

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**March 3, 2024, The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent**

Luke 5:17-26, Isaiah 43:1-3a, 4a, 5a

God is Always There, Sometimes With a Human Face!

When I was four there was a girl named Karla K. Our mothers were friends. Her mother was a psychotherapist. Now what I didn't learn until I was older was that Karla had trouble being with other children because she got so excited around children that she couldn't calm down and play with them. Our mothers decided that I might be able to help her since I played well with other children.

My mother in soothing tones, that should have been the warning, explained that a new girl was coming to play with me and she needed friends. Wanting to be helpful I looked forward to Karla K's arrival, so that I could become her new friend.

Karla K came in our front door with a banshee shriek, a crazed look in her eyes that I can still remember, raced around our living room like the Tasmanian devil I'd seen on my cartoons and then she saw me! I was petrified. She pushed me to the ground, held me down by my shoulders, sat on my chest and began to bounce, laughing maniacally. Her mother rushed over pulled her off me and took the screaming child out the door.

The next time she came to visit I was a little more prepared but still willing to be her friend. Unfortunately, the scene played the same way, only this time, not only did she push me down and bounce on my chest, but she clamped her knees to my chest like she was riding a horse and held tightly to my shoulders as she bounced. It took her mother pulling her, lifting her in the air, with me attached to her, and my mother standing across from her and pulling me, to separate us.

I was told Karla needed to grow up a bit more before she came to visit again, but I had done a good job of trying to be her friend. I was left with terrifyingly vivid memories of her bouncing on me, knocking all the breath out of my body, her spiraling eyes staring into mine and that maniacal laugh that are with me still, 60 years later!

I tell you this story this morning because I want you know that while I feel a lot like Karla K being back with you this morning, I promise not to knock you to the ground in glee at finally getting to see you, if you promise to do the same!

Although if you hear a banshee yell, you might want to run :)!

A final note on Karla, we met up again in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and became really good friends throughout the three years of jr. high!

This morning, I am going to break some rules I was taught in seminary as I preach this sermon. First, I was taught that if you go on a journey, you shouldn't preach a travelogue when you get home to the congregation, you should preach a regular sermon. But this has been quite a journey we have all been on together, while being apart, so that rule needs to be broken.

Second, I was taught that as a pastor I should never talk about something that is too emotionally close to me, until I have processed all the emotions and can preach it calmly and without an overly huge display of emotion. The phrase used was "don't preach it until its baked." In essence nobody wants to see the pastor cry or be emotional.

Well, I don't know how to talk about living with a disability without being emotional about it, and I sure don't know how to talk about how you have been companions on my journey without feeling strong emotion, and how can I about anything else today? So that rule is getting thrown out the window too. After preaching 34 years, some rules are meant to be broken!

But first I want to back up for those of you who are new to us in the past 20 months, or visiting today. And for those of you who know this story, just hang on. At the end of December 2021 I got Covid, I didn't end up in the hospital but I was really sick. I returned to ministry in February of 2022 and lasted until June of 2022, when I realized I was getting more and more sick, instead of getting better.

With the help of the Session, and the amazing Board of Pensions of the national Presbyterian Church I went onto short-term disability that turned into long-term disability. Since December of 2021 I have been living with constant daily headaches and migraines that have never gone away, chronic fatigue that is still with me and shortness of breath and damage to my lungs that continues. Thankfully the covid brain issues of lost words and thoughts are mostly better, but you may hear me slip in a word or idea that has nothing to do with what I'm saying.

😊 This will make preaching a real hoot for all of us; let's just say I plan to stick closely to my manuscripts for all our sakes :)!

There have been many doctors and specialists who have entered my life over the last two years, and many of them are still treating me. I am working with the Long Covid Clinic at the University of Iowa, and a specialty headache clinic in Davenport. But some of the **very best medicine** has been **YOU**, the people of First Presbyterian of East Moline.

Your prayers, your emails, your texts, your meals in the early days when I was barely functioning, and your cards that are now filling a second big box have blessed me, encouraged me and given me strength for the journey.

YOU are some my favorite medicine.

You are part of the team of people who have carried me to Jesus for healing during these past two plus years. You have carried me with my amazing circle of friends, with my wise Spiritual Director and wise therapist and a team of traditional and non-traditional medical healers who are helping me learn to heal as best I can, with Jesus' love, help, and healing.

You have been with me as I have walked in the wilderness of learning what it means to live with chronic illness,

as I continue to wrestle with living with disabilities and daily pain,

and as I have walked the valley of depression that comes with chronic illness.

You have prayed when I haven't been able to pray and I've relied on knowing that the church family and my friends were praying for me.

Through the years I've said to many of you individually and in sermons that it is okay when you just can't pray.

That is when the community of faith is praying for you. That is the gift of being part of the Family of Faith.

And as Romans 8:26-28 promises, "when we don't know how to pray the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings too deep for words."

I have told myself those words over and over again these past months, and I believe they are true now more than ever.

Part of my healing has also been not worrying about you as a church because you have **thrived** during these months. You are **AMAZING!!!**

Under the gifted guidance and preaching first of the Rev. Gay Behrensmeyer, until she got Covid, and then under the preaching and care of Lay Pastor Sheila Sheer you have had wise and gifted counsel and pastoral leadership.

I can't say enough about our amazing Elders, Parish Nurse Laura Brown, and Clerk of Session Aneita Buss who took on so many of the ministries that they had never done before, and the life and ministry of the church continued beautifully.

I am so proud Deacons who provided pastoral care and the Elders who ran the life of First Presbyterian Church working together as a team.

Sitting in the pews on Sunday morning you didn't see the behind the scenes as the Elders and Aneita faced some exponential learning, invented wheels, and created 20 months of the church being the church.

While being on disability, I of course wasn't supposed to be hearing things about the church, but of course I did, and I watched worship every Sunday, and what I heard and saw was wonderful.

It is an honor to be in ministry with our Elders and Deacons.

This church truly is a church where each member and friend is a minister, ably guided by the pastors who have come and gone during these months.

Finally, these two years of Long Covid have been a challenge in another way. Many of you in your cards have written about God not seeming to answer prayer; you have wondered why I haven't gotten well. And I too have asked my own questions of God. We have been praying for my healing together and apart. And I still have Long Covid, I still have damage in my lungs, I still have chronic fatigue, I still have constant, unceasing headaches. I'm still on disability

But in the past, I couldn't walk from my house next door to the church.

I couldn't drive myself to doctor appointments.

I couldn't walk down the long hallways of the University of Iowa without leaning against the walls to catch my breath and use an inhaler.

Healing looks like many things.

I now drive myself to appointment, I walk over to the church, I walk around the University of Iowa hospital, I walk in the neighborhood, and some days I don't even need a nap :).

I have rescue medicine for the migraines which truly is an answer to prayer.

I am in the pulpit this morning.

Answered prayer doesn't always look like we expect it to, and yet I am convinced that God answers prayer, in God's timing and in God's way.

God says when you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

God **doesn't** say there won't be flooding waters, there won't be rushing rivers, there won't be raging fires. That isn't a promise in the life of faith. It never has been. Just look at all the stories in the Bible of our mothers and fathers of faith.

And many of you could stand up here with me and tell your own stories of rushing rivers and raging fires. Through the years I've sat with many of you, as you and your loved ones have been surrounded by the heartbreak of illness and death and tragedies in life.

God says those things will happen in life. God says **when** you pass through the rushing waters and the raging rivers, not *if* you do. It's part of being human, fires will come, floods will come, there will be illness, there will be chronic long illness, there will be cancer

there will be death: we will bury our parents, we will bury our children, we will bury our best friends,

wars and the rumors of wars will come, economies will change,

jobs will be lost, friends will betray us, the unexpected will happen,

relationships will end or change, life will crash down around us,  
 brothers and sisters will betray us, grandchildren will be in trouble,  
 our hearts will break, and then break again  
 and through it all over and over again, God will be with us, moment by moment, breath by breath,  
 saying to us in the midst of the flooding water, the rushing rivers, the raging fires,  
 in the midst of the heartbreak, the seemingly unanswered prayers,  
 in the midst of the loss, the depression, the tears,  
 the anguish, the loneliness, the fear, and the despair,

God will always say to us the eternal words:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
 I have called you by name; you are mine.  
 For I am the Lord your God, your Savior.  
 Because you are precious in my sight  
 and honored and I love you,  
 Do not fear, for I am with you.”

This morning, we come to the Family Communion Table where that promise is offered to us every time we share the bread and the cup.

In this season of Lent, we walk with Jesus to the cross, where he showed us the promise of Love.

He stretched out his arms in love, for the world, and for you and for me,  
 to show us that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus.

As Paul asked in Romans 8: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Children of God, let us come to the Table that has been set with Love, to feed us with healing Love.

It is a joy beyond measure for me to be at this Table in person with you.

God is with us at the Table, let us prepare our hearts to meet our Savior there. Amen and Amen