

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands

Reverend Cheryl Raine

March 29, 2020 - Facebook Live

First Reading Psalm 27:1, 13-14

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ¹³ I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! ¹⁴ Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Second Reading Genesis 13:17

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." ¹⁸ But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. ¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here." ²⁰ And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. ²² The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

The Message Take Courage

I watched the news on Friday night and as I did, I felt my heart start to race and my anxiety begin to rise. Last Sunday there were about 378,000 Covid-19 cases worldwide, but as of this morning there are now almost than 685,000 cases. In the US last Sunday there were about 43,800 known cases, but this morning there are now almost 125,000 cases. Medical professionals tell us we still don't know when those numbers will peak here in America. So, why on earth would I entitle this morning's message, "Take Courage?" How is it possible to let our heart take courage as the psalmist suggests in the midst of this pandemic?

Our psalm this morning is one of the most familiar psalms in Jewish liturgy. Some Jews recite it precisely 100 times in the late summer and early fall, once in the morning and once in the evening. A striking element of this psalm is its movement from confidence to need, from believing in God's reliability to worrying about God's absence. The opening line is part of the first stanza of this psalm where the worshipper appears confident. "The Lord is my light and salvation... the Lord is the stronghold of my life."

But by the second stanza the worshipper is distressed about God's absence, "Do not hide your face from me." This cry wells up in us in these days of uncertainty, "Where are you God in the midst of this Covid-19 crisis? Have you hidden your face from us?" We are all crying out, yet the virus continues its march across the globe. Loved ones have not been spared. As of this morning 32,113 loved ones across the globe have succumbed to this virus. We cry out, how many more? How much longer must we shelter in our homes? How long must we wait?

Then in the third stanza of this psalm there is another turn, as the worshipper expresses hope, yet hope that is incomplete. It is as if the worshipper is not fully confident in the God he calls out to, yet he urges himself to hope in this God in the midst of what he is facing.

This feels like the oscillation of faith I experience when I turn on the news, for I plummet from feeling confident to being overwhelmed and then from distress to shaky hope. In the

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safety of my home with the news turned off, I can look out my office window and boldly proclaim, "From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Or these words from this psalm sing in my heart, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" Yet, if I turn on the news my spirit of confidence wanes.

And that is exactly when we should turn to Psalm 27. This psalm is about faith that includes doubt as well as confidence. This psalm models for us the maturity of an authentic relationship with God. You see, God is not afraid of our oscillations of faith from confidence to distress to shaky hope. God is not afraid and we should not be either, for God simply wants us to speak our truth.

As I walked through the orange groves surrounding my neighborhood yesterday I cried out to God. I sounded a bit like our psalmist as I lifted my praises with confidence, but then I cried out for a pastoral colleague I know from Los Ranchos Presbytery who is in an ICU with Covid-19. I cried out for all of our healthcare workers, especially those in hospitals that have more patients than they can handle. As one nurse said on the news Friday night, "I have never experienced this much death." "God, do something!" I cried out, "Do not hide your face from us."

"And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people." O to have such clear signs as our ancestors in faith did that God is with us right here and right now.

Our faith story reminds us that Pharaoh let our ancestors of faith go, but God didn't lead them by the way that was near. God didn't take the easy route, the close route, the shortest route. God took the long way around, for God knew that the people would just run back to Egypt at the first sign of trouble.

As I wrestled with this text, I wondered if symbolically, Egypt could be for us the way things were before this crisis. Where we were oblivious on most days that all of humanity is interconnected. Where we thought we were in control of our futures. Where we thought business as usual would be business as usual. Yet, these last two weeks have taught us otherwise and the way of life we have all experienced probably feels like the long way around. These past two weeks have made it abundantly clear to us that God is God and we are not. They have also made it clear that we really do need each other and that none of us is an island to ourselves. Imagine if the essential workers didn't work... no medical facilities, no grocery stores, no communications, no... the list is long. As I shared in an email to the leadership of this church on Friday, "I gave thanks this day for the individuals who picked up my trash." Thanks be to God that their jobs are essential. We are all interconnected. We are one human family. We have been and we always will be, even those few who choose to live "off the grid" as they say, for most of these folks communicate using technology!

God led our ancestors of faith the long way around. There wasn't a direct route and I don't believe there is a direct route with a defined ending for us either. I am almost certain this crisis will not be over before Easter and it may not even be over by Pentecost. Even so, the

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good news is that God will lead us along this journey, even as our faith oscillates between confidence and distress.

What I found curious in this story is that the slaves – yes slaves – went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Yet, we are struggling as a nation and a world to be equipped for our battle. I know this first hand, because my son Aaron works in the medical device industry and his company anticipates their orders will double and maybe double again. We have heard repeatedly that we do not have enough ICU beds or respirators for the anticipated spike. We are not equipped and equipment manufacturers are scrambling. My pastoral colleague from Los Ranchos Presbytery is currently receiving lifesaving treatment because there is a respirator for her. And thankfully, I heard late yesterday afternoon that she has turned the corner towards healing, with doctors hoping that her life saving respirator will be available for someone else by Monday.

Are we equipped for the long way around this battle that is before us? Do we have the spiritual maturity to traverse this wilderness of physical distancing and stay at home? What is our pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, assuring us that God is with us? And are we willing to be as honest with God as our psalmist was, with faith and doubt all mixed together?

Paul Tillich, a Lutheran theologian, reminds us that, “Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.” Doubt keeps us in conversation with the mystery we call God or as I have said before, “Doubt is the crucible of faith.” Frederick Buechner adds a bit of humor saying, “If you don’t have doubts you’re either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants-in-the-pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving.”

So, what visible signs of God’s presence are helping you these days when your faith oscillates between confidence and distress, and distress and shaky hope? The signs for me are many. One sign is the way this congregation is caring for each other in the midst of crisis, as you call each other and check in and even run errands for each other as needed. One sign is the willingness of those able among us to give beyond themselves to help those in our community who are most vulnerable. One sign is the compassion we have for each other’s unique situations and the willingness to keep all our employees whole. One sign is the faithful sunrise each day and the playfulness of God’s natural creation so visibly demonstrated to me yesterday as thousands of butterflies danced through the orange groves drinking of the sweet nectar of the orange blossoms.

God’s yes is what will carry us through this pandemic, even as we accept the reality that none of us are immune. Our faith will oscillate in the days ahead; I am almost certain of it. But, hear this good news, these oscillations mean your faith is alive. Be honest with God and wrestle all you want, for God will never give up on you or me or all of humanity. This is the truth that allows us to take courage. Remember, my friends, “God so loves the world.” Amen.