

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

June 21, 2020, The 3rd Sunday of Pentecost/The 12th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17, Matthew 10:24-31 (10:24-39)

IN 2020, HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW

Intro to NT Lesson

In this morning's reading from Matthew Jesus is preparing to send the 12 disciples out into the area towns and villages to tell the good news that Kingdom of heaven has come near. Before they left, he wanted them to know that it would not be easy. Because people were opposed to Jesus and his message, they would be opposed to the disciples as well. This morning we are listening to just a few of his instructions to them, including words of comfort that God would be with them and care for them.

Intro about hymn after Sermon.

This week our Choir Director David asked if we could sing at home. So, following the sermon you are invited to use the bulletins that have been mailed to you and sing two verses of "His Eye is On the Sparrow." Paul, Linda, Jason, Charles and I will not be singing, but we will be singing on the inside!

This week I braved my dentist's office for the first time in months. As her hygienist cleaned my teeth, she talked about how this season of the world pandemic has changed life for their family. She has three children and the family usually begins each summer with big poster-sized calendar pages for June, July and August spread out on the living room carpet. They then fill in the children's summer camps, sports, church activities, family trips and adventures that are a part of every summer. Needless to say, this summer the calendar pages were not spread out on the living room floor.

We are in this for the long-haul, aren't we? This is our 14th Sunday of being apart from each other. Many of us have never experienced something like this, that has gone on for so long. But I've spoken with some of you who lived through World War II as children and young adults. Back in April one of you said to me: We've done something like this before, and we can do it again." I am thankful that we have your wise voices to encourage us in these days of changed living. It helps to tell myself that it won't always be like this.

But its been hard hasn't it. I miss my lunches and dinners with friends and colleagues, laughing and playing cards, gathering to watch movies. I'm truly sad that I will not be walking through the beauty of Ghost Ranch this summer, as I take a class there, and spend a week with my long-time friend Jenn.

I miss Prayer Shawls, and 2nd Friday Movies and Presby Seniors, and Youth Group and Confirmation.

This is the time of year I'm usually learning VBS songs, and hand motions, and dance steps, and telling myself that you need a younger pastor!

And while I feel connected to you as I lead you in this Sunday worship, it is of course not at all the same without you!

Life has changed, and it continues to change as we find the best ways to care for each other in this world pandemic. As I've talked to some of you in the last few weeks, I have heard weariness, and loneliness, and confusion, and fear and frustration.

You are not alone in those feelings.
 They are a very normal reaction to a situation that is not normal at all.
 I am feeling all of those things too.

So how do we as people of faith continue to walk through these days and weeks and months that are ahead of us? How do we, with our weariness, loneliness, confusion, fear, frustration, hope, and remembered past endurance, live through these days?

Here is the only way that I believe we can hold on and thrive during these days of a world pandemic, and necessary questions about policing, and racism, and the gifts and challenges of our diversity in our nation and our world.

In these days we are called to remember who we are and who we belong to.

It is our crucial task to as people of faith to remember:

We are children of God and we are held and cared for by our God of love.

But can I tell you that I find it challenging to remember this on this long journey.

I have to keep reminding myself:

We are children of God, and we are held and cared for by our God of love.

In all honesty, I find it so easy to get tangled up in the worries, and the sorrows, and the fears of this time in our collective history, and in my own story, and in the stories of those of those I love, that I quickly forget who I truly am and who I belong to.

And then I swirl around in the feelings of loss and confusion and sorrow and fear.

And then as if that wasn't enough, I feel guilty that I'm not doing better at remembering and living out who I am as a person of faith.

I feel guilty that I forget to hold onto the God that I belong to.

It's a repeating cycle some of you may recognize.

It can feel unceasing.

So, I put reminders into my path that stop the cycle of feeling like I'm not doing faith and life the right way. On my computer screen I have a picture I took of frothy ocean waves, the open rolling blue ocean, and then the sharp horizon line with a lighter blue sky above. A year ago, in February when I was out in Portland Oregon for a workshop, I stayed afterwards and gave myself the gift of three days on the Oregon coast. I stayed in one room of a big house, on a bluff over the ocean and I watched the waves for hours.

It was a wonderful three days alone with God. As I sat in a big chair, journaling and praying, I kept looking out that window at the ocean. My eye kept being drawn to the horizon line: out past the pounding surf, out past the rolling ocean, the place where the sea met the sky.

I felt God guiding me to realize that so often I get caught up in the surf, the pounding waves, the questions and decisions, the day to day of life, all the busyness and noise and confusion.

I heard God calling me to spend more time being filled up with God at the silence and peace of the horizon;

I heard God calling me to spend more time in the presence of the bigness of God, and God's unceasing love.

I was thinking about that learning later, as I walked along the beach on that cold February day. The wind was up and the waves were pounding and I couldn't even see the horizon, the waves were too tall. I was caught up in the pounding rush of the unceasing waves.

It was such a powerful reminder that I need to step back and away from the rolling waves, and

get to a place where I can see and remember the horizon line. I need to step back, and put myself before the bigness of God and God's love.

This isn't to say that God's big love isn't right there moment by moment of living with the pounding waves.

But it is in the silence and peace of stepping back from the waves, that God's love and care can sink in more deeply.

So, I have the actual picture of that horizon line in front of me on my desk.

I also put other reminders of God's love and care around myself that help with the living of these days.

I no longer wake up and start my morning with the morning news. That comes after I've listened to the "Pray As You Go" devotional app on my phone. I get out of bed and I start the app. This devotion starts my day with music, a Bible reading, silence and prayer. I start my day at the horizon line where God is, before I turn on the pounding waves of the morning news cycle.

Then when I'm leaving the house, I use another devotional app on my phone, "Lectio 365." You can also download both of these on your computers, as well as your phones. I walk out into the day, and before the to-do lists start in my head, I hear music of faith, a Bible reading, prayers, silence, and this app has wonderful questions and ideas for living the life of faith.

When I enter my office at the church, I light a candle to remind myself that the Light of Christ shines always. Throughout the day I see that candle and it brings me back to who I am as a child of God, who walks beside other children of God here at First Presbyterian Church. Together we are held and cared for by our God of love.

Plus, when I see the candle, I hear over and over again one of my favorite Bible verses from John's gospel: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it." (1:5)

I have written reminders on my walls of my office and at home. The one I have been returning to lately are words that the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung had carved above the entry to his home. "Bidden or Not Bidden, God is Present." (*The quote is from Desiderius Erasmus 1466-1536*)

When we ask, when we forget to ask, our God of love is always present. We are never alone. "Bidden or Not Bidden, God is Present."

At home, and on my desk in the office, I have a basket of stones I've collected beside Lake Michigan. Beside that basket is an empty basket that represents God. When I'm carrying the weight of the day, or the most recent news report, or I'm concerned for one of you, or one of my friends, or myself, I pick up one of the stones and I hold it. I pray for the person or the situation, or for myself, and then I give that concern or that person into God's loving care, as I place the stone in the God basket.

It reminds me of who I am, when I let go of that stone and remember that God's love and care is big enough for all that is going on around me. I don't need to carry it alone.

This morning's readings from the Bible are among the hundreds and hundreds of verses that are also there to help us in the living of these days.

The gift of this morning's reading from Psalm 86 basic: the author reminds us to ask for help. We don't know the story behind this Psalm, but we know the author is struggling. In verses 6-7 he prays: "Please listen, Lord! Answer my prayer for help. When I am in trouble, I pray, knowing you will

listen.” (Contemporary English Version)

There is help for the pounding surf days, there is help from our God of love, who listens. The gift of the Psalms is that when we don't know what to pray, they give us the words to pray. So please borrow verses 6-7 any time you need them and let them be your prayer in these days: “Please listen, Lord! Answer my prayer for help. When I am in trouble, I pray, knowing you will listen.”

Then in Matthew's gospel we have the wonderful words of comfort that Jesus gave to his disciples when they were about to enter a new season of challenge in their lives: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your God. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So, do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (10:29)

Jesus says to us who walk along the pounding surf of these days, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid because the most minute detail of your life, even the numbers of hairs on your head, are known to God.

The God who knows when one tiny sparrow is in trouble, loves and cares even more for you.

In the smallest and biggest moments of your life, the love and care of God encircles you, holds you, comforts you, and will not let you go.

Do not be afraid. You are always loved.

There is an image of sparrows that has stayed with me since I was a young pastor in suburban Detroit. I lived on the third floor of a condo building and one day there was a horrible storm, with tornadoes predicted.

As I looked out into the storm, and realized there was nowhere safe to go in my building that had no basement, I looked down into the pine tree that was there below my window.

In the branches of that tree, that were being thrashed by gale force winds, two sparrows huddled near the trunk, holding on.

I've thought of those two sparrows a lot through the years.

They had chosen a safe place to ride out the storm.

They continue to remind me to hold on in the midst of this season
because we are children of God
and we are held and cared for by our God of love.

These are just a few of the ways that I find to return to the strong horizon line where God is. These are some of the ways I step away from the pounding surf, and remember who I am, and who our God is.

I want to invite you to come to the horizon line with me. Please find your own ways to remind yourselves that we are children of God, and we are held and cared for by our God of love.

Please don't stay down in the pounding surf of this season all the time.

It is of course the place where we walk through our days,
and God is there moment by moment.

But please, also make time to look out at the silence and peace of the horizon,
and spend time there,
basking in the bigness of our God, and God's love for us all.

I'd like to close with Joyce Rupp's prayer “Hiding Place” that you'll find at the beginning of your bulletins. Let us pray
(Holy Creator)

Ah, there are those days
When the best place to be

Is hiding out with you
Where stillness is to be found
And perspective from problems.
Where hope can be restored
And peace re-enters the mind.
Where joy waits to be savored
And mourning, given her due.
Thank you for being my Hiding Place.

Amen and Amen.

"Hiding Place" is from: Fragments of Your Ancient Name © 2011, by Joyce Rupp.
Used by Permission of Sorin Books ®. All rights reserved. Reading for: September 18