

Sermon 5 17 20

“What a long strange trip it’s been!” What will our memories be of this quarantine time? And it’s not over yet! Brad and I have been blessed with the arrival of our son, Andy. He has been so helpful!

As many of you probably know, I was cursed with a staph infection that I probably caught from my CPAP. A lesson for us all - CLEAN THAT THING! A small portion of my face looks like I caught leprosy! I wrote this sermon, but as you can tell, Brad is delivering it. I am having a hard time shaking this, but I will. After three visits to the Emergency Room and loads of antibiotics, and lots of rest, I am finally wrestling this thing to the ground. It’s slow going, but have no fear — the ER assured me that I am not a secret carrier of Covid 19. And another lesson to us all — if you feel sick - lie down - and don’t get up until you feel well!

Now on to our sermon.

We have so much going on in our world these days to scare us. Every day there are more and more reasons to live in fear. Having God in our lives teaches us and supports us so that we don’t need to live in fear. God loves us. Whatever happens, whatever we may be afraid of, GOD LOVES US - UNCONDITIONALLY! AND THAT MEANS SOMETHING!

We are often reminded, with our New Testament readings, just how very intelligent the Apostle Paul was. He was this supposedly bandy-legged, bowlegged, short balding guy who could PREACH! And preach he did. Take our first reading from Acts: Paul stood in front of the Aeropagus in Athens and proceeded to declare to the people of Athens just how very intelligent they were. The Aeropagus was a very prominent spot, in the center of the temples, used by speakers to make a point. Paul picked the perfect spot to compliment a highly intelligent audience. Smart move!

He praised the Athenians for being religious, and not only religious, but intelligently religious. He even praised them for worshipping an “unknown God.” (I guess they covered *all* their bases with that!) Well, Paul explained to them exactly who and what their “unknown God” was! That was Paul’s “in.” And he did it beautifully, by expanding the possibilities of their “unknown God” to include a God so vast and great as to be an “unknowable God,” a god beyond their imaginings. This God could not be limited to shrines made by human hands. This “unknown” God was so powerful that this God didn’t need sacrifices from humanity, but was so vast that all life and breath everywhere came from this God.

And then Paul suggested that this “unknown” God could be searched for and found and communicated with, because, as grand and vast as this god is, this god *“is not far from each one of us.”* As

one of their own Greek poets had said, “in him we live and move and have our being.” That was Paul quoting the Greek poet Epimenides of Knossos who lived six or seven hundred years earlier.

He suggested that this god was a god that one might even possibly have a personal relationship with, especially if we were willing to consider ourselves this god’s children or “offspring.”

Now, could people be the offspring of a god made of silver or gold or stone? No. We are the offspring of a living God who raised the one who will judge us from the dead - Jesus. Well, Paul cleverly brought it all back around to Jesus, didn’t he? He brought it back to Jesus who came back from the dead.

And I’m sure the Athenians loved it! He took their own mythology and interwove it with the story of Christ, to make Christ real for them - so Christ could be *their* salvation.

And then we hear from Peter. And what we are inclined to forget is that Peter and Paul - all the apostles - were writing to encourage new Christians - recently converted Christians in these newly created baby churches who were vulnerable and frequently under attack for their beliefs. We don’t even know what that’s like! Peter and Paul were trying to encourage these fledgling Christians. The attacks on our faith today are much more subtle. Society, all of our communications tell us that if you’re a Christian you can’t be very sophisticated or savvy. Or else we are told that if you’re

Christian, you must be super-Christian, up to your earlobes in rules and regulations and if at all possible, outdoing your neighbors in so-called “Christian virtue,” which nine times out of ten has nothing to do with virtue at all, but a lot to do with judging, and absolutely NOTHING to do with love.

Think of the irony of Peter’s question from his epistle, “Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” Oh, watch ‘em line up! But consider Peter’s promise, “even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.” This blessing carried weight. Members of the Early Church were often punished for following God’s laws. “Do not be intimidated.” That exhortation meant something. We live in a society that is willing to allow for Christian thought. But do we exercise that thought? Really? How many of our children would just as soon not talk about what they believe in? They’d rather not be noticed for that. Better to be noticed for athletics or math scores or good spelling!

No, we don’t suffer for our faith. But we are easily intimidated. The world chips away at us. This time of social distancing can be an opportunity for us to sit back and review how we live our faith in the world. What does it mean to be a courageous Christian?

In our Gospel today Jesus promises us that he gives us the Spirit of truth, that is, the Holy Spirit, and will not leave us orphaned. He is both our father and our brother. He promises us

that he will return. Do we believe him? “Because I live, you also will live.” Do we believe him? Do we believe that if we love Jesus, we will be loved right back? Do we believe that Jesus can and will reveal himself to us - over and over again?

I believe that we can believe in Jesus Christ, even more today than yesterday, even more because of what we are going through today than ever before. We can recite the Nicene Creed together - again - with joy, every single Sunday and believe every single word of it.