

**SERMON: June 21, 2020**  
**Stand by Me... Living Unafraid with Courage and Hope #3**

*Lord God, who calms the troubled waters, we bless you for your presence in the midst of all our fears, all our trials, all our worries. We release to you the things we hold too tightly, and we trust your words of peace. Be among us in this hour and may we lean into your everlasting arms of love, secure that we are yours, now and always. ... May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing and of you, who are ROCK, REDEEMER, and COMFORTER of us all. Amen.*

I hope you have found the GPS (God-positioning system) materials helpful over the past weeks. These are daily readings intended to help us learn and grow in love of God and to support our growth in loving God's people as we strive to Live with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times. The GPS is part of our worship guide and may also be found on our website... [saintjamesweb.org](http://saintjamesweb.org).

We're in our third week of focus on Living with Courage & Hope in Uncertain Time. We came to this series through our Thursday morning Bible Study Group. We meet each week by Conference Call ([freeconferencecall.com](http://freeconferencecall.com)) these days. This is a group of people who have been gathering for many years... some in the church, some in other churches, but have found companionship through many seasons of change & adaptation, loss and births, shrinking and expanding, agreeing and disagreeing, listening and learning all the way. If there was a motto or vision sentence it might be... *We stand by each other through it all.*

I share this because the nature of this group displays the essence of the message today... we long for communion with God and one another. It is part of our DNA. And our deepest fear is that of being alone.

I've been doing a lot of research lately, and in looking at the things that most people are afraid of, one of the most common topics is in chronic loneliness.

In fact, last November (pre- Covid19) the UMC launched the "Not the Only One" advertising campaign to help offer encouragement through community.

Research continues to emphasize people are experiencing a growing sense of loneliness. In fact in a 2018 study by CIGNA, nearly half of Americans feel alone or left out, and it's taking a mental and physical toll on them. (<https://www.cigna.com/newsroom/news-releases/2018/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america>).

“The advertisements target those who identify themselves as spiritual, socially conscious and seeking meaning in their lives, but who are not affiliated with a church...”

What's missing? According to the surveys people are: craving meaningful relationships,” shares Poonam Patodia—chief marketing officer for United Methodist Communications. “We invite them to find love, joy and peace by joining a welcoming community.”

So this week we will hone our focus on fear of being alone, and we will learn two strategies, one from therapeutic intervention and one from spiritual intervention. These will help us to re-frame FEAR as: Facing Fear with Faith, Examine Assumptions in light of Facts, Attack anxiety with Action, and Release our cares to God.

So to be clear, loneliness is a feeling of sadness that comes from a sense of social isolation- as though we have no companions. Frederick Buechner writes of loneliness as an awareness ‘of an emptiness that takes more than people to fill. It is to sense that something is missing which you cannot name.’ He points out that you can be lonely in a crowd; you can be lonely even when being around dear friends or family. (Beyond Words, p 226)

Solitude is different. Solitude is the state of being alone. (Heritage Dictionary).

As the oldest of 6 kids, with two brothers that came in close succession after me (my sister is 6 years younger), I frequently sought time alone... to swing & sing, to read in the poplar trees, trying to gain space from the perceived ‘chaos & competition’. In fact, by 9<sup>th</sup> grade it was my intent to be ‘a hermit’. We all need solitude... and we all need community.

We all feel lonely at times. Even I do... and I am so thankful for the presence of the pups, Zachary & Ivy Rose. In fact, it was my toy poodle that really helped anchor my understanding of God's presence even in the midst of feeling alone in ministry. She would be in the dog bed under the desk... and I would feel this little nudge and licking at my ankle. I'd be self-absorbed in a task...and she would nudge again and give another lick... and I would have to pay attention. We would

get up, go out, do a walk, chat with the neighbor, and then return to the 'very important task' at hand. We all need solitude... and we all need community.

In Genesis we have two creation stories. They are different. Genesis 1, we hear God create and pronounce each element as good and humanity as 'very good'.

In Genesis 2, as poet John Milton reports, 'loneliness is the first thing which God's eye named not good'. As we heard Josh read to us... 'it is not good that human is alone'. And so we hear of the need for human companionship.

Let's think on that a moment... a baby hears the mother's heartbeat... perhaps the first cries we hear aren't so much to be fed as to be close, in the presence of a heartbeat. Even as we may be caregivers for family, we are tending to the need of our companion or loved one. This is a true challenge and tragedy in this time of COVID19... the need we all have to be near... to be with our loved one.

And so as we get lonely our emotions... our protection system works... our imagination takes a larger role and we begin to CATASTROPHIZE in our loneliness. It can sound a little bit like that old sing-song saying... *'no one loves me, everybody hates me, guess I'll go eat worms.'* Some find themselves saying, 'why would anyone want to be with me or be my friend?' Albert Einstein wrote, 'it's a strange thing to be so well-known and so lonely'.

In this cycle of loneliness too often our tendency is to withdraw. This is self-defeating. In fact research tells us the impact of this chronic state is as harmful as 15 cigarettes a day.

Remember... we are wired for companionship... we are wired for connection.

This is important to remember even in the digital age... meaningful connection is essential. This is why transitions between grade levels, ES/MS/HS/college/career/retirement... all these shifts to our root system of connections are important to pay attention to, to celebrate, and remember. We have communities of care built in... and then we will need to develop new connections, new support persons. In this season, changes in jobs, moving, divorce or marriage or separation can add more stress and loneliness.

A therapeutic intervention is often required and I encourage seeking a resource for addressing on-going sadness and loneliness. Frequently, exploring a history of making attachments in childhood is helpful in understanding patterns that look like abandonment & rejection. TOO often Catastrophizing is the filter in which to interpret life experiences... imagining the worst possible reason someone doesn't respond to a phone call or a text message.

So we need help to unpack and silence the self-talk in our head (tapes)... she doesn't like me and so she's not returning my phone calls... or she doesn't like me and won't respond to my email/text. In other words, we assume the worst and not the best... and then we sabotage the relationship, friendship.

So instead of withdrawal, the strategy is to engage... to have the conversation to check the facts. And this takes time and courage, and help from a trusted counselor or pastor.

It is important to plan for meaningful relationship. And there are Spiritual Resources available... UMCom got it right, I believe, in reaching out to people.

You see, God knows us... we are never alone... and God has provided two answers to this challenge of loneliness... a community for connection and a personal relationship through Jesus Christ.

What was it Josh shared with us today... John 13:34... 'Love as I have loved you'! In these disciples, Jesus created a community and tasked them... and us to go and make disciples... and to do so with LOVE. And we build one another up in love... not just by worshipping once a week, but by engaging with one another in care and in the work of making disciples. The Church is designed to be an intentional community...

Mt 9, Mk 2 the paralyzed man... healed by friends' faith... who are the stretcher bearers who carry you... How has Saint James been a community that has nurtured you... In one of our small groups... a bible study... a mission activity?

The second provision is in having a personal relationship through Jesus Christ. A little later in John's gospel we hear, 'I don't call you servants... instead I call you

friends.’(John 15:14-15). As we position ourselves to learn and cultivate a relationship with Jesus, we connect to God... we open to God, and invite God to work within us through the spiritual practices of prayer, study & action.

Our deep wiring (GPS) is truly a deep longing for God and for human companions. The psalmist captures this as God saying, I know you, I made you, I know you better than you know yourself... and I still love you!

In the letter to Romans, Paul states this completely from his own experience... ‘There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.’ Romans 8:37-38).

Being centered on church activities is a good thing, yet it has been the hardest part of COVID19... to not gather with this community... how has SJ responded... carried or reached out? Maybe you’ve received a call from our Vine and Branches ministry? Perhaps you’ve come to know you are not alone in this extraordinary season.

Let’s pray...Thank you for loving me, God. You know everything about me, yet you still love me. I trust this. Thank you for always being with me. Help me remember that. Help me love you, help me seek you, know you & share your love with others.

I pray for our church... our faith community... that we love not only in words, but in actions. I pray we love those we know AND especially reach out to those we don’t know so that they may know the love of God. I pray this in the name of the One True God who stands by and Lifts and love us all... Amen. Amen. Amen.