

Sunday Devotion

March 29, 2020

Find a quiet place by yourself or with another and come to God.

Before you begin worship, stop and think of something that has been difficult in this time when we have had to deal with the life changes caused by COVID-19. Then think of something that has been positive. Bring this to your time of worship.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Thom M. Shuman)

In silent sanctuaries, in our homes or apartments,
wherever we are in these moments of worship,
early each morning, God waits to greet us with joy and wonder.
We awake to find ourselves enveloped in grace.

During these days of isolation and worry,
in this time of uncertainty and fear,
Jesus challenges us with the possibility of faith.

Even in these times of safe distancing
and caring for others, as well as ourselves,
we can offer healing and hope to others.

In the shadowed evenings when fear lurks outside,
and we long to hear the lullabies of grace,
the Spirit is with us.

Let us worship God who is the Light of life shining on us
from early morning until we say our prayers,
comforting us in the shadows of sleep.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (by Thom Shuman)

One thing we know, Listener to our hearts:
you are the One
who journeys with us
in these days of confusion,
and who waits for us at

our final destination.

One thing we know, Healer of our lives:
when we find ourselves
in valleys veiled in shadows,
you are walking alongside us
even though we may never notice.

One thing we know, Comforter of our souls:
when we are weakened
by the burdens of our lives,
when fears disrupt our lives,
you come to us,
to rest your strengthening peace upon us.

One thing we know, God in Community, Holy in One:
once we could not see you in every moment,
but now our eyes are opened wide,
and so we can pray. Amen.

CALL OF CONFESSION (by Thom Shuman)

In these days, when we have more time to be worried and fearful, God longs for us to sit by the still waters of love. But our isolation confuses us, our loneliness heightens our doubts, our doubts seem to lessen our ability to be children of God. Let us bring our prayers to the One who will restore us with goodness and mercy.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (by Thom Shuman)

Like Cinderella, Loving God, we sit in the ashes of our hopes, but you see us as your beloved children. We pay strict attention to all who hoard but ignore the opportunities we have to share with others. When we think you are as limited in being able to move and act and live as we are, you continue to burst forth to bring hope and newness into the world.

Have mercy on us, God of forgiveness, and open our eyes to your presence among us. As you look at our hearts, may we see others in a different way, not as enemies or strangers, but sisters and brothers of the same family, kin to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

The Spirit of the Lord has come upon us, bringing hope, life, and forgiveness for each person. The waters of our baptism remind us of the good news: Jesus died for me. Jesus forgives me. Jesus loves me. Jesus is good to me.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON Psalm 107:1-15, 23-32

- ¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- ² Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
- ³ and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
- ⁴ Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;
- ⁵ hungry and thirsty,

their soul fainted within them.
⁶ Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;
⁷ he led them by a straight way,
until they reached an inhabited town.
⁸ Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
⁹ For he satisfies the thirsty,
and the hungry he fills with good things.
¹⁰ Some sat in darkness and in gloom,
prisoners in misery and in irons,
¹¹ for they had rebelled against the words of God,
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.
¹² Their hearts were bowed down with hard labor;
they fell down, with no one to help.
¹³ Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
¹⁴ he brought them out of darkness and gloom,
and broke their bonds asunder.
¹⁵ Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

²³ Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
²⁴ they saw the deeds of the Lord,
his wondrous works in the deep.
²⁵ For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
²⁶ They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
²⁷ they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.
²⁸ Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
²⁹ he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
³⁰ Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
³¹ Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
³² Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON Mark 35-41

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.
³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.
³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have

you still no faith?”⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

MEDITATION

I love to go kayaking especially when I get to take my grandson Keegan with me. I am so thankful that I am passing on my love for this water sport to him. In warm weather, whenever we get the opportunity, we get out the kayak and head for the Pine Barrens in NJ. There are several rivers that wind through the Wharton State Forest, emphasis on the words “wind” (like the long and winding road) and on the word “forest.” When we get into those woods, the rest of the world goes away. Often we can’t see or hear anyone else.

One day last summer we got on the river with my son and a friend of his. It looked like a pretty nice day. There was some cloud cover, but it was nothing to cause concern, or so I thought. I had checked the weather report. Rain was forecast but not until much later when we would be off the river. But a couple of hours into the trip and there was a noticeable shift. The clouds were rolling in fast. The wind was picking up and then I heard it – thunder. It began as a low rumble.

We were a good two hours from our destination point where we would be picked up by a shuttle service. That stretch of river is very isolated. There are no roads passing nearby. We had to just keep paddling hoping we would come to a beach where there was road access. It wasn’t too long before that low rumble turned into what sounded like a whole percussion section and we had front row seats.

We were the only three boats that could be seen from our vantage point. Dense trees lined either side of the river. The rain started pelting down. It felt like needles hitting our skin. Then I saw it – a lightning strike, not far off to the side – the side from where the wind was blowing. My son shouted over to me, “Mom, we have got to get off this river – now!” As much as I agreed, there just didn’t seem any place to pull over where we could pull out our kayaks. “Around the next bend,” I shouted back, “There’s got to be an access road coming up soon where we can then call to be rescued.”

It had been a wet spring, as you may recall, and we were surrounded by Pine trees (the reason it’s called “Pine Barrens”). As was evidenced by exceptionally large number of downed trees spread across river, under the spring conditions, these pines came down rather easily. The wind was wild at this point and I wasn’t sure what was actually happening as the sky was getting darker by the second, so you might imagine my concern. Add to that the fact that I have an open kayak – it’s like a canoe and we were getting very wet.

Now, I have done a lot of whitewater rafting over the years. I’ve navigated Class V rapids. For those of you who don’t know this classification, that is the most difficult rapids to navigate and are permitted by law for commercial outfitters to run. Even if I have been through extreme conditions, I looked at my grandson in the helm of our two-person kayak, behind me was my son and behind him was his friend, all of them paddling for all they were worth! This was serious. Even when we get to shore, I thought, “Would we be safe? Can I even get us to shore and safely out of the boat as the wind was forcing our trajectory downstream at breakneck speed?” The lightening was becoming more frequent and the thunder was right over head. Pulling on my paddle with all of my strength, I felt like I was losing control. My son was right. We had to get off that river – NOW!

It’s amazing how quickly we can lose control in a storm? As long as life is going the way we want it to go, we feel as if we are in control and that gives us a great sense of security. Of course there are aspects of life we can and should control – our appetites, our money, our tempers, even our time to a significant degree. But our lives? No way!

All it takes is one storm to show us we can't control life. That is exactly what the disciples discovered in today's gospel lesson. Bill Lawrence called this passage "Stormology 101" in that storms have something to teach us and what they teach is that we are not in control of life.

This scene gives us the first of the "storms" which the disciples faced and it's a doozy! Up until now, the disciples have been observers and not participants. They have listened to Jesus, watched him, observed what he did and how others responded to him, but no demand has been placed on them. They have been interns following the boss around. It was like my sitting in on training seminars for Zoom. I took notes. I listened. I observed. And then the training was over and I had to put together my first Zoom meeting on my own. I had to put into actual practice what I held up in my head.

The disciples passive observations are now about to change. Now they were confronted by chaos that would force them to put into practice what they had learned from Jesus. Instead they became frightened with seemingly little hope. Even at face value, this seems odd for a bunch of men who were more than a little familiar with their surroundings. For sure at least Peter, Andrew, James and John had maneuvered these waters their whole lives. They were seasoned fishermen who must have encountered storms before.

The thing about that place on the lake, storms can come up fast and furious, out of nowhere. It has to do with the differences in air temperature and pressure of the hills that surround it and those near the water. Other contributing factors include the shallowness of the lake and its small size. You can "Google" it, if you are interested.

The point is, those men were familiar with uniqueness of that body of water and they knew that a small craft, such as the boat they were in, was in perilous danger when a storm arose. Still, as seasoned fishermen, don't you think they would have read the signs? Surely they had seen this before and could then sense that something was right for a storm to emerge. This wasn't their "first rodeo," or in this case, boat ride. Wouldn't a smart fisherman know enough to read the signs? After all, there was a lot at stake – not just their livelihood, but their lives. But for whatever reason, they got into that boat probably because Jesus said to do it.

Seems like that's what happens to us. We go on our merry way, doing what we think we should be doing and then all of the sudden COVID-19, or some other illness, or an accident, or we get older and wake up one morning and realize our bodies don't want to work as they once did, or the child that we desperately loves has a crisis, or the job we depended on comes to an end and we find ourselves no longer comfortably floating on the stream of life. The waves and wind have picked up and we are being tossed around and hanging on for dear life.

In whitewater rafting, the aim is to keep paddling in order to go faster than the river and stay in control, even through the whitewater. But there are times when the river becomes so wild that all you can do is to stop paddling and hold on.

I think those disciples got to the point that even as skilled as they were to handle whatever might come their way on that sea, it had gotten so rough, all that they could do was "hold on," and they were terrified. I would imagine that it wasn't until after they tried every trick they had ever learned about boat handling in a storm that they finally look to Jesus who is asleep and ask, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

This is a story that many are living today and asking, "Jesus, don't you care? as grocery shelves are emptying – can someone please explain the whole toilet paper thing? I heard someone ask the question if people are stock piling the stuff so they can will it to their grandchildren! Churches and schools have closed, the stock market looks like a roller coaster ride at Six Flags; and the confirmed number of cases just keeps increasing. In spite of what some are saying, there just doesn't seem to be an end in sight. *Our*

fragile vessels on our sea of life are threatened by waves and winds we can't control or predict and we are fearful.

In his 1933 inaugural address, during the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt said "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Fear can lead to more damage than anything else. Fear wants us to believe we are alone, but faith knows differently. Fear isn't the enemy. Crystal Hardin tells us that fear can distort our perception. Again, fear wants us to believe we are alone, like people in a horror film who walk through an abandoned building or dark and mysterious woods. Fear can distort our perception. We fear there isn't going to be enough toilet paper.

In that boat on the stormy sea, those disciples felt that they were alone and without resources. But in fact they had both each other and they had Jesus. Faith tells us that we are not alone. Trouble is, when the going is difficult, often fear takes over from faith. We go along in our life-boat thinking that we are exempt from storms, that Jesus will keep us from the storms in life. This is why we respond with such anger and resentment when the storms hit. We see Jesus asleep in the back of the boat and we are angry because it would seem that he doesn't care. That's fear taking over our faith.

The novel by Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, tells of this character's ship wreck after a great storm. Stranded on a deserted lonely island, he made a chart with two columns. In one column he put how evil had affected him, and in the other he wrote what was good about his situation. He was stranded on a desolate island, but he was not starving. The rest of his ship's company had drowned at sea. He was away from human society, but he was still alive. The little island could support his basic needs. He had no clothes, but he was in a hot climate and did not need them. He was without any means of defense, but he saw no wild beasts such as he had seen on the coast of Africa. He had no one to talk to, but God had sent the ship so near to the shore that he could get everything out of it that would help him survive. So, he concluded, there was no condition in the world so miserable that one could not find something to be grateful for.

When whitewater rafting, when the "hold on" call is sounded – what are we to hold onto? The boat. When the World Council of Churches was formed, leaders sought a logo to identify the whole family of Christ. They drew a fishing boat with the cross as its mast. It was a good symbol. Christians are people who are in the same boat with Jesus. That's what our faith tells us – not fear, but community with God. We are NOT alone.

Through our lens of faith, like Robinson Crusoe, our gratitude is where we can see God in our "boat" or entered our deserted island of social distancing or whatever is disturbing our otherwise peaceful existence. God is here with us.

I asked you at the beginning of this service to think of something that has been hard during this time of isolation and what has been good. Think of that now. See how we are not alone? God is involved in our lives. Thanks be to God!

PRAYER

Almighty God, scripture tells us that long ago Job, in his suffering, cried out to you and you answered by challenging him to see you as Creator God. When we suffer and complain, help us note your wondrous work throughout the universe, and give you thanks for caring about us in the middle of it all.

Loving God, you hear our prayers: You live among us.

Lord of all nations, give us courage to trust you, to face danger unafraid, and to believe in your providence.

Loving God, you hear our prayers: You live among us.

Lord Jesus Christ, giver of God's grace, open our hearts to receive you in faith, to do your work on earth, and to give thanks for every daily opportunity to be your person.
Loving God, you hear our prayers: You live among us.

Holy Spirit, Mighty God, as you calmed the sea, still the storms within us and around us, both in our personal lives and in our church lives, and when you say, "Peace! Be still!" may we obey.
Loving God, you hear our prayers: You live among us.

All Powerful God, Giver of Life, all of us know the pains of illness, separation, loneliness and death. Hear us as we name those with difficulties who need your Holy Spirit's presence, and your healing touch (say your own prayer here).
Loving God, you hear our prayers: You live among us.

Your love, Invincible God, always wins. Thank you for life lived in your boat. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go now in peace
and in all that you do, do it for love,
and by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Always remember – you are never alone!
The peace of Christ holds all of creation.
The love of the Creator enfolds all that has been,
all that is,
and all that will be.
And the wings of the Holy Spirit carry it –
in the moments of grief,
and in the celebration of life made new,
now, and always. Amen.

I commend to you this music, "It is Well With My Soul" that it might be a prayer that will carry you through the week:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FexGqNDBK3g>

Lyrics:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrow like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Refrain:

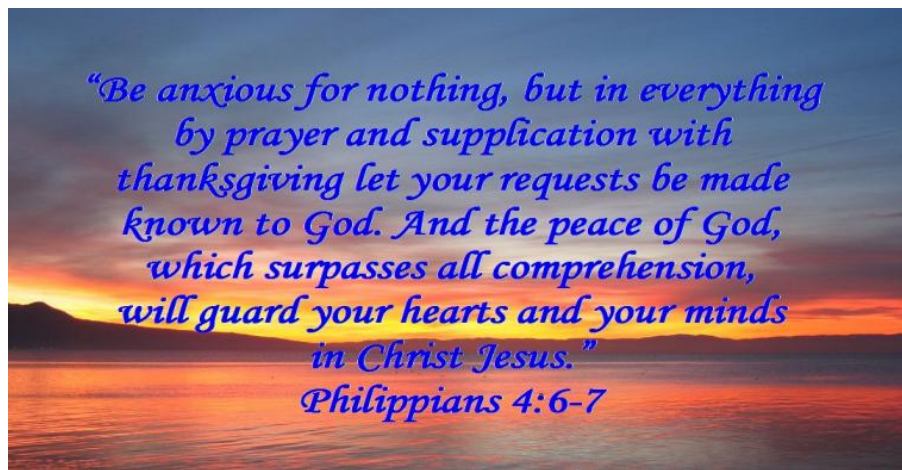
It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

But Lord 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait.
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh, trump how the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul.

And Lord haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trumpet shall resound,
and the Lord shall descend,
even so, it is well with my soul.

This hymn was written by Horatio Spafford after traumatic events in his life. The first two were the death of his four-year-old son from scarlet fever and the [Great Chicago Fire](#) of 1871, which ruined him financially (he had been a successful lawyer and had invested significantly in property in the area of Chicago that was extensively damaged by the great fire). His business interests were further hit by the economic downturn of 1873, at which time he had planned to travel to Europe with his family on the [SS Ville du Havre](#). In a late change of plan, he sent the family ahead while he was delayed on business concerning zoning problems following the Great Chicago Fire. While crossing the [Atlantic Ocean](#), the ship sank rapidly after a collision with a sea vessel, the [Loch Earn](#), and all four of Spafford's daughters died. His wife Anna survived and sent him the now famous telegram, "Saved alone ..." Shortly afterwards, as Spafford traveled to meet his grieving wife, he was inspired to write these words as his ship passed near where his daughters had died.

It's incredible to think such encouraging and uplifting words were born from the depths of such unimaginable sorrow. It's an example of truly inspiring faith and trust in the Lord. And it goes to show the power our God has to overcome even the darkest times of our earthly life.



CHILDREN'S LESSON (of whatever age)

Theme: God provides for our needs.

Objectives:

- * to discover many things you are thankful for
- * to learn that God provides us with everything we need
- * to express thankfulness

You will need:

- * scratch paper or post-it notes
- * something to write with
- * string, yarn or tape
- * crayons or markers
- * string, yarn or tape
- * a large tree branch, whiteboard, several pieces of paper taped together to make a large poster and draw a picture of a tree on it

Bible verses:

Luke 17:11-19 (This will be acted out later. Here's the script)

“One day Jesus was walking to Jerusalem. Suddenly he heard a group of ten people who had leprosy, a terrible skin disease. They were calling out to him. They cried, ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us!’ They wanted Jesus to take away their dreadful disease and make them well.

When Jesus saw them and heard their cries, he said, ‘Go show yourselves to the priests (pastors).’ So the ten lepers went to see the priests. While the lepers were with the priest, they were suddenly completely healed.

After they were healed, nine of the ten lepers went back to their homes, shouting and rejoicing. The tenth leper came back to Jesus and threw himself at Jesus’ feet. He thanked Jesus with all of his heart for making him well. Jesus told the man, ‘Rise and go; your faith has made you well.’”

Philippians 4:4-6, 19

⁴ Be full of joy in the Lord always. I will say again, be full of joy. ⁵ Let everyone see that you are gentle and kind. The Lord is coming soon. ⁶ Do not worry about anything. But pray and ask God for everything you need. And when you pray, always give thanks.

¹⁹ My God will use his wonderful riches in Christ Jesus to give you everything you need.

Gratitude and thankfulness doesn't always come naturally. We can help our children learn to demonstrate honest and sincere thankfulness by pointing out all of the amazing gifts God give them each day. Paul's letter to the Philippians was written when he was in prison. His future looked bleak. Still, he demonstrated an unwavering trust in God's plan. He even went so far as to thank God for his present circumstances, knowing that God would bring good from bad. Through this, we can see that trust in God and thankfulness to God go hand in hand.

Activities:

1. Act out the story in Luke either by assigning parts, using puppets, or have children play all the parts. The ask the following questions:
 - Which one of the lepers did the right thing? Why?

- Why do you think only one of the lepers came back to say thank you to Jesus?
- Why do you think it was important for the one leper to tell Jesus how thankful he was?

2. READ the Philippians passage.

- God always gives us what we need. Think of as many things as you can that you are thankful for. Use the 5 senses to get everyone thinking – smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing.
- Take a tour of your house and recognize all the things in that room for which you are thankful. For example, for smell, in the kitchen you can smell things that are cooking like cookies, tacos or apples.
- After taking inventory, take slips of paper or post-it notes and write or draw as many of the things for which you are thankful.
- Saying “thank you” is one way that we show our joy in all that we have. The Bible tells us that we are to “pray and ask God for everything you need.” God wants us to do two things. First, to pray and thank God for the good things God gives us. Second we are to ask God for the things we need. The pieces of paper that list what we are thankful for, are our prayers of “thanks.” Now write or draw what you would ask God to give you.
- Hang your prayers on a tree branch or post on poster paper. This is your “Prayer Tree/Poster.” Trees are like God in that they are strong. They can stand up in all kinds of weather and still provide shade and sometimes even fruit. God is the same way. Even in tough times, God always provides us with everything we need. As you hang each of these either say, “Thank you” or “Please” depending on whichever is appropriate. This is your prayer.