

“Holding Faith, Together”

Matthew 11:28-30

March 15, 2020

Many months ago, when I was choosing scripture passages and a theme for this season in the life of the church, there was much that I did not know about the moment in which we would find ourselves this morning. I had never heard the word Coronavirus and could not have found the city of Wuhan if you gave me a map of China. I did not know March of 2020 would bring the routine lives of so many on our planet to a screeching halt. I was not planning to preach in a nearly empty sanctuary on this third Sunday in Lent. And yet, when I chose this scripture and selected this theme, I did know that these words would speak to us. I did know that many among us would come to worship carrying heavy burdens of every type. I did know that news headlines would carry grim messages and that individual lives would be marked by the sting of grief, the pain of worry, the shock of difficult diagnoses, the sense of loneliness, the struggle for meaning. I knew that these words of scripture and this theme of clearing room in our lives for the presence of God would speak to us now just as it would have last month or last year. The gift of these grounding faith practices and sturdy, built-to-last words is that they offer us steady guidance no matter the uncertainties that assail us. And, oh how they have assailed us.

This week, there were more than a few moments when all of the *unknowns* became more than I could handle. Constant news alerts. Rising case numbers. Collapsing market numbers. Ever more drastic and aggressive measures. Alarming predictions. And, here in our small corner of the universe—runs on hand sanitizer, cleaning wipes, and, curiously, toilet tissue; the domino-like cancelation of sporting events (and then whole sports leagues), colleges and school systems, large gatherings of every type, and finally many of our neighboring congregations. I found myself lost in a sea

of uncertainty and fear. I prayed for wisdom.

It was then that I heard a voice. It was not the voice of God, but it was the voice of a powerful leader. Her name is Anna of Arendelle and if you haven't heard her voice you need to turn away from your preferred news channel to Disney+. Anna is a leading character in Disney's *Frozen* franchise and a rockstar in our house. In fact, before I knew the word Coronavirus I knew that we were having a *Frozen* birthday party at our house yesterday to celebrate our new three-year-old and *Frozen* fanatic. At least the weather cooperated. A couple of weeks ago, still singing the songs from our theater viewing in January, we downloaded *Frozen II*; what that means in our house is that we've all seen parts of the film six-hundred and eighty-four times. And, in that movie, Anna gives us these words, this phrase, a mantra that hit me with the force of revelation this week—*do the next right thing*.

Could it really be that simple? Could it be that we who are weary with the heavy burdens of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear are called to find a little rest in knowing that we can only do one thing at a time? If there are two clear conclusions that can be drawn from this moment in our world, they are that we are fragile, and we are interconnected. When any single one of us chooses to do the next right thing, their action impacts all of us. Martin Luther King called it an inescapable network of mutuality...a single garment of destiny. None of us needs to be reminded of the truth in those words on a day like this. In our fragility, in our vulnerability, in our uncertainty, here is what we can try. Do the next right thing. The one that is right in front of you. You can't see the top of the staircase right now, but the next stair is just ahead of you. Take that step. That looks like breathing in the grace of God in the moments that you are overwhelmed. It looks like finding moments

of restoration and rest. It looks like speaking gently to those around you and respecting the heaviness that we're all feeling. It looks like giving yourself the grace to laugh (here's one: Two silk worms had a race. They ended up in a tie). Read a book or go for a walk or watch a movie. It looks like Sabbath moments that keep us grounded in God's grace. Sometimes, the next right thing is a nap, and that's okay too. Fatigue can so easily give birth to fear. Accept the rest that Jesus invites us to this morning. Trade-in your heavy load for a lighter yoke.

Now, believe me when I say that Second Presbyterian Church is already and will continue to take steps to care for our congregation, our neighbors, and the broader community. I do believe that this moment calls us to draw on the deep wells of compassion that God has offered to us. I firmly believe what an infectious disease physician in our congregation said to me this week: that people of faith have a significant role to play in responding to the needs that have and will emerge. And we will respond with loving care and generous hearts *because* of the steady presence of Christ who equips us to serve. I truly believe that this world will see the tremendous and transformative impact of those who know the meaning of unconditional love and live it even when the temptation is to turn inward, self-protect, hoard necessities, demonize others, or lash out in frustration. May the church, having received Christ's words of assurance, rise up to meet this call.

Another voice I heard often this week was that of Sarah Illingworth, our new (but now very experienced) Communications Director. Late Wednesday evening I read an email Sarah sent with the subject, "Crisis Management." She gave me lots of wonderful wisdom, but the one that leapt off the page at me was this—"Remember to say what we *do* know." It is the same wisdom I heard from experts in speaking to children in these times, like Sam's kindergarten teacher Mrs. Herris who responded with such tenderness on Thursday when a student raised his hand and with a worried look asked, "Will you still be able to read us stories every day?" Say what you do know. Yes—I will absolutely find a way.

I do not know what happens next. I have no clairvoyant vision of the future and no prophecy to share today. But, following the sages surrounding me and the Spirit that enlivens me, I will tell you what I do know.

I know that the God who is sovereign over the universe and numbers the hairs on our head is a God of compassion, love, and grace—a God who is faithful in all circumstances and whose promise to us is life.

I know that you, and I, and all the beloved souls on this planet belong to God and are held in the loving arms of God.

I also know that we belong to each other and that God has given us a charge to live in ways that honor this truth. Jesus Christ showed us what this belonging means and gave us the model for selfless compassion and sacrificial love.

I know that, while sanctuaries can be emptied and programs can be canceled, the Body of Christ that is the church is yet alive with the Spirit of God. You see, we are resurrection people. We know something about death. We know how to respond to the forces of death—like those quarantined Sicilians playing violins and singing to each other from their balconies, we will not be silenced by fear or driven to our worst in this moment. We will sing of a God who defeats fear and death with the power of love.

I know, I know deep in my heart, that the power of love is stronger than all that works against it; that it is always darkest just before dawn; that new life begins in the valley of death's shadow. I know that we are held in the tender grace of God.

I know that, together, we can do the next right thing. And the one after that. And, no matter how long it takes or how deep the darkness, together we will walk each other into the light.

One of my favorite creeds from the Iona Community in Scotland includes this line, we affirm God's goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong. Beloved, here is what I

know—the goodness of God is the heart of who we are, it is more planted more deeply than any affliction we may encounter, it is more contagious than any virus, it is our pathway through this barren land. Cling to the truth you have always trusted. Hold on to the faith that has carried us this far. God is with us. Amen.