

Do Not Worry: Preaching in a Pandemic

Sarah Chancellor-Watson

Philippians 4:4-9

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⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[1] these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Well, they certainly never offered a preaching in the midst of a pandemic class in seminary. Pastors often complain about all the practical things we weren't taught in seminary, but I think I'll give the good folks in Austin a break on this one, because who could have ever predicted, who would have ever thought that we would be living in such interesting times. I do want to thank everyone in the church, our elders, our staff, and other leaders for stepping up in so many ways and for your patience and understanding, as we all are figuring things out as we go and doing our best each day.

I thought we'd take a short break from Lent today and go off topic and reflect on these words from the Psalms and from the Apostle Paul. They are words that I have needed to hear this past week and today. One thing I was taught in my preaching class is that often we pastors first preach to ourselves. The message that the Holy Spirit places on our hearts is a message that we need as well. So, I'm writing these words for myself as well as for all of you who will be listening to them today.

If things were a little unclear just a week ago, there is no doubt now, that what we are living through is unprecedented for many of us in our lifetimes. This is a scary, frightening, and anxious time, so the question for us to now ponder is how do we as Christians deal with and handle our fears and anxieties in such times? How can we even read, much less live out, these

words of the scripture that say, “do not worry”? I don’t know about you all, but I have worried a lot this past week and half. Everyday has brought more bad news, more recommended restrictions on our activity. It’s truly dizzying trying to keep up with it all. There are many ways we can cope with this reality in our lives, some more helpful than others. What I want to clarify for us as people of faith is that these words we read from Paul aren’t meant to discount our fear or give us an excuse to bury our heads in the sand. Church historian, Kate Bowler talks about the dangerous territory we can find ourselves in when we don’t acknowledge and properly process through these very real fears. She says, “[I’m] hearing lots of people defining “fear” as the opposite of “positive thinking.” As a historian of positive thinking and Jesus-fan, I beg you: Speak honestly. Acknowledge reality. Fear is not the act of saying “negative” things out loud. You can still be faithful and afraid. When we are afraid, our culture tells us that if we say it out loud that we are just being “negative.” I can tell you frankly that that is absolutely not true. Tell the truth. Fear is real for all of us and one of our strongest tools to combat it is communication. Let’s not make honesty the enemy. We have each other. And we can handle a little reality with a lot of love.”¹

The early Christians no doubt lived in a reality full of fear. Any moment on the whim of some far-off emperor they could be rounded up, imprisoned, and killed. What Paul is advocating in his letter to the church community in Philippi is bringing those fears and worries to God. Prayer is where we can tell the truth, where we can be honest and real and vulnerable with our Creator, our Protector, our Comforter. Just as God was with the Church centuries ago, taking care of them, God is with us now and always. Paul also advises the Philippians to think on the things that are true, honorable, just, pure, and pleasing. So maybe for us that means we that cut back on our dosage of 24-hour news and social media feeds. Take time to care for our spirits and our hearts. There is a real need to remain informed and knowledgeable about the events happening all around us, but we don’t have to bathe in it all day. I urge all of us to find some balance and prioritize our mental and spiritual health in the midst of caring for our physical health. And let us also remember that God is bigger than any of us and any of these circumstances.

One way that I am finding that balance myself is noticing all the ways the folks are finding connection and fostering community, bringing a little bit of light into the darkness. From a high school choir singing “somewhere over the rainbow” over video chat, to people putting out Christmas lights, to neighbors in Italy and New York City joining together to sing songs and play music from apartment windows and balconies, all around there are shining examples of the goodness of humanity. Somewhat ironically, I think that these social distancing measures have caused many of us to see just how interconnected and dependent

¹ Bowler, Kate. Instagram and Twitter post on March 19, 2020.

we are on one another. From the President of the United States to the guy working in the grocery store stock room, we are realizing just how much we *need* each other. That's kind of what Jesus has been trying to teach us all along. There is no them, there is only us. Paul, in his words to "keep on doing the things that you have learned, and received, and heard, and seen," is teaching us that no matter the circumstances, we are to keep on being the Body of Christ in this world, we are to keep on loving God with our whole heart, mind, and strength, and to keep loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Right now loving our neighbors as ourselves means that we practice social distancing, that we do these hard things now, to give our health care workers a fighting chance to care for those who will get sick and to save as many lives as possible. I've always advocated and believed that our faith is an embodied one, and that coming together, physically, is an important part of our life together. We all have to rethink now how we can still stay connected, live out our faith together, care for another, worship together, learn together, while being physically apart. On Wednesday evening I got a taste of what this new life together is going to look like for the time being. I got to meet with our Young Adults and Families group for our weekly PINTS bible study and discussion time over Zoom, a video conferencing tool, that I'm sure many of you have already been using and hearing about a lot over the past week. 19 of us were able to still gather, to check in on each other, to continue to read the book we have been reading together since September, and to still be a community. In our reading, the author of our book², Rachel Held Evans, talks about one of the oldest and largest living organisms in the world, a forest of quaking aspen trees that has been growing for the past 80,000 years and spanning over 100 acres, known as Pando, Latin for "I spread."³ Now at first glance these trees look like any other forest, but each tree that is a part of Pando is genetically identical and shares a vast underground root system. The metaphor reminded me powerfully that the ties that bind us run just as deep. The tethers of the Holy Spirit are not so easily broken, and I have been so encouraged already from all the stories I am hearing of how you all are continuing to cultivate community, calling one another, and checking in on each other. So let us continue to reach out to one another with intentionality over the coming days and weeks.

Finally, perhaps the strangest piece of advice Paul gives in this passage is to rejoice, to rejoice in the Lord always. Now, it's easy to rejoice when we are in the midst of joyful circumstances, but when that joy is harder to find so is our ability to rejoice. But that is what we are called to do. We are called to tap into the deeper well of joy that our faith gives us, to seek out all the

² Evans, Rachel Held. *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*. Nelson Books. 2015.

³ <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/pando-the-trembling-giant>

ways that God is caring for us and providing for us and give thanks to God for his faithfulness. While I want to acknowledge that this is a truly difficult time and that many of us feel a deep sense of grief over the loss of community and communal life as normal, I also want to ask us: Where can we see the gifts that this new normal, this new way of life can give us? What opportunities are we being presented with? Maybe some of us needed to slow down the pace of our lives. Maybe we needed to be shown just how vital some of our lowest paid workers are and how necessary access to basic health care is to the health of the whole community.

So my prayer for us, in addition to asking God for strength, healing, guidance, and grace in these days, is that we not forget the lessons we have learned and will learn in this time. That when we come back together, in person, we will come back with our communal ties strengthened, with more kindness and love in our hearts. Life may never be same after this, but maybe not all of that is a bad thing. May God use us in this time to transform our hearts and minds, our church and our community.

Friends, please take care of yourselves and each other. To all those who are watching this from Lambeth House, we love you and we are with you in spirit and we will continue to keep you all close in our prayers!