

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. Grow, Pray, Study is part of our worship guide and may be found on our website... saintjamesweb.org.

We're in our FIFTH week of focus on Living with Courage & Hope in Uncertain Time. This series is undergirded by the book we've been studying by Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*. In this series we have re-Framed the word FEAR as an acronym to help us live with courage and Hope... re-framed, FEAR is:

Facing Fear with Faith,

Examine Assumptions in light of Facts,

Attack Anxiety with Action, and

Release our cares to God.

The scripture we have this week is one of a dozen psalms that David Jeremiah calls 'Shelter' Psalms. Many of us know the very last line that Jim read for us... verse 10... '*Be Still, know that I am God.*' But the challenge for us to remember, friends, is verse 1... '*God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of trouble.*' Perhaps the challenge in remembering God is our refuge is made known best in a children's story. Maybe you've heard of it... Henny Penny or Chicken Little?

To sum it up, an acorn falls and hits Henny Penny (Chicken Little) on the head & this character immediately proclaims, 'The sky is falling, the sky is falling!' The hen goes to report the news to the ruler of the land and along the way tells everyone she meets, who accompany her on the mission... resulting in a bit of catastrophizing and mass hysteria. And then the group meets Fox, who invites the company follow him on a short cut. Their fear prevents them from seeing the predator. They follow and the group is never heard from again, though a very fine feast was enjoyed at the Fox house.

This is a story that has long been told ... reportedly shared by Buddha (a rabbit is the key character and the world is crumbling) some 2500 years ago.

But when we place the story alongside the FEAR acronym, we can see where missteps and challenges begin. The only factual thing that occurred in this unfortunate scenario is an event that occurred (one acorn fell and landed on the hen's head). The interpretation of the event (an assumption) was spread as if it was truth, and the action taken resulted in the crowd meeting with disaster.

Studies on things that cause fear demonstrate an interesting trend... whatever is prevalent in the news cycle is the rising fear across all adult groups, particularly those in the 50+ age group. In the year preceding the last National (presidential) election, the message both ways was so negative that both candidates were impacted by claims of being crooked, lying, and corrupt. Rick Wilson is a Republican political strategist and media consultant. In 2016, He noted, "*Fear is the simplest emotion to tweak in a campaign ad. You associate your opponent with terror, with fear, with crime, with causing pain and uncertainty,*" and you have a strong chance of winning an election. When people are afraid, they want protection. They want strong borders and walls.... *'in 60 seconds I can use fear to engender feeling empowered or afraid'*.¹ As we are approaching another presidential election, we should remind ourselves of the challenges that lay ahead. As we strive to flatten the curve and prevent spikes in cases of the virus; And as we engage in meaningful conversations around racial injustice, we should remind ourselves of the importance of facts, examining assumptions, attack anxiety with action, and release cares to God.

¹ Quoted in Molly Ball, "Donald Trump and the Politics of Fear," The Atlantic, September, 2, 2016.

In our current season of trial and tribulation with a viral pandemic and unrest with the virus of racism, it is more important than ever, I believe, that we seek the One who is refuge when worlds fall apart, and nations crumble. Let's work with this psalm in mind as we address current challenges.

We are currently in a season of 2 fears ... the novel Coronavirus, and a movement speaking out against Racism. We have, in Maryland, managed to face COVID19 with minimizing exposure to risks by staying home, staying safe, and washing hands. As we've begun a process for re-entry into society, people are strongly recommended or required to wear masks and keep social distance.

Our church, too, designed and developed plans to re-engage while keeping as low a risk as possible. These plans are developed with CDC, federal & local guidelines in mind. We've read articles and resources from the BWC and experts. We did, in fact, survey you, the congregation, to seek understanding of your concerns. And as much as we would like to gather inside the Sanctuary and 'get back to normal', we realize there is too much risk. As a result, 1) we continue our newly developed ONLINE Worship; 2) Our regular-occurring summer outdoor Chapel is being offered, complete with masks and social distancing.

I'll be honest, some have challenged the decision to wear masks, to keep distance, and to not sing when we're together. Some suggest that we are more fearful than faithful. I respond with the scripture we read just last week... 2 Timothy 1:7, *'For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.'* I remember the days of not wearing seatbelts...and I wear one regularly. I remember the days of driving with my brothers & sister to get our 'sugar cube' vaccine. I keep my vaccines up to date, including flu shots every year. I do my best to eat right and exercise. I do not drink if I am driving. Are these of sound mind? Are these of love for myself and my neighbor? I do so believe!

The research on wearing masks and COVID19 is very clear. Wearing a mask protects your neighbor from droplets spewing forth from our own mouths onto our

neighbor. For me, I am using a sound mind in choosing to wear a mask. For me, and for the Re-Entry Planning Team, wearing a mask is an act of love for my neighbor.

The other current point of challenge is the unrest surrounding racial injustice. Matters of race in our nation have been like lava flowing & swelling underground. There would be tremors at reports of another Black life lost at hand of police intervention. However, the 8:46 sec video captured of life ebbing out of George Floyd underneath knee holds of three officers of the law resulted in an explosive volcanic eruption above the surface, pouring forth the pent up fumes and flows of hot, molten earth from deep within the heart of Black community, of mothers, of sisters, of brothers, of people throughout the world.

Personally, I was deeply troubled by that moment in witnessing the words, 'I can't breathe', once again. And I have shared with you my measured response to calls for clergy presence in peaceful protests and prayer vigils in Columbia and in Baltimore. In every measured response, I reflect using the discernment tools of scripture, tradition, reason & experience. Frankly, this psalm, Psalm 46, is one such scripture I lean on. Another is Psalm 121 v1-2...*I lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from...it comes from the Lord, maker of heaven & earth.* Equipped with God's help, a history of standing up and standing with oppressed, my mask, a commitment to keep social distance, and a process for personal safeguards when returning home, I have engaged in actions of presence and solidarity; And I will continue to do so.

I understand the defining mark of a Christian is not being right – I understand the mark of a Christian is Love. Jesus said, *'I give you a new command, love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you should love each other'* (John 13:34). So knowing there are people upset with this tension of faith & race, I seek to learn, to listen, and to gain understanding. We conducted a survey about faith & race.

Here is a summary of the results: 55% (15) of respondents feel positive change is being made in racial justice. 30 % (8) of respondents feel things are getting worse. 15% (4) of the respondents feel there is no change in racial justice.

61% (17) want the church to provide guidance on responding to racial justice issues. 22% (6) disagree that the church should provide guidance on racial justice issues. 18% (5) persons were neutral.

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There is a pattern that is reflected throughout the survey... many seek information, some do not, and some are neutral or not sure.

The information most needed is: education on justice related issues; biblical understanding of justice; know church leaders care about racial justice

The action desired from church leadership is: a series/sermon about racial justice issues; organize a prayer effort for community; dialogue with community leaders to give diverse perspectives; partner with other churches and work toward policy changes.

Some may hear this summary as say... 'Wow, Pastor, sounds like a divided church.' My response, 'Well, my BFF, John Wesley, put it this way... 'we may not all think alike, but we are all called to love alike'.

The other thing I remember is the notation in scripture that describes the people Jesus called to follow him. Those persons included Matthew, a tax collector, and Simon, a Zealot. In the politics of the day, one group aligned with Rome...make the best of the circumstance; one group wanted to throw the Oppressors.

Too often, the Tax Collectors took advantage of the people, lining their own pockets. Zealots were prone to acts of violence against the Romans. That's like bringing the staunchest of Republicans and Democrats into an intense course of study in ministry. There were plenty of interesting conversations as they traveled... just read the scriptures to listen in.

The point is, Jesus included diverse thinkers as his students and mentees.

What does this mean for us? Well, the body of Christ Universal includes those on the right, those on the left, Republicans, Democrats, Independents, liberals, conservatives, those whose skin contains a range of light and dark melanin, and hailing from countries and cultures throughout the world... just as God promised Abraham. In Saint James Church, there is a diversity of perspectives and thinking as well. We are diverse, as diverse as creation. I believe that is God's design! Again, we may not all think alike, but we are CALLED to love alike... to love as Jesus loved and lived.

So... as God's people we can choose to focus on the troubles and be divided OR we can be linked together... like a bridge across the river, united in love and seeking solutions together.

One of the great blessings in my life has been to travel to other countries and spend time immersed in culture other than what I've known. Most memorable are the experiences of hospitality shared and the stories heard. In every place, I found there were so many successes and challenges that we had in common than I imagined, as a woman, as a single person, as someone 'other' than the social culture said was 'normal'.

You see, the danger of fear, remember, is the isolation, the shielding, the wall constructed for self-protection around our hearts and over our eyes. By insulating and isolating we limit our exposure to experiences and, as a result, miss opportunities to learn, grow, and receive understanding.

By walling ourselves off, we lose the ability for compassion and mercy; we lose connection.

As an educator by nature and training, I seek learning opportunities. Traveling across our country, I learned more than geography, but the untold story of the people Native to this land known as the United States. By visiting the Holocaust Museum I learned how in 1939, Jewish persons sought refuge by boat in Miami and were turned away. I learned even after WWII was over, 59% of US Citizens didn't want to receive refugees who were Jewish. In 1975, the same thing occurred with refugee children from Vietnam. And in the last three years, the current leader of our nation signed executive orders that prohibited refugees from Syria and other Muslim countries. The driving reason, fear.

The prophet Jerimiah spoke to God's people (22:3): *Do what is right & just; rescue the oppressed. Don't exploit or mistreat the refugee, the orphan & the widow.* Jesus spoke to this matter too, 'whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me'.

We must face fear with facts, examine assumptions in light of facts; Attack anxiety with action, and release our cares to God.

Courage is the willingness to do what you know is right even if it makes you afraid. I hope to be courageous, both as a Christian, and as a leader.

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Remember that hymn we sang a couple weeks ago (Harry Emerson Fosdick)
verse 2... *Though the hosts of evil round us scorn you Christ, assail your ways!
Fear and doubts too long have bound us; free our hearts to work and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days, for the living of
these days.*

Where does our peace come from? Ps 46 confesses...God is our refuge, our
place of safety...not the City...not the government or its leaders... *God is our
refuge... the God of Jacob is our place of safety and peace. BE Still! Know that I
am God!*

....Let's pray...and I invite you to repeat after me... The Serenity Prayer -Reinhold Niebuhr

God, give me grace to accept with serenity... the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,

accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,

taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,

not as I would have it,

trusting that You will make all things right,

if I surrender to Your will,

so that I may be reasonably happy in this life,

and supremely happy with You forever in the next.

Amen.

Now let us prepare our hearts for Communion.