

Ever-Present Help in Trouble

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Scripture Readings: Psalm 46:1-3 & Mark 4:35-41

Psalm 46:1-3 (NIV – New International Version of the Bible)

¹God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.

²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

³though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

Mark 4:35-41 (NRSV – New Revised Standard Version of the Bible)

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Let us pray. Loving and ever-present God, we ask you to bless your Word, so that they may be for us your living Word, made alive by your Holy Spirit so that we may be fed, strengthened, encouraged, and filled with your hope, peace, joy, faith and love. Move in us to be your faithful and effective witnesses to all for the love and saving grace found in Jesus Christ. And speak through me so your message will be proclaimed, the message you have for each of us during these uncertain and challenging times. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Here we are at the end of March, and thought it has been several weeks since schools were closed and a few days ago since our state of Michigan was given the stay at home order. And on Wednesday I received word from our Bishop, David Bard, that we would not have worship services in our Methodist churches for the next following weeks, and understandably due to the coronavirus. That means we will not be having our Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday services.

I cannot remember a time when this has happened, nor can anyone that I know, even those who have been alive much longer than I have.

No doubt I have missed seeing you at church, at community and school events, at the local restaurants, in the neighborhood or other places that we run into each other. Of course, for me, and those who I visit who cannot attend church all year round, those who I regularly visit. Many of you have received my messages, including this one you're reading now, and you know I miss each of you. I also know that you miss each other.

I am holding you and everyone in prayer as we go through this together, as we weather this storm while we stay in our own homes. We are connected by God's Holy Spirit and the power of prayer.

I do thank God that there have been no major needs among our church family and friends. However, if there are any needs that we can help with, please let me know.

Finally, I want to encourage you all again to reach out to one another as I continue to, as I am able. Though not as quick as I had hoped, I still am calling each member, and will in time be calling you if I have not already. Please be patient, and in the meantime, take the time to call each other. It is times like these that we not only reach out to each other more, but actually draw closer together, though physically apart as a church.

Though I and my family are doing well as we have spent so much time together, Jamie and I have been keeping very busy, as you can guess. Jamie is still taking courses, working from home, and of course helping take care of our 3 children, though the children are more independent than ever. Of course, we still help them with their homework and all the other things parents do.

We are truly grateful that we are able to do all that we can for each other, our families, and our church family.

As we weather this storm, I have started virtual Prayer Meetings on Monday mornings at 10 a.m., and virtual Devotional & Fellowship times on Wednesday nights at 7 p.m. These are times when we can join by video and/or phone to see and talk with each other as we connect, pray and grow together. Please know you can simply call and join if you do not have a computer or smart device. Regular emails and updates are being sent about how to connect to these virtual meetings. Feel free to call me at the parsonage if you have any questions.

And now to today's Scripture readings, that remind us of several important lessons that are most helpful to remember during these times where it is not only uncertain, challenging and most concerning, but also filled with worry, fear, and stress. As I record this video on Thursday night, I have already heard the latest news about how we now have the most coronavirus cases in the world.

As most all of us have, I too have thought of all the things that would go through our minds during this pandemic, a world-wide crisis that has not only caused fearful reactions among people, but have raised concerns for all areas of life. I am also concerned about the health of others who are at risk of dying from this virus. I am concerned about whether everyone will do their best to help in the efforts to stop it from spreading. I am incredibly concerned for all the healthcare workers who are going to work with all the risks. One friend shared a picture of her husband who was outside their house to wave at their children, but he could not enter their house and will not for some time since he is treating coronavirus patients. I am also concerned how there are so many who do not have their basic needs met, as many of us actually do. I am concerned for the mental, emotional, and of course spiritual health of everyone. These are no doubt very trying times.

And with all of these concerns, and with striving do all that we can, even if it's mainly to stay at home, for those of us who are not in the healthcare profession or those working at the stores and restaurants, pharmacies, as well as those who have to keep working, driving, delivering, and doing what is allowing us to continue living and having the basic needs such as food, we always need the incredibly powerful and ministering Words of God. And from Psalm 46, verse 1, we are told, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."

How powerfully comforting it is to know and remember that God is our ever-present help in trouble, even when we are in the middle of the storm and not moving out of it yet. How incredibly assuring it is to know our God is our refuge, which also means shelter, protection, safe haven, and my favorite, sanctuary. God is our sanctuary.

God tells us in Psalm 46 that even if the earth give way, mountains fall into the sea, waters roar and foam, and mountains quake, we can be without fear.

Let me stop here and say that, even in my mind, and though I've read this verse hundreds of times, it sounds so irrational, illogical, and even absurd to be told not to fear.

I have experienced earthquakes, and I will tell you that it is eerily frightening.

I have experienced being in rough waters and storms where I knew I would have drowned if I had not made it to shore.

I have experienced being in car accidents, one in which everyone was astounded after seeing the side door where I was sitting completely smashed in by the car that hit us going about 55 MPH; astounded because and I suffered no injuries, just a very sore leg and one tiny scratch on my arm from the glass that had shattered and flew into the car.

I have been in mountains and high up in the Badlands when I was visiting with my Lakota and Kiowa Native American friends in South Dakota and Oklahoma where I almost fell to what would have been certain death when jumping through an opening in the mountains as I was journeying with my Native American friends. I had stepped out of the opening and completely focused on the majestic scenery, but when looked down and saw my feet were at the very edge of the precipice, I almost had a heart-attack. I felt the blood leave my face, and my legs got weak, and I when I finally stepped away and down, I just about collapsed.

But I have had even more frightening experiences. And the one that was most frightening for me was almost losing one of our twin boys, and twice we almost lost him. Though he had trouble breathing while in NICU, the first time I experienced the near-death experience of my son was when I was in his hospital room, watching the doctors brought our little helpless boy come back from having stopped breathing.

And the other time was while Jamie and I were at the hospital and the doctor said there wasn't much hope. We were crushed, filled with what felt worse than if the earth gave way. And my D.S. at that time, District Superintendent Tom Macaulay, was one of the first people I called to ask for prayer. He was, and still is today, our pastor, the one who pastors my family. He was at a cabinet meeting with other district superintendents and the bishop. Typically they do not leave such meetings unless there was death for which they are needed to provide their pastoral care, which usually meant the death of their own family or that of one of the pastors they oversaw. Knowing he was at such an important meeting, as well as it being a long drive, I told him not to come, but to pray and ask for the prayers of all gathered with him. If anyone, I, as a pastor, understood the power of prayer, which could be lifted up just as powerfully in person or many miles away.

However, to my utter surprise, about an hour or so later, Tom walked up to us at the hospital and embraced us, prayed with us, and stayed with us as long as he could.

I cannot fully describe how that affected me, even more powerfully than any other experience when it came understanding the power of presence and God working in and through us as God's presence in the lives of those around us, especially those who need it the most.

I had always done my best to be there for others in times of great need. However that experience impressed upon me more of how it felt for those I visited in their times of need, which then I could minister to them better with God's love and presence, truly knowing God was present for them in and through me.

So returning to today's Bible verses, and now to the disciples and Jesus on the boat as a storm raged, Jesus actually sleeping, and the disciples waked him up and cried out that they're going to die if nothing was done about it. Jesus must have been completely exhausted to have been sleeping through that. We know Jesus was fully human and fully God, so if Jesus wanted to sleep in such a way nothing could bother him, he would be one to make that happen. We could also gather that Jesus purposely slept so that would have been remembered and written in the Bible, pointing to how Jesus, who created all things, was not only at peace in such a storm, but also one to show that with him, there was no reason to truly fear.

So, I will say that though we are told, even in Psalm 46, and many other places in the Bible, including Jesus saying it many times, that we are not to fear. However, we are human and fear is a natural feeling that comes to us all in various ways and degrees, whether warranted or not, whether true or not, whether immediate, soon or in the distant future.

What we must understand is that we will have fears. If Jesus said to fear not, then that means there will be reasons for us to fear, whether it seems like we should have such fears or not. The Bible telling us not to fear means that there will be things that would cause us to fear.

And more important than trying to manage our fears ourselves, is what we do with the fears we have when it comes to our walk with and faith in Jesus Christ.

I had mentioned in one of my earlier messages that Jesus prayed and was so burdened that he said, "I am deeply grieved, even to death." It was before his arrest and his journey to the cross with all it meant, including taking on the sins of us all. He prayed fervently and his disciples to pray and stay close to him.

No one would have dared to say to Jesus at that point, where is your faith? Why do you fear? They could have said to Jesus, remember what you said to us on the boat when we were surely going to die if you didn't calm the storm? You said to us "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

However, Jesus was telling his disciples, and is telling us today, that with him we should not fear. And for me, I not only hear Jesus saying to have more faith in him than fear of anything else. More about that in a moment.

Jesus was in anguish because it was a time that he would suffer like no one would or could suffer.

So hear me carefully, Jesus though fully God was also fully human. He experienced life as we do, with all the joys as well as sadness, pains, and suffering. And when he allowed himself to be hurt, to be beaten, flogged, crucified on the cross, separated from God the Father for a time due to the sin of us all that he took upon himself, and the 3 days he'd spend in hell, sure enough Jesus was troubled, even to the point of death he said, and to the point of asking and praying 3 times for some other way to be provided, knowing it was the only way. Thank God we get to see that though Jesus was telling us not to fear, it doesn't mean we don't experience fear. But rather when we do, we turn to Jesus as the source of our help, refuge, shelter, protection, safe haven, and sanctuary

So as we have our fears, as we are now fearful of the coronavirus, as also we have all sorts of fears from wondering if we'll have enough of what we need to weather the storm that hits our health, our economy, healthcare system, country, and the entire world. We wonder if we will be able to weather this storm well enough to come through it well, in light of all who have been affected by it, even to the point of death.

Let us find or regain such faith in Christ, the faith he not only tells us to have, but offers such faith to us. Jesus is telling us to have faith in him when facing any storm. We are learning and growing spiritually all the time. And our faith is able to be strengthened, even when we feel we

are being beaten down. We are learning, just like many disciples of Christ, who have faced fears enough times that such fears no longer have the power they used to. And their faith in Christ has more power than all the fears of the world, even death.

So when we find ourselves on our knees and praying, just as Jesus prayed the Garden of Gethsemane, in anguish even to the point of death, let us also ask for those close to us pray with us, to be there for us, to reach out and stay connected, and for us not to be afraid to ask for what we want, what we need, and to then trust in God all the more. We still have to face what is going to happen. We still will live with what after-effects will ripple through our country and world. However, we can do so as we look to Jesus, trust in him, and remember what we have been told in God's Word, that Christ is our ever-present help in times of trouble.

We not only hope to feel it, hope to experience, or even hope to flex our faith enough to experience it, but rather come to truly know and believe that Jesus is our ever-present help, even when we feel fear has gripped us and won't let go.

Connect with Jesus even more through prayer, reading the Bible, listening for God, being faithful in all the ways you can, serving those close to you, doing what you can for anyone and everyone, near and far, and through every means possible. Our faith in God can continue to grow, especially during these times, so that our fears actually do fade in the presence of the one who can calm any storm, even that of death because he is the Resurrection and the Life, the giver of eternal life.

Please know that you are not only recipients of such faith in Christ, but also bearers and sharers of such faith we have in Christ.

My faith is not something I made, but God put in me and helped grow through the love and fellowship of other believers. And that continues today. And so we all must do our part in not only growing in our faith to overcome our fears, but to also help grow the faith of others by the power and grace of Jesus Christ. I know you have experienced such faith shared with one another. And I have experienced God's love and presence through so many in my life when I needed most.

During these very uncertain and stressful times, let us all turn to the One who is telling us to trust in him and have more faith in him, so much so that we cast out our fears, even when we come face to face with them. Yes, we are being told to place our faith in him, Jesus Christ, when it seems like things are going from bad to worse and the world seems to be giving way. That does not mean we do not hurt, or cry, mourn, or are in anguish. Jesus cried, Jesus hurt, Jesus mourned, Jesus got angry, Jesus experienced anguish. But he did not fear going to the cross for the sake of saving each of us. He actually looked to the cross with joy, not a worldly joy, but a godly joy, that like a mother going through the pains of childbirth endures such pain with joy for what precious gift that is to come.

So I have fears, of course. But they do not determine my life, my faith or my love for God and others. Some fears may have influence over me, and sometimes I have to ask others to pray for and with me as fears mount and press against me.

But again, let us all remember the times God has been our ever-present help, even through times when things went from bad to worse. There are times I look back and wish such events they never happened. But again, even though they did happen, such memories and fears are what Jesus tells us not to let overcome us and determine the strength of our faith in Christ.

Let not fear, like one word of criticism that often strips away all the compliments, diminish our faith in Christ. May our fears be transformed into even greater faith in Christ who has saved us and says he'll be with us always, even after life.

I'll end with sharing the rest of what happened to our twin boy who almost died twice. Most all of you know, but for those of you who have not heard what happened, our twin boy Jonathan, surprised us all after the doctor said they did done all they could, having miraculously come through by the grace of God. Today, I joke and say the only issue he has is that he whines sometimes. That always makes me smile when I make such a joke which is more of a great sigh of relief, as well as endless gratitude to God. Please know that I am fully aware that I'm telling about my family's experience that turned out well. I not share a story in which it did not turn out well in the end. But most all of you know my family's story of how my grandfather, who I never met, was martyred when my mother was only 6 years old at the end of the Korean War in which he was killed for not rejecting his faith in Jesus.

What did that do to my faith when I heard that upon deciding to leave a career in engineering to enter the ministry? It helped me overcome some of the greatest fears I had boldly faced them because I knew that if my grandfather possessed such faith in Christ as he chose to die in being faithful to Christ, that I could surely live by the same kind of faith that Christ also offers me and every follower as I simply live for him.

So my friends in Christ, please remember that God is our ever-present help in trouble, including in these times we are facing. Jesus Christ came not only to help us with our fears, but save us so that we could truly live abundant lives, living not by fear but by faith in him who has conquered the world and even death. Amen.