

**First Presbyterian Church of Rouses Point
Order of Virtual Worship - March 29, 2020**

Let us pray:

Greetings

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Hope in the Lord for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is great power to redeem. Let us worship God, and begin seeking pardon for our sins.

WE ASK THIS IN THE NAME OF JESUS, OUR SAVIOR WHO TAUGHT US TO PRAY, SAYING: OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BY THY NAME.....

PRAYER OF PREPARATION FOR WORSHIP:

Let us pray: God of all Creation, we seek your presence and help with us in this time of worship when we cannot come together in one place. Encourage and inspire us today so that we might provide encouragement and hope to others. In Christ's name we pray. Amen

***Charge and Benediction**

**PARENTS- ONLINE CHILDREN SERMON RESOURCES:
<https://sermons4kids.com/>**

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**In God's holy presence let us we confess that we are sinners.
O Lord hear our silent confession: _____
Forgive us Lord for the wrong we have done and the right we have failed to do. Accept our repentance, cleanse us from our sin, and empower us anew to love as we are loved by You for the sake of Jesus your Son, our Savior. Amen**

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Old Testament: Ezekiel 37:1-14

New Testament: John 11: 35-44

Sermon "Be Encouraged"

You are invited to say the Apostles Creed with me.

EZEKIEL 37:1-14 AND JOHN 11:35-44

TODAY WE ARE IN AN UNUSUAL TYPE OF EXILE. FOR MOST OF US IT IS NOT FROM OUR COUNTRY OR HOMES, BUT ONE ANOTHER.

MANY FEEL LONELY, OTHERS ANXIOUS OR DISCOURAGED. AND THOSE AMONG US WHO ARE IN POSITION CONSIDERED ESSENTIAL, MAY BE EXHAUSTED. OTHERS MAY BE WORRIED ABOUT CATCHING THE VIRUS FROM THOSE THEY MUST HAVE CONTACT WITH.

THESE ARE UNEASY AND UNCERTAIN TIMES, THUS WE ARE CHALLENGED TO SEEK GOD'S HELP AND TO ACCEPT IT.

HERE IS A STORY ABOUT THE ALTERNATIVE, I FOUND YEARS AGO ONLINE:

ONE DAY THE DEVIL LOOKED AROUND HIS WAREHOUSE AND REALIZED HE HAD A LOT OF STOCK, SO HE DECIDED TO HOLD A SIDEWALK SALE TO GET RID OF SOME OF THE EXCESS.

MOST OF THE "TOOLS" THAT WERE FOR SALE- LIKE: JEALOUSY, PRIDE, DECEIT, LUST, RAGE, AND LYING, WENT FAIRLY CHEEP, AS THERE WAS ALREADY AN OVERABUNDANCE OF SUCH ITEMS ON THE WORLD MARKET.

HOWEVER ONE ITEM WAS OFFERED FOR ONLY A SLIGHT DISCOUNT, AS IT WAS A VERY SPECIAL TOOL - CALLED DISCOURAGEMENT.

WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE PRICE DIFFERENCE, SATAN EXPLAINED: "ITS MORE USEFUL TO ME THAN ANY OTHER TOOL.

WHEN I CAN'T BRING SOMEONE DOWN WITH ANY OF THE OTHER TOOLS, I USE DISCOURAGEMENT, BECAUSE SO FEW PEOPLE REALIZE IT BELONGS TO ME."

DISCOURAGEMENT OR HOPELESSNESS CAN INDEED BRING DOWN INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS ALIKE.

THIS IS EVEN TRUE AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE FAITH, SINCE IN ITS STRONGEST FORM, DISCOURAGEMENT CAN CAUSE PEOPLE TO EVEN GIVE UP ON GOD.

FOR EXAMPLE GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE TIME OF EZEKIEL WERE ENDURING A PERIOD OF GREAT DISCOURAGEMENT DURING THEIR EXILE.

THE LAMENT OF GOD'S PEOPLE OVER THEIR SEEMINGLY HOPELESS SITUATION HAD BEHIND IT THE SILENT QUESTION- "WHY SHOULD WE CONTINUE TO TRUST IN THE LORD? "

NATURALLY THE LORD GOD WAS WELL AWARE OF THE PEOPLE'S DESPAIR, AS OUR OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGE TELLS US IN VERSE ELEVEN.

THERE, GOD SAYS TO HIS PROPHET: "MORTAL, THESE BONES ARE THE WHOLE HOUSE OF ISRAEL. THEY SAY OUR BONES ARE DRIED UP, AND OUR HOPE IS LOST; WE ARE COMPLETELY CUT OFF."

THE BONES GOD IS SPEAKING ABOUT WERE SEEN BY EZEKIEL IN A VISION, WHERE THE HOLY SPIRIT TOOK HIM TO THE FLOOR OF A VALLEY, MOST LIKELY AN OLD BATTLE FIELD.

THERE THE PROPHET SAW THE BROKEN AND SCATTERED BONES OF UNBURIED DEAD. SURELY THAT SCENE PRESENTED A VIVID PICTURE OF THE HOPELESSNESS ISRAEL WAS EXPERIENCING..

BUT EVEN AS EZEKIEL'S EYES BEHELD THIS DISCOURAGING SIGHT, HIS EARS HEARD A HOPEFUL SOUND.

THE SOUND OF HOPE CAME IN THE QUESTION THE LORD PRESENTED TO HIS PROPHET, ASKING: "... CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION MIGHT SEEM OBVIOUS, AND YET THE ANSWER IS NOT AS SIMPLE AS SOME MAY THINK.

ON THE ONE HAND, HUMAN REASON WOULD SAY- "NO WAY"; BUT ON THE OTHER HAND, WE MUST CONSIDER THE CHARACTER OF THE QUESTIONER.

FOR THE ONE WHO ASKED "CAN THESE BONES LIVE?" IS THE LORD OF LIFE, THE CREATOR OF ALL, THE GOD FOR WHOM ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.

THEREFORE EZEKIEL'S ANSWER, "ONLY YOU KNOW LORD", SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD AS A REFERENCE TO GOD'S WILL

BEHIND IT IS WHETHER GOD IS WILLING TO BRING DRY BONES BACK TO LIFE, RATHER THAN WONDERING IF GOD IS ABLE.

NOTICE-THE LORD RESPONDS TO THE PROPHET'S STATEMENT OF FAITH BY CHALLENGING HIM TO ACT UPON HIS EXPRESSION OF TRUST THAT GOD CAN DO THE IMPOSSIBLE.

THUS EZEKIEL IS COMMANDED TO- PROPHECY, SPEAK, PREACH- TO THE DRIED-OUT REMAINS OF THOSE MANY INDIVIDUALS KNOWN ONLY TO GOD.

AND OUT OF HIS OBEDIENCE BONES RISE FROM THE VALLEY FLOOR AND ARE CLOTHED WITH SINEW, FLESH, AND SKIN.

NEXT FROM THE FOUR WINDS, IN A KIND OF REENACTMENT OF GOD BREATHING LIFE INTO THE FIRST HUMAN BEING AS RECORDED IN GENESIS TWO, EZEKIEL IS COMMANDED TO SEND THE BREATH OF LIFE INTO THE NEWLY RE-FORMED PEOPLE.

THAT SCENE CERTAINLY MUST HAVE BEEN AN AMAZING THING TO BEHOLD!

HOWEVER, IT WAS IN GOD'S EXPLANATION OF THE VISION THAT THE TRUE IMPORTANCE OF THE PASSAGE IS REVEALED.

THE LORD, BEGINNING IN VERSE ELEVEN, TELLS EZEKIEL THAT HE HAS HEARD THE LAMENT OF HIS PEOPLE AND KNOWS THEY HAVE LOST HOPE.

GOD THEN COMMANDS THE PROPHET TO CALL HIS PEOPLE BACK TO FAITH IN THEIR GOD, THE LIVING GOD.

THEY SHOULD TRUST GOD TO FULFILL HIS PROMISE THAT THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WILL, ONE DAY, RETURN TO THE PROMISED LAND.

GOD FURTHER GIVES THEM THE ASSURANCE OF NEW LIFE BY PROCLAIMING THROUGH THE PROPHET, HE WILL PUT HIS SPIRIT WITHIN THEM.

THUS THE PEOPLE ARE CALLED TO HAVE FAITH, AND TO HOLD ONTO THE HOPE THAT THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE LORD, WILL ONCE MORE BE EVIDENT, IN THEIR LIVES

IN A SIMILAR WAY THE SISTERS OF LAZARUS- MARY AND MARTHA NEEDED ENCOURAGEMENT.

AFTER ALL, THEY HAD CALLED UPON JESUS TO COME AND HEAL THEIR BROTHER, BUT HE ARRIVED TOO LATE.

AND FOR THEM THEIR BROTHER'S DEATH LED NOT ONLY TO GREAT GRIEF BUT ALSO UNCERTAINTY.

REMEMBER, BACK THEN, JEWISH WOMEN COULD NOT HOLD PROPERTY OR WORK FOR A LIVING.

OWNERSHIP WAS IN THE HANDS OF MALE RELATIVES. THUS THEIR SITUATION WAS DEVASTING IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.

BUT JESUS SAID TO MARTHA IN JOHN 11:25- "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE".

THIS WAS A CALL TO FAITH, TO TRUST IN GOD, EVEN WHEN THINGS LOOKED HOPELESS.

REMEMBER, THAT PARTICULAR TITLE FOR JESUS IS ONE THE SAVIOR GAVE TO HIMSELF.

HE USED IT WHEN HE SPOKE A WORD OF COMFORT AND HOPE TO MARTHA, WHILE CALLING HER TO HAVE FAITH.

THEN, DURING THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN MARY AND JESUS , WE ARE GIVEN THE SHORTEST VERSE IN SCRIPTURE: "JESUS WEPT".

BUT WHY DID HE WEEP WHEN HE WAS ABOUT TO BRING FRIEND BACK TO LIFE?

JESUS HE WEPT, WE MAY IMAGINE-BECAUSE LAZARUS HAD DIED, AND FOR HIS GRIEVING SISTERS.

PERHAPS HE ALSO WEPT FOR THE LACK OF FAITH OF THE PEOPLE, OR OVER THE REALITY OF SIN AND DEATH, OR FOR A REASON WE CANNOT IMAGINE.

BUT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE STORY HOWEVER, IS NOT THAT JESUS WEPT, FOR THAT WAS NOT THE SAVIOR'S LAST WORD.

INSTEAD HIS WEeping WAS FOLLOWED BY A PRAYER, AND THEN THE COMMAND: "LAZARUS COME FORTH".

AND THE FINAL WORDS OF TODAY'S READING SUM UP THE MEANING OF JESUS AS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE- WHEN HE SAID: "UNBIND HIM AND LET HIM GO."

NICE WORDS, AND A HAPPY ENDING FOR THOSE INVOLVED IN THE BIBLE STORY.

BUT WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH US IN OUR ORDINARY LIVES, AS WELL AS DURING THIS EXTRAORDINARY AND UNCERTAIN TIME?

CONSIDER THIS- JESUS UNBINDS US NOT FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF PHYSICAL DEATH BUT FROM ITS LIMITATIONS.

THE LAYMAN'S COMMENTARY EXPLAINS OUR UNBINDING SAYING: "THE LIFE JESUS GIVES TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIM IS A GIFT THAT PHYSICAL DEATH CANNOT TAKE AWAY OR DAMAGE."

ANOTHER WAY TO LOOK AT HOW JESUS IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE FOR US IS- TO THINK ABOUT PHYSICAL LIFE AS A WAY TO DESCRIBE OUR PRESENCE ON EARTH- THAT IS:

THE FUNCTION OF THE BRAIN, THE BEATING OF THE HEART, THE ABILITY TO BREATHE, THE NEED FOR FOOD, WATER, SHELTER, & TO OTHERWISE RELATE TO OUR ENVIRONMENT.

ETERNAL LIFE, AS ANOTHER PASTOR DESCRIBES IT, IS "BEING ABLE TO RELATE, TO CORRESPOND WITH GOD, HIMSELF."

ETERNAL LIFE, IN THIS SENSE IS NOT JUST SOMETHING WE GO TO WHEN WE DIE, BUT IT IS ALSO PART OF OUR EARTHLY EXPERIENCE.

IT IS THE WAY JESUS UNBINDS US FROM THE STING OF DEATH AND FREES US TO LIVE AND TO DIE IN CONFIDENCE, THAT HE IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE FOR US.

YES, JESUS BECOMES LIFE FOR US AS WE DIE TO SIN AND OUR OLD SELF AND ARE RAISED TO NEW LIFE IN CHRIST BY OUR BAPTISM.

AND THEN OUR CONFESSION OF CHRIST AS LORD AND SAVIOR CONFIRMS THE EFFECTS OF WHAT GOD'S SPIRIT HAS DONE FOR US IN THE SACRAMENT.

FOR BAPTISM IS A SIGN OF JESUS' DEATH FOR OUR SAKES, AS WELL AS HIS RESURRECTION, AND POINTS TO OUR OWN.

A METAPHOR THAT POINTS TO CHRIST AS THE SOURCE OF OUR ASSURANCE IN LIFE AND IN DEATH, CAN BE FOUND IN A PICTURE OF A LIGHTHOUSE.

IN PARTICULAR, ENVISION A PAINTING OF A LIGHT HOUSE THAT IS BEING BATTERED BY FIERCE WAVES DURING A STORM.

THE STRONG WINDS ARE LIFTING THE WAVES UP ABOVE THE ROCKY SHORELINE TO SLAP AGAINST THE LIGHTHOUSE, IS IF IN AN EFFORT TO PULL IT INTO THE SEA BELOW.

IF ONE WERE TO STAND ON THE UPPER LEDGE AND LOOK OUT INTO THE SEA DURING THIS STORM- EVEN THE BRAVEST PERSON MIGHT BECOME FEARFUL.

HOWEVER IN THIS PICTURE, A MAN STANDS OUTSIDE AT THE TOP OF THE LIGHTHOUSE FACING THE LAND.

THEREFORE, IN SPITE OF THE THREATENING WIND AND WAVES BEHIND HIM THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER IS SECURE.

HE IS PICTURED WITH HANDS IN HIS POCKETS AND A CALM EXPRESSION ON HIS FACE, NOT IN DENIAL OF THE STORM, BUT IN ASSURANCE OF HIS SAFETY.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST IS INTENDED TO PROVIDE A SIMILAR ASSURANCE.

HE IS THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE, HE IS OUR SHELTER, ONE THAT EVEN DEATH ITSELF CANNOT SNATCH US FROM.

WE ARE THEREFORE CALLED AGAIN TO LOOK NOT TOWARDS THE CHAOS OUR LIVES BUT TO LOOK TOWARDS JESUS.

WE ARE ENCOURAGED BY THE PROMISE THAT WE ARE SAFE IN THE PALM OF GOD'S HAND, NO MATTER WHAT.

AND REMEMBER, WE NEED NOT SOCIAL DISTANCE FROM THE LORD, IN FACT THE CLOSER WE DRAW TO GOD, THE BETTER.

CHRISTIANS, HOWEVER ARE CALLED TO DO MORE THAN SIMPLY STAND AND LOOK, WE ARE ALSO CALLED AND EMPOWERED BY GOD'S SPIRIT BE A LIGHT TO OTHERS.

WE ARE CALLED TO SWING OPEN THE LIGHTHOUSE DOOR, AND KEEP THE BEACON STRONG SO THAT OTHERS WILL BE DRAWN TO IT AND ENTER INSIDE.

THIS IS HARDER TO DO WHEN MOST OF US ARE STUCK AT HOME. BUT PRAYER FOR OTHERS IS ONE WAY TO DO THIS.

ALSO WE CAN POST ON SOCIAL MEDIA THINGS THAT BUILD UP AND ENCOURAGE RATHER THAN WORDS OR PICTURES THAT TEAR DOWN AND DISCOURAGE.

AND, WE CAN SHINE CHRIST'S LIGHT BY THANKING THOSE WHO MUST WORK IN PUBLIC DURING THIS PANDEMIC.

A SIMPLE WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO THOSE WE ENCOUNTER WHEN WE MUST GO OUT, OR SPEAK TO ON THE PHONE, IS ANOTHER WAY TO LIFT OTHERS UP.

FINALLY, LET US NOT FORGET POSTAL MAIL AS WELL, A CARD OR PERSONAL NOTE IS ANOTHER WAY TO SHINE THE LIGHT ON OTHERS.

AND REMEMBER, SOMETIMES THE BEST WAY TO ENCOURAGE OURSELVES IS TO TRY TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS.

I WILL CLOSE WITH A PRAYER ADAPTED FROM THE BOOK OF COMMON WORSHIP OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH-USA.

LET US PRAY:

ETERNAL GOD, OUR HOPE AND HELP IN TIMES OF TROUBLE:

HELP US TO FEEL YOUR PRESENCE.
BE OUR MEDICINE WHEN WE ARE ILL,
BE OUR STRENGTH WHEN WE NEED HELP,
BE OUR PEACE WHEN WE ARE AFRAID,
BE OUR COMPANION WHEN WE ARE LONELY,
BE OUR COMFORT WHEN WE ARE SAD,
LIGHT OUR WAY THROUGH THIS DARKNESS.

WE ASK THIS NOT ONLY FOR OURSELVES BUT FOR THE WHOLE WORLD.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS, OUR SAVIOR WE PRAY. AMEN

SERMON SUMMARY EZEKIEL 37:1-15 AND JOHN 11:35-44

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THANKS BE TO GOD. AMEN