

First Reading **Psalm 46: 1-3, 10-11**

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
- ³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
- ¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Second Reading **John 14:15-18a, 25-27**

- ¹⁵ If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.
- ¹⁸ I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ²⁵ I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Message

Is Peace Possible?

Who could have imagined this day? I know I didn't and I don't believe many of us did either. Even though we saw what was happening on our news feeds in China and then Europe, somehow, we thought this virus wouldn't make its way to our shores or at least if it did it wouldn't cause as much disruption.

Yet, we all live on this one beautiful blue planet together for in the beginning God created the heavens and earth... and God created humankind, in God's image. As we gather this morning, we are all more aware this day that we really are just one human family, with all our borders, divisions and classifications of no consequence."

The government pronouncements this past week have changed the way we live and move and having our being as citizens in this community. We have been told to stay at home, traveling only for essentials. As I checked on the church this past Friday, I saw restaurants on Orange Street that have placed plywood over all their windows, as if a hurricane is on its way. I saw cars lined up to order fast food, yet no other cars or activity present in the food establishments. There are fewer cars on the road and in parking lots, except at grocery stores and pharmacies. There is an eerie calm in many places where people used to gather.

Yet, these are the only things I have noticed. I have seen more people out walking and bicycling for exercise. As I have walked, I have noticed that people are more willing to engage, with the appropriate physical distance, in conversation. People

are checking in with each other and asking, “How are you doing?” My street is already a friendly place, but we have been even more intentional about checking in with each other as we walk. And what made me smile from ear to ear on my Saturday walk were chalk artists who graced a sidewalk with these words, “Call a friend and check in on them today.” Colorful artwork accompanied these words, beautiful flowers and a bright shining sun.

As the mole said in Charlie Mackesy’s book entitled, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*, “One of our greatest freedoms is how we react to things.”

How have you reacted this past week to the unfolding news about what we are actually facing? What has been on your heart and mind? I don’t believe any of us have been totally free from fear. I know one night this past week, I fell asleep just fine, but when I awoke in the middle of the night my mind started racing and sleep was illusive for hours, even as I repeated a musical refrain that usually centers me, “Peace be still, peace be still, though the storm rages, peace be still.”

Our fear is real. Our fears are fed ravenously by each succeeding news cast. Yet, is fear our only choice? Do you remember what the mole said? “One of our greatest freedoms is how we react to things.”

Let me back up and read the pages in Mackesy’s book that lead up to the mole making this statement. In this wonderful story book with sketches there is a boy and a mole, and then a fox who is caught in a trap. Listen to the dialogue that takes place. “I’m not afraid,” said the mole out loud to the boy and

within hearing distance of the fox. The fox snarled back saying, "If I wasn't caught in this snare I'd kill you." Given the fox is trapped in a snare in the middle of a snow laden winter the mole calmly responds, "If you stay in that snare you will die."

The question is what happens next? Well, the mole chooses kindness and chews through the wire snare with his tiny teeth. The mole's choice changes everything. The boy, the mole, and the fox become friends in this story. "One of our greatest freedoms is how we react to things."

"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," how will we use our greatest freedom? Will we choose God as our refuge and strength, our very present help in this time of trouble? Will we trust God and not be afraid? Will we listen deeply to the words of wisdom Jesus shared with his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives."

"Peace be still, peace be still, though the storm rages, peace be still." Peace, is it possible in the midst of this hurricane force storm? Our faith teaches us that peace is possible, yet we cannot will this peace. That would be the way of the world. No, we cannot will it. We can only surrender to the One who provides peace, not as the world gives.

As I reflect on this past week, I was most anxious, most afraid when I forgot whose I am. As I shared last Sunday, "We belong to God. We are precious and beloved children of God.

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands

Reverend Cheryl Raine

March 22, 2020 - Facebook Live

We belong to God whether we live or whether we die. We are God's precious children. Yet, will we surrender to this truth?

Now surrender is not a word that is common in our lexicon because it is usually associated with defeat or giving up. Surrendering normally means we are throwing in the towel. Yet, what if we translated surrendering as simply a receptivity or a willingness to the ways of the God who loves us more than we can imagine? What if it means surrendering to a way of life that recognizes God is God and we are not? What if it means surrendering to a way of life that reminds us that humanity was created to be one human family, stewards of the whole creation?

Do you remember who we want to be as God's people gathered at the corner of Cajon and Vine and known as the First Presbyterian Church of Redlands? We are committed to living the heart and mind of Christ at the heart of the city. We are committed even now, even as our building is shuttered and closed, even as what is yet to come is unknown. If we are God's precious children, surrendered and centered in God's love, then we can use our greatest freedom to choose a response other than fear to our current crisis.

Can you hear Jesus whispering in your ears, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid?" Do not let the world define who you will be in these coming days and weeks and months. Choose to react to things in ways that honor this God of love whom we claim.

Be like the sidewalk chalk artists in my neighborhood. Be like those in our community who responded to the need for

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sack lunches to feed those without homes as services in our community were shut down. Be like those who are checking in with their elderly neighbors and making sure they have everything they need. Be like those who get up and go to work on the frontlines of essential services, even at great risk to themselves. Be a friendly phone call to check in on someone.

Now is not the time to shutter the church, because the church is not the buildings here on the corner of Cajon and Vine. The church is each one of us disbursed into our homes and into essential frontline jobs. The church is each one of us using our greatest freedom in this situation to choose loving kindness and extravagant generosity, rather than fear. The church is each of one of us giving beyond ourselves in whatever capacity is possible for us these days. Now is not the time to shutter the church.

Listen to these words from earlier in this year when I said, "If someone were to ask me what do you think it means for your church to live the heart of Christ, I would respond with something like this: It means that as a church we will be moved in the moment by the suffering we collectively see and prayerfully respond to it." We will be moved to respond, because living the mind of Christ causes us to look to the interests of others, rather than to only our own self-interests. We are to be moved because as people of faith we have a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another.

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It's not the time to shutter the church, but in order to be the church we want to be in the midst of this storm we will need to surrender again and again to the One who gives peace.

Listen to the wisdom of from Macksey's book, for the mole said, "Find a quiet spot and shut your eyes and breathe." Or as the psalmist said, "Be still and know that I am God." We are not alone in this. Claim Emmanuel – God with us. We have an Advocate, just find a quiet spot, shut your eyes and breathe. Bask in God's love. Breathe in peace and exhale anxiety and fear. Or as our friends from twelve-step programs say, "Let go, and let God."

We cannot control what is to come, we never have been able to and we never will be able to. But we do have this great freedom. We have the ability to choose how we will react.

My friends, may the peace, the deep peace that Christ offers each of us, be the wellspring from which we draw as this day and the days ahead unfold. Amen.