

Brian's Sermon Text at Brentwood Presbyterian Church

Sun, May 3, 2020



Faith amidst the Storms

(Ps 23 and Acts 27:13-38)

Therefore, I urge you, take some food,
for it will help you survive;
for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.
(Acts 27:34)

Word to Ponder = Storm

Congregational Wisdom = fear, sickness, panic, provocation, turmoil, damage, personal isolation, beauty, trapped, distress, seek shelter & safety, uncertainty, light, drama, will pass, destruction

Storms cause fear.

I have vivid memories of thunder storms when I was growing up.

At times, our little house in Niagara Falls
would shake from the thunder in the pounding rain.

The day was dark and no end was in sight.

Those memories can still generate a shudder in me.

You probably have memories of your own
of storms in your lives that generated fears –
natural storms, like mine,
psychological storms, health storms,
incidents of all kinds that threatened your sense of safety.

One of the best descriptions of the fear brought on by storms
that I have ever found is in Yann Martel's wonderful novel, *The Life of Pi*.

I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease. It begins in your mind, always. One moment you are feeling calm, self-possessed, happy. Then fear, disguised in the garb of mild-mannered doubt, slips into your mind like a spy. Doubt meets disbelief and disbelief tries to push it out. But

disbelief is a poorly armed foot soldier. Doubt does away with it with little trouble. You become anxious. Reason comes to do battle for you. You are reassured. Reason is fully equipped with the latest weapons of technology. But, to your amazement, despite superior tactics and a number of undeniable victories, reason is laid low. You feel yourself weakening, wavering. Your anxiety becomes dread.

Fear next turns fully to your body, which is already aware that something terribly wrong is going on. Already your lungs have flown away like a bird and your guts have slithered away like a snake. Now your tongue drops dead like an opossum, while your jaw begins to gallop on the spot. Your ears go deaf. Your muscles begin to shiver as if they had malaria and your knees to shake as though they were dancing. Your heart strains too hard, while your sphincter relaxes too much. And so with the rest of your body. Every part of you, in the manner most suited to it, falls apart. Only your eyes work well. They always pay proper attention to fear.

Quickly you make rash decisions. You dismiss your last allies: hope and trust. There, you've defeated yourself. Fear, which is but an impression, has triumphed over you. The matter is difficult to put into words. For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation, such as you feel when you are brought face to face with your mortal end, nestles in your memory like a gangrene: it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you. (178-179)

I imagine Paul and the other 275 passengers
trapped on that ship in the midst of that storm
might have experienced much of this in their fear.

I suspect we have as well in our fear.

God's answer to such fear is faith.
It sounds simple, but it isn't.
As we have seen in our explorations
of what the Spirit was doing to launch the church
as Luke tells the stories in Acts,
our ancestors in the faith
were pushed into places they never imagined being,
like on a boat, in a storm, going to Rome, as a prisoner.
In the midst of such situations,
God equipped his ambassadors with the gift of faith.

This gift of God's faith in us to us generates a response.
It may well be neglect.
It may well be rejection.

We have the capacity for both and have honed it well.

But God keeps pestering us with the possibility of another series of responses -
acknowledgement, appreciation, acceptance, and alignment.

We are pestered to acknowledge that there is forgiving and reconciling love
at work in the world.

We are pestered to appreciate the power of that love.

We are pestered to accept it as gift.

We are pestered to align ourselves with it for the flourishing of all creation.

That's what God's faith in us, and ours in response to God's,
makes possible in the midst of the storms that rage in us and around us.

We can, in this understanding of faith, live through them.

But there remains one fearful feature of all of this.

Living through these storms may involve death.

That's a reality that we humans all face, in one way or another.

Paul faced in more, I would imagine, than most of us.

Others in our world today face it daily
in circumstances consumed by fear.

As Paul's faith had been honed by God's faith,
his response to this fear is two-fold.

"Come on, folks, let's eat together."

"Don't worry. Even death will not harm you."

Let's nourish ourselves to flourish in this life
and move through our fears in the confidence
that life will continue in the joy of Jesus' companionship.

I don't pretend to understand that faith completely,
but I do trust the One who gifts us with it.

My Notes



My Prayers

This morning's Prayers of the People

Take these prayers that we have expressed
in word and thought and feeling
and shape them further
to align them with the intent of your forgiving and reconciling love.

The sounds that surround us these days
are filled with fear.

Our sanity is being stormed by forces beyond our control.
The death toll from the pandemic alone is staggering – almost 250,000 world-wide,
65,000 in the US, 3,500 in Canada.

And that is only one of the storms that deal death in our midst.
No wonder we are gripped by fear.

But there are also signs of faith.
Your faith in our capacity to nourish life
and our response in joining you
with all the life-giving actions we can imagine,
trusting that you will guide us into your flourishing future.

In the midst of the storms that disrupt our lives,
awaken us to a new confidence in your loving purpose
for us and the whole of your creation.

Help us find that confidence afresh in the *sounds* of your prayer:

[we sing Darryl Nixon's arrangement of *The Lord's Prayer*]