

March 15, 2020

"Do Not Worry"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Various scripture

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What's happening today in our country - the concern, the anxiety, the borderline panic - is something the likes of which most of us have never seen or experienced before. Here in the United States, with the exception of perhaps 9/11 and some localized disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, we've been rather insulated from so many of the national tragedies some places in the rest of the world have had to live through. Imagine being in an African nation going through a Civil War and genocide. Imagine living in Haiti during that devastating earthquake. Or in Puerto Rico, experiencing such destruction during their recent hurricane and earthquakes. Or in Japan when the Tsunami hit, and nuclear reactors were breached. Imagine living in Venezuela where shortages and even starvation are happening right now. Imagine living in Syria - a war zone where your children are gassed. Or Russia where Civil liberties are trampled on. Over the years we've read of these things and prayed for the people, but now, today - that same kind of concern and fear exists here. And it's humbling.

Yes, brothers and sisters, we are living right now in a time of uncertainty. It is a new reality. We have not had to face things like restrictions on our travel, on our gatherings, or the mandated changes to our schedules and plans, or the way we feel that we suddenly have no control. Not that we ever really have total control over our lives anyway. But let me suggest that we do this one more time - breathe in and breathe out. Breathe in and breathe out. And let us hear from the One who does have control. God, who is sovereign, who is powerful, who created this world he called, "Very good."

Psalm 46: 1-6 "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. (Though a viral pandemic sparks anxiety and alarm.) The nations are in chaos, and their kingdoms crumble! But God lifts his voice and the earth melts! The Lord Almighty is with us!"

Yes, the Lord Almighty is with us. And he will not leave us or abandon us. He tells us in Isaiah: "Do not fear, because I am with you; don't be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you; I will hold you up with my righteous strong hand." Yes, we will have to go through a period of waiting, of not knowing all we want to know. The truth is, we don't know what today will bring, let

alone the future. And so, it can easy to begin to lose hope, to feel despair. But let me share with you the resounding assurance we find from the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:28-31 "Have you not heard? Have you not understood? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth. He never grows weak or weary. No one can measure the depths of his understanding. He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless. Even youth will become weak and tired, and young men fall in exhaustion. But those who wait upon the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint."

Now in order for us to understand the enormity of this Bible passage, we need to know what has happened to the Israelites. The Babylonian army has stormed in, destroyed their homes, killed family member and friends, left their city in shambles, and taken the survivors to be used as slaves in a place hundreds of miles away. But Isaiah tells them to have hope. He says, "Wait for the Lord and do not despair. Have you not seen? Look at the heavens – the sun and moon and vast array of billions of stars. Look at the authority and majesty that created and sustains all that. Have you not heard? Eventually even the most powerful and most feared viruses are ultimately brought down and rendered defenseless. Have you not understood? God our Creator is the everlasting God, who does not faint or grow weary, but instead gives his strength and help to those in need so that they can overcome." Yes, God is among us.

You know, back on 9/11, there was fear and anxiety and we wondered if our lives would ever be normal again. But together - supporting one another, loving one another, sharing in our humanity together, and, as a people relying on our faith and trust in God, yes, we came through. Because we trusted that there is a power that is greater than any darkness we can encounter. The Apostle John said this about Jesus: "His life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." And so I want to leave you with a true story about a light that shone in the darkness - the darkness of a war zone.

After World War II the pastor of St. Andrews Church in London told a friend of the bombings that city suffered during the war. People being killed and homes destroyed. He said that on this darkest of nights, he saw from a distance the whole center of London in flames. "All seemed lost: the war,

England, all the values our civilization holds sacred. As I watched London burning, I wept like a child. I literally wept like a child, out of fear and despair. But then a gust of wind cleared the smoke for a moment, for just a moment, and in the faint light from the fires I saw the gold cross of Christ still standing on the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. I stopped crying because I knew then there was a power stronger than the swastika. A power that would carry us through so that we would live on.”

And there is a power much stronger than the pandemic that frightens us today. And that is our Almighty God. Remember, we are in Lent, on our way to Easter, where God proved that nothing, not even death can defeat us. And so listen to God once more: "Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for I, the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."