

"Be Still"  
Psalm 46

March 22, 2020

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday In Lent

As many of you know, we follow a lectionary system in which the Scripture readings for today are chosen for us. This disciplines the pastor in his preaching to proclaim "the whole counsel of God" and not just his pet topics. It also protects the congregation from hearing 21 sermons in a row on stewardship. Normally, I faithfully follow the lectionary system and preach on one of the assigned texts. I usually don't choose a "free text" (one not among the assigned readings for today). However, I did so today. Lectionary texts are for normal times. These are not normal times.

Last week, while working on a perfectly good sermon on Jesus healing the man born blind, I changed my mind. While the the good news of Jesus correcting our spiritual blindness so that we have spiritual sight and the warning to those who think they can see but are really blind are both important messages, these are not the topics which people are thinking about these days. I don't have to tell you what people ARE thinking for there is only one topic on everyone's mind: the coronavirus pandemic.

People are afraid. While some may still want to debate the reality of the pandemic, there is no debating the genuine fear which exists. People are afraid of contracting this deadly disease, especially those in the most vulnerable groups: the elderly, those with compromised in systems, and those with other pre-existing medical conditions. People are afraid of inadvertently passing the virus along to one of those in the most vulnerable groups. People are afraid that the medical supplies and equipment will rung out and that our healthcare system will be overrun as is the case of Italy today. People are afraid that, as advanced as our technology and medical systems are, this disease will simply overrunning us.

The prescribed course of action – self- quarantining, washing your hands frequently, using hand sanitizer, and "social distancing" – are good as far as they go. Although many of you, our congregation, and myself are following these recommendations, I feel that they bring little comfort or peace. Where do we go for true peace and lasting comfort? Where we always go – the Word and promises of God.

I feel that we often consider matters of life and death in very theoretical ways. I feel that when I preach a sermon that talks of death and damnation yet includes the promise of life and salvation, we are neither afraid of the Law's condemnation and punishment nor do we rejoice in the Gospel's comfort and assurance. We sit through the sermon, either preaching it or listening to it, very politely and then we hurry home for Sunday dinner or to flip on the game.

In this coronavirus pandemic, these are real issues of life and death, not theoretical. They are real issues, not only for me, us, our state, or our country, but for the entire world. People are dying and more will continue to die. We are blessed that we do not have a theoretical Gospel. We have truly Good News that comforts us now and promises good things in the future.

How did we get to this place? God created a perfect world. Sin changed all of that. Sin did not only corrupted the hearts and souls of humanity, but also corrupted

the physical world. God's judgment against us for our sin was harsh: death in this life and death for all eternity in hell. God's judgment against creation is equally harsh. Not only did God curse the ground with thorns and thistles for Adam, but also with every so-called natural disaster (earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and so on), pestilence, and disease.

The coronavirus is neither a natural act of evolution nor an intended part of God's perfect creation. Like death for the sin of humans, pestilence, disease, and disaster are parts of God's judgment against creation. As we long for deliverance from sin and death to perfection and life in heaven, so the creation longs for deliverance, as well. The Word of God says, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from that its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." (Romans 8:19-21).

Although the present situation is dangerous and, as a result, frightening, there is still great hope. In our Church Calendar (of which the lectionary system is a part), today is the fourth Sunday in Lent. Although it may not seem like Lent now because of this pandemic, it is precisely for this time and for this situation that the season of Lent is made for.

Lent prepares us for the remembrance of Good Friday, the day on which Jesus Christ, the Son of God took all of the sin of all of the world for all time to the cross and there endured the wrath and judgment of God. If you think the coronavirus is something bad, it is nothing in comparison with the wrath and judgment of God. Yet Jesus did this in our place and for our good. His death on the cross as the sacrifice for sin has removed our sin and freed us from death since death's only power comes from sin.

Ultimately, Lent prepares us for the celebration of Easter, the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ from the dead. His final and ultimate victory guarantees us final and ultimate victory, not only over sin, but over death, the punishment for sin, and the wrath of God, His judgment against sin. There is nothing, not even the coronavirus or any other pandemic before it or after it which can deny us this victory.

What do we do in the meantime? That brings us (finally) to our text which I chose for this morning. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Two of the most distressing results of this pandemic are the feeling that there is no safe place to go and that we are fighting this battle alone. God is our refuge, our fortress, our place of safety. We can rest in the Lord and not be afraid, regardless of the virus's effect on us. And, no matter what happens, our God is always with us to help, comfort, and support us.

"Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though the waters roar and foam though the mountains tremble at its swelling." We will not fear, and not just the everyday problems which we face, but when the entire world is falling apart.

We are members of a stronger kingdom, the kingdom of God. Therefore, we trust and do not fear. "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her

when morning dawns.” The kingdom to which we belong by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is one that shall not be moved or overcome. God is in our midst and he will help us, either immediately or at the dawn of the Last Day when we shall be called to inherit the kingdom prepared for us since the before the foundation of the world.

While we may face opposition to us, to our faith, and to our confidence in Christ, our opponents cannot overpower us. “The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Israel is our fortress.” Nothing, not even death, can overcome the victory that is ours to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Even though we rejoice in the ultimate and eternal victory we have in Christ, we may worry or fret about any particular point or event in time. That’s only natural, but we don’t have to do it. Not only is the final victory guaranteed, but the entire journey to that victory is in the Lord’s hand as well. And so, He encourages us, “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth!” The essence of sin is that we want to be our own gods and in control of everything. The essence of faith is that remain calm and let God be God in control of everything. The one true God is God and shall always remain God.

When I decided to scrap the sermon I was working on and change to this text, I noticed how inadvertently the sermon hymn fit the new message, better than the old one. It is a hymn of confidence and faith in God and defiance of fear, sin, and Satan through faith in Jesus Christ. The last verse sets the tone for our mood in the upcoming days and months ahead:

Hence, all fear and sadness!  
For the Lord of gladness, Jesus enters in.  
Those who love the Father,  
Though the storms may gather, still have peace within.  
Yea, whate’er  
I hear must bear,  
Thou Art still my purest pleasure,  
Jesus, priceless treasure!”

The psalmist concludes his Psalm in the same way that he started: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” Amen