



“Sheltering in Place”
Scripture – Philippians 4:4-13
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 29, 2020

Are you spending the majority of your time sheltering in place? I hope you are able to get outside to breathe the fresh air and to witness the colors of spring. Even then, you may feel as if you are under house arrest.

Thinking about this lockdown may remind us of the experience of the Apostle Paul. When he wrote this letter to the followers of Jesus who lived in Philippi, he was in lockdown. However, he was not voluntarily sheltering in place for his own safety. He was imprisoned by the Romans and unable to venture out for a walk or to shop at the market.

Worse, he was awaiting trial for encouraging people to believe that Jesus, not Caesar, was the Son of God. Jesus, not Caesar, was the true king. Jesus, not Caesar, was the one to whom you should pledge your allegiance. Jesus, not Caesar, was the one to trust.

This amounted to treason. And since Paul had no intentions of backing down or modifying his message, looming over his head was the likelihood of execution.

None of us like being confined. Not only do we enjoy our freedom, but sheltering in place can produce numerous negative emotions. You may feel anxious or lonely. You may be afraid or battling depression. You may feel panicky – especially if you are out of work and not being paid. You may be wrestling with an illness. However, sheltering in place is very different than being imprisoned by the government and awaiting a date with the gallows.

Paul situation was more extreme than ours, so how did he cope with his situation? Our passage reveals the remarkable. Paul was feeling neither fearful nor depressed. In fact, he was jubilant! No, he had not gone off the deep end. No, he was not smoking anything with hallucinogenic properties. What did Paul have that we need during this surreal and unsettling time?

Some have compared our current crisis with the terrorist attacks of 9/11. That, too, was a deeply disturbing time. We experienced shock. We could not believe what had happened. It took some time for it to really sink in. As now, it seemed unreal.

Many of us were anxious. We wondered where the terrorists would strike next. For weeks after that I had an eerie feeling every time a jet flew low overhead. I had a similar eerie feeling when I went to the Acme last week to stock up. I wondered if any of the other shoppers I walked past had Coronavirus. I wondered if anyone who had the virus had handled the item I was taking off the shelf.

We would have to be totally numb right now not to feel some degree of anxiety. Who does not worry that this deadly virus may strike a loved one? Who does not worry about catching it? And wondering if we would survive it?

There are some similarities between now and the days following September 11th, but there are also stark differences. Back then, people flooded into churches. People yearned for an infusion of faith and they sensed how healing it would be to be together with their church family.

Today, we know we need to lean heavily on our faith, but we are forbidden to be together. We cannot experience the healing that occurs when people pray together and sing together and embrace each other in Christ-like love.

What do we do in this time of empty streets, closed businesses, and overflowing hospitals? How do we soldier on while hearing about desperate shortages of masks and ventilators and ICU beds?

We can begin by acknowledging our fears and talking about our anxiety with a friend or pastor. Bottling up these emotions will not help them to subside. More likely they will fester and each bit of bad news will fill them with more power than they deserve. Sharing our fears and anxieties can get them out in the open where we can handle them. There can be healing in simply knowing that others share the same emotions. We are not alone in our thoughts. We are not the only one feeling mental distress.

Paul had to have known fear and anxiety. He was beaten on numerous occasions and nearly stoned to death. He was shipwrecked and he was imprisoned. Experiencing such harrowing episodes – so many times terrorized – he must have been well acquainted with fear and anxiety. Yet, instead of writing a letter of lament; rather than crying out, “Why me, Lord?” he wrote to his friends in Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always... (and) Do not worry about anything.”

If anyone who has lived a privileged life said this, I would write it off as the folly of someone untouched by the pain of the world. But knowing the ordeals Paul endured, we are obliged to pay attention.

Perhaps we find a clue in what Hildegard of Bingen wrote. She was a 12th century Christian mystic who said, “We need to fly with two wings of awareness. One wing is an awareness of life’s glory and beauty. The other is an awareness of life’s pain and suffering. If we try to fly with only one of these, she said, we will be like an eagle trying to fly with only one wing.”¹

To put it into context with Paul, we would all agree that life includes both suffering and rejoicing. And it is not simply one at a time. Often both are present simultaneously. That is certainly what we are seeing today. On one hand, there is the suffering and fear produced by Covid-19. On the other hand, there are so many courageous and selfless people who inspire us with their refusal to surrender to fear. Doctors and nurses and health care workers dare to put their lives at risk by helping people who have contracted this deadly virus. They put themselves in harm’s way out of an allegiance to saving people lives. They literally suffer for others. Could anything be more Christ-like?

Paul is saying we choose our focus. Will we obsess on anxiety or will you trust God? His answer is: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayers of thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

For Paul, the key to handling misfortune is prayer – constant prayer – for at least three reasons. First, prayer sharpens our awareness that we are not alone. God is with us. God is not controlling the situation or dictating the future because that would rob us of our freedom. Rather, God is with us to strengthen us in the moment and to assure us that come what may, we are perpetually in God’s care. An active prayer life creates that assurance in our soul.

Second, prayer can generate a heart of gratitude. Paul had discovered that no matter how terrible his situation, he could point to blessings. Nurturing a grateful heart drains the potency of fear and anxiety. These negative emotions cannot dominate a grateful heart.

Finally, prayer spawns a confidence that our Creator is a God of resurrection. Joy is not a hidden gem that only emerges when the wind is at our back. God draws light out of the darkest places and elicits life out of places given up for dead.

As Paul faced an uncertain future when he wrote his Letter to the Philippians, we too face an uncertain future. We have no idea how long we will need to remain confined to our homes or when this pandemic will end. However, I do know this: This crisis is screaming at us to ramp up our prayer life so that we will have the emotional confidence and the spiritual stamina to weather these unsettling days.

NOTES

1. John Philip Newell, "A Message from John Philip Newell," March 22, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God, our Hope –
who stirred dry bones to life,
who summoned Lazarus from the tomb –
you are the Resurrection and the Life.
The grave is no match for you!

In these days that seem shrouded in death,
we call out to you –
as did the prophet Ezekiel,
as did Martha of Bethany,
as did so many of our ancestors
in times when death appeared triumphant.

Not unlike Ezekiel, surveying that bone pile,
we look around and see devastation –
in reports of the virus spreading,
in reports of the economy tanking.

God – our spirits are weary;
our souls are parched.
We long for your Spirit to sweep over us:
to draw order out of chaos,
to stir dry bones to life,
to make all things new.

So, out of the depths, we cry to you,
for we trust that you hear our prayers:

For those suffering directly from Covid-19,
and those caring for ailing bodies

and afflicted spirits ...
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

For those reeling from the effects
of this outbreak,
whose uncertainty is compounded
by a lack of security or resources ...
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

For those struggling with other crises
or conditions,
which persist even now,
in the midst of a pandemic ...
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

For those who stand at the tomb and weep,
mourning the loss of life and love ...
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God, our Hope –
who declared to dry bones:
you will live again! –
You take off our sackcloth
and clothe us in joy.
So, during these Lenten days,
we cling to the hope of Easter,
we cling to the promise of eternal life,
we cling to the assurance that nothing
in all creation
can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

May your grace and love strengthen us in hope,
fill us with peace,
and sustain us in joy,
as we strive to do what is honorable,
what is commendable, what is just,
for the sake of the Gospel.
By your Spirit,
breathe new life into us
and awaken us to signs of your creative work
so that we might proclaim resurrection hope,
in these uncertain days.

This we pray in the name of your Son,
who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**