately after she arrived. During her walk back to her dorm located on the corner of 5th Ave. and 16th street, through the Washington Park Arch, she witness one of the Twin Towers collapse. She immediately changed course, crossed the street and went into the Episcopal church. She went to Jesus. It was her security blanket. And she wasn't alone.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you.” When Jesus issues the invitation to “come,” he doesn't say, “Come to me, all you who are weary and heaven laden and I'll eliminate all that is the cause of your feeling burdened and distressed.” Instead, Jesus offers to switch out our burden with his which is not only lighter, but also it is connected to him. It's a swap that creates a new reality from what had been known. What Jesus issues then is an invitation to a new way of being.

That may sound wonderful, but I wonder. We get used to one way of being and Jesus invites us into another. It isn't a life of “heaven on earth” in the sense of there not being anything that will cause us grief or worry. It's a different way of *dealing* with the grief and worry that Jesus offers.

Looking at this lesson through today's lens, maybe what it is saying to us is that Jesus is calling us to let go of the same old and come to a new way. In today's culture, we are bombarded by news and these days most of it is bad, even scary. Even when I try to limit myself to about twenty minutes of morning TV news and online the New York Times Daily Update, I find my stomach churning and my anxiety level rising. Restful sleep is becoming something of the past – and I don't even have children at home or a job that makes me and those around me vulnerable! So maybe this is the change that I need to make through Jesus' invitation. But what would that look like? Is God calling me to not only deal with this crisis differently, but also life in general differently?

As I pondered this, I happened to glance across my desk to see the Epiphany star I received. Epiphany seems so long ago now. It's been just 11 weeks since we celebrated the *Wisemen* who, foolish in the eyes of the culture, followed a star to find the Savior. During our celebration, those in worship were given a star with a word written on it. The intention was to have that word help to serve as a prayerfully guide to Jesus. My star had the word “simplicity.” Simplicity is usually not my style. I like elaborate – lots of trimming and “stuff,” programmatic, decorative and lots of, well, STUFF! Just one look at my office will give you an idea how simple doesn't seem to be my modus of operandi. There's nothing simple about clutter. I hadn't honestly thought too much about simplicity until now. But at this time it seems like an invitation to come, to change my ways, shed all the complicated and simply focus on what truly matters, whether I want to or not. Whether I change my life to reflect simplicity or something else (what's your star read?), one thing is for sure, I'm going to have to change.

No one likes change, not even Jesus disciples. Oh, they thought they did, when they followed Jesus who offered a different life of hope and grace. But the stories we hear about what they did after Jesus'

resurrection tell us something very different. At that time everyone wanted to get back to the way things were – and for most of the disciples that meant fishing. But the truth is they couldn't go back. They had been changed. Whenever a big event happens, it's life-changing. We can't go back whether it has been an illness, a trip that has expanded our vision, take a course, falling in or out of love, the birth of a child, a new puppy – or cat – life doesn't go back to the way things were, as much as we might want it to. God is never static. God is working God's purpose out as year turns into year.

We are in the middle of a global crisis with COVID-19. As much as it is a crisis, it is also an opportunity. Our presbytery called this time a sabbatical - extended period of leave from one's customary work, especially for rest, to acquire new skills or training. I think of it as an invitation, an invitation by Jesus to change yokes and take on his.

I was sitting in on a webinar this past Wednesday where there were a panel of pastors and experts on change discussing how to navigate church at this time. One pastor said, we all want to DO something, but every avenue to which the church has usually traveled has been closed. But we are a DOING people. One person said, "All I can do is pray," to which the pastor responded, "That's not nothing!" Prayer is doing something, a very important something, because what prayer does is not necessarily change what is going on around us, it changes us.

As Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, God works all things for good for those who love him. I'm not saying that God caused the COVID-19 virus any more than I think God gives people cancer or takes the life of a loved one in order to teach a lesson, but I believe, as did Paul, that God is able to transform even the worst and make it into something good. To take heavy burdens and make them light.

There is a lot of anxiety out there. Not just in the secular realm where people are fighting for survival – with jobs, housing, food, and basic services at risk, so is there anxiety around the church. Pastors are wondering, will my church, my job, my people survive. The simple answer is, none of us know. What we do know, is that God still is the Great I Am, God still IS – working God's purpose out, still IS in control, still IS a very present help. That's our security blanket, and you don't have to run to the store to get it, just open your heart. Amen.

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

PRAYER

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
for the privilege of prayer.
Hear me as I pray for those who are burdened
by COVID-19, dementia, addiction, and depression.
(add your own prayer)

I pray for those who are providing necessary services during the COVID-19 crisis,
for our healthcare professionals, our first responders, cleaning and janitorial services, grocery store
clerks, pharmacists, delivery personnel, educators and caregivers.
(add your own prayer)

I pray for families whose patience and energy are wearing thin as they struggle to juggle caring for their children with working either in or out of their homes.
(add your own prayer)

I pray for those who have lost employment as a result of this current crisis.
(add your own prayer)

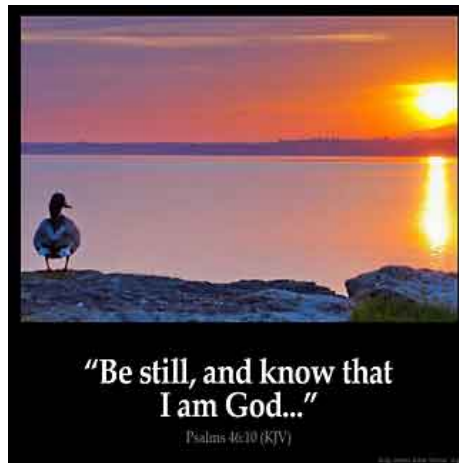
I pray for all those who are afflicted
with poverty, war, injustice, and the pain of loss.
(add your own prayer)

Hear now the deepest desires
of my heart.
(add your own prayer)

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who hears my prayers. Amen.

BENEDICTION

God, who has given you rest and peace, will go with you as you from this time of worship. Feel the healing love of God in your life. Bring the good news of God's love to others. Go in peace and may the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen.



I commend to you this music that it might be a prayer that will carry you through the week:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PP7FpSm5Uyo>

Last week I said that while we are not together physically, our spirits are joined together in the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. This is still my hope and joy. You continue to be in my thoughts and prayers and I look forward to the day when we can give each other a big hug!

CHILDREN’S LESSON (of whatever age)

Children aren’t being affected by COVID-19 the way adults are. Yet the adults around them may behave differently as close proximity and the inability to go out and “do” sets in. The story of Jesus and the storm can provide a starting place for many people who need assurance of God’s control over forces that seem out of their own control. The disciples in the sinking boat faced overwhelming fears. But when Jesus so quickly calmed the storm, their fears were quickly replaced with awe and worship.

Many of us—especially children—carry the burden of fear, perhaps not realizing that we can run to Jesus for safety.

READ Mark 4:35-41. Here’s a suggestion on how you can tell this story. Fill a container or sink with water leaving plenty of room at the top. Find something that floats and can be used as a “boat.” You can cut out figures from paper to represent Jesus and the disciples. These will be placed in or on your “boat.” Make sure they are small enough that they don’t sink the boat. Get your children to help with this. If you don’t want or can’t do this using water and the other materials, you can always act out the story. Use a blanket or bedsheet as the water. Two people can work together to make the waves. Take turns acting out the different part. Then tell the story by saying:

This is the sea of Galilee (your container of water). So many important things happen by the sea. It is a wonderful and strange place...When the wind blows the sea becomes very rough and wild. (blow over the water and see how it ripples. Take turns. See the different effects of blowing hard or gently.)

When the wind is calm the sea is peaceful and still. (Stop blowing. Now place your “boat” in the water)

Once when Jesus was teaching beside the sea, so many people came to listen to him that he had to get into a boat to teach. (Put Jesus in/on the “boat.”)

He taught all day. When evening came, he was very tired. “Let’s sail across the sea,” he said. (Put the disciples in the boat with Jesus and lay Jesus down)

Suddenly a strong wind began to blow. (start blowing on the water – not so hard it sinks the boat!)

The sea became very rough and wild. Waves beat into the boat. It began filling with water. (If your boat sinks, just laugh and start again)

Jesus was sleeping. “Wake up!” the disciples cried. “We’re drowning! Don’t you care?” Jesus got up. (Make Jesus sit/stand up)

Jesus said to the wind, “Peace! Be still!” (stop blowing) He said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” The wind became peaceful and still. And there was a great calm. (stop all motion and enjoy the calm for a moment.)

“Why are you afraid?” Jesus asked his disciples. “Have you still no faith?” They were amazed and wondered, “Who is this person? Even the wind and the sea do what he says.”

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD: WONDERING TOGETHER – Ask the following questions and give the children the opportunity to share their answers:

- I wonder what it was like to be in such a great storm?
- I wonder how Jesus was able to sleep during the storm?
- I wonder how the wind feels blowing the sea?
- I wonder how the sea feels being rough and wild?
- I wonder why the wind and the sea did what Jesus said?
- I wonder how the sea feels being calm?
- I wonder how the disciples feel?
- I wonder why the disciples are following Jesus?
- I wonder if they would keep following Jesus if he were not doing amazing things?
- I wonder what they told their families and friends when they came ashore?

ACTIVITY

Create a “Water Symphony.” Gather buckets, spray bottles, empty soda bottles, strainers, funnels, anything that can hold water, and lots of water

Have you ever stopped to listen to the sounds of water? If you listen closely, you’ll hear an entire orchestra of sounds. Make music together with water. Give each person something that can drip or pour water. Synchronize the water sounds into a kind of harmony. Imagine the sounds of the water the disciples would have heard as the waves crashed against their boat. The wind was blowing so hard that the disciples were having a hard time rowing. Jesus is able to calm the wind and the waves. He can calm our lives when they get stormy as well.

PRAYER ACTIVITY

Write or draw what it would be like to be in a storm on a boat and then what it would be like to be in calm water. Think about times when it was “stormy” in their lives – when they were frightened and when they were happy. Talk to God about that. This is a type of prayer.