

SONGS FOR OUR TIME: WHEN PARALYSIS SETS IN; PSALM 27:1, 4-9, 1 COR. 1:10-18; 1.26.2020; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CH.

In the movie *Just Mercy* one of the inmates on death row, Herbert, a Vietnam veteran and medal-winning infantryman, who saved others' lives, when he came home, could not save his own because of severe PTSD. Herbert committed a crime for which he received the death penalty but which, given the nature of the crime and his mental condition, not to mention his valorous service, should have lessened his punishment.

The film is based on the true story of Bryan Stephenson, a Harvard educated attorney who is black and discovers his vocation representing death row prisoners most of whom are black. In the story, Herbert receives a letter announcing his execution date which induces paralyzing fear. His neighbor on death row is an inmate by the name of Johnny D. framed for a murder he did not commit.

When Herbert gets the letter and starts to hyper-ventilate, Johnny D. leads him through a deep breathing exercise from the cell next door; Johnny D. takes a deep breath, Herbert takes a deep breath, eventually Johnny D. guides Herbert to an imagined place looking up from the soft floor of a pine forest into the blue Alabama sky. Herbert relaxes, his fear subsides.

The psalmist today leads any of us who are fearful through a deep breathing exercise: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Should I fear anyone? The Lord is a fortress protecting my life. Should I be afraid of anything? I have asked one thing from the Lord – to live in the Lord's house all the days of my life, to see the Lord's beauty and constantly adore his temple. He will shelter me in his own dwelling during troubling times; he will hide me in a secret place in his own tent; he will set me up high, safe on a rock. Now my head is higher than the enemies surrounding me...."

I want to talk about fear and fragmentation today; we live in an age of fear and anxiety that polarizes the nation. There is nothing more toxic, destructive, and counter to a life of faith and shared community than fear.

Fear does serve an evolutionary purpose; it puts the body into fight or flight mode. But when we are inordinately afraid the body can shut down – breathing grows short; legs and arms turn heavy; thinking is narrow and confused. We aren't much good to ourselves or anyone else when we are in the grip of fear. Fear is a breeding ground for failed communication, broken relationships and compromised collaboration and mission.

The impeachment trial underway in Washington, the impulsive behavior of the White House, and gridlock in Congress reflect fear and fragmentation across the land.

There's a lot today that induces anxiety and fear. Russian and Chinese cyber meddling in our democracy, catastrophic environmental events from extreme forest fires to melting ice caps; and technology despite its many blessings also isolates and insulates users making us vulnerable to misinformation, false information and depending on our degree of cynicism vulnerable to being manipulated by conspiracy theorists and power-hungry con artists.

Disparity of wealth, a shrinking middle class, loss of living-wage jobs in an increasingly automated economy and a more secular and pluralistic society than ever before inflame normal concerns for health, wellbeing, and safety and divide us along racial/ethnic lines into culture wars for which we have sold out once cherished principles and sacred values.

When fear rises within it can take hold of your life. It eats at us every waking moment. Storm clouds gather, there's a rumbling of thunder, things get dark. You get a bad report from your physical: is this condition treatable? You hear a rumor your company is downsizing: are you next? Your child gets into trouble with the law: am I losing my loved one? Your spouse seems terribly unhappy: is this the end of the marriage? Now national and global affairs weave fear into our personal daily lives.

Just as we respond individually to heightened fear so do communities and groups of people. Churches that operate by fear pullback, turn inward, and become insular and cut off from the real world – a world that needs them – a world just outside their doors. When Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians, it appears that that congregation was in the grip of fear. The church was fractured into splinter groups, each one vying for supremacy, following a different teacher.

Acrimony and judgement shattered the common ground they once shared; the one source to counter their fear—faith in God and allegiance to Jesus Christ—was subject to endless, hair-splitting debate; and the mission they formerly embraced was nullified by their divisiveness.

It's easy to criticize the folly of the Corinthians who aligned with their favorite teachers against one another. But the point of this letter for the church through the centuries is not to reject the Corinthians but to identify with them to see how our fears can cause us to fall into the same warring factions that plagued them.

Westminster, thank goodness, is free of debilitating infighting but when we consider the wider church—across the denominations—or when we consider our national republic, what sides do we take? Do we see ourselves aligned with, for example, social activists or evangelicals, progressive or conservative theology? Are we red Republicans or blue Democrats, globalists or nationalists, gun regulation supporters or gun rights advocates?

Just because some of these groups may be further removed from most of us here today doesn't mean our judgment of them is any less destructive to the church universal on the one hand or our nation on the other hand.

There is sometimes an unspoken assumption that any dissension among Christians is inappropriate because we have in common allegiance to Jesus Christ but that is not what I am arguing nor was it Paul's concern. Nor should it be assumed that because we are all Americans that to disagree with each other is unpatriotic.

Paul's call for unity is not a threat to diversity of viewpoints and opinions because he calls for unity *not uniformity*, solidarity *not lock-step conformity*.

Where would we be without honest disagreement that ultimately benefits everyone from hearing and weighing multiple viewpoints? Such openness enables complex problem-solving. Such discourse is baked into both our Presbyterian and national polity and culture. What plagued the Corinthians and what plagues the wider church and the nation today (for the wider church and nation mirror a common polarization) is fear for our well-being and way of life; a deeply rooted fear that makes us easily manipulated and undercuts the higher principles and aspirational goals that are the foundation of a Christian church or democratic society. Once we compromise these principles it is difficult to imagine let alone believe in a world in which our hopes and dreams for our families and loved ones (not to mention all the families of the earth) can be fulfilled.

In times of crisis—and the times in which we live have been referred to more than once as a time of crisis—a constitutional crisis and an ecological crisis to name two of the most obvious—in such times the church has forged faith statements that represent, with our backs to the wall, what it is we believe in, take our stand upon and would die for.

The early creeds defined the boundaries of Christian faith against the attempts of cult religions to coopt the nascent movement for Christ; the medieval and Westminster confessions proclaim the sovereignty of God over and against the authority of the Pope; the Barmen Declaration reaffirms the authority of Jesus Christ as head of the church against the claims of Hitler; the Confession of 1967 lifts up the need for reconciliation during the 1960s, a time similar in some ways to ours, when the nation was divided over a war and civil rights for blacks and women; and the Belhar Confession is a pronouncement against the subjugation of people of color in South Africa under the system of Apartheid and it affirms the dignity and worth of every human being. Each of these statements grew out of real social and ecclesiastical crises and held up the principles that provided a spiritual compass and the light of justice that led our ancestors out of the wilderness of conflict and division.

If we are not presently in a crisis nationally it sure seems we are close to one. The depth of division today appears to exceed even that of the 1960s – when bipartisanship in politics and religion was still being practiced. Today crossing the aisle is seen as political suicide not as an act of honor, courage or commitment to a larger, ultimate cause.

Adam Schiff was brilliant last week presenting the articles of impeachment against the President; he appealed not to a Republican or Democratic base but to an American ethic, at least an American ethic of not so long ago.

He empathized with his colleagues of both parties in the Senate saying there are two parties in Congress not Republican and Democrat but those who occupy safe seats and those who occupy unsafe seats. He knew the risks Senators of red or purple states will take if they express support for additional witnesses and documents let alone, if there is cause, for impeachment.

He appealed to the principles of the Constitution and the vision of the founders as well as to history and precedent. And he spelled out the dangerous precedent now being set by the abuse of power and obstruction of Congress by the office of the President and the grave implications if nothing is done. Claude Welch, a SUNY distinguished professor of political science said that the effects of this administration will be felt by our grandchildren.

On a much smaller scale but not without significance is the ongoing division in the Presbyterian Church and just about any national or global church you can name. We divide over the authority of the bible, the nature of Jesus Christ, theological matters like Resurrection and the sacraments and the role of the church in politics.

Maybe it's time for some deep breathing exercises like psalm 27 or perhaps a new statement of faith that might serve as a compass out of the current mayhem.

But it appears that many of us feel disenfranchised; that the machinations going on in Washington take place in another universe, far removed from our day to day lives; a universe that, because we enjoy a certain privilege, many of us are buffered from...for the present.

When I started this sermon Thursday morning I had no intention of referring to the proceedings in Washington. In fact, the sermon was mostly written by Friday night until I heard Adam Schiff reassert the authority of the Senate to conduct a trial that would allow reasonable witnesses and documents for both the prosecution *and the defense* to argue their cases.

What would someone conclude, I wondered, if in some future generation they came across the text of this sermon on this date—smack dab in the middle of the impeachment trial of Donald J. Trump—and saw no reference to that historic moment in our life as a nation.

My fear this morning is that we're still asleep or feel disempowered or exhausted or numb or disgusted from the endless media hype and taking of sides. And that's precisely the work of Satan – the devil is in our divisiveness that deflects and distracts and disguises the gravity of this moment. He is the master of deception.

So how does God help us in our malaise and fear? Sometimes we pray and pray—we bang on God's door with everything we've got. We ask for prayers. And sometimes, wonder of wonders, God responds with healing and deliverance.

At other times it's not deliverance but a sense of God's nearness that we get, God going with us into the day, alongside of us on the path where we stumble.

Then there are those times when it's enough to know that God is God, that bad things are happening but are not the final word, but that God will ultimately redeem our situation. It is helpful to know that God cares, that God is as outraged by injustice as we are and that God is loving but also righteous and God will get God's way with the world in the end.

And then there are those occasions when we are filled with fear or disgust and we simply sing. I'm talking about more than 'whistling in the dark' – wishful thinking or singing as we walk through a dangerous and scary landscape. I'm talking about lifting up your heart and joining a defiant chorus of confidence even when you don't feel like it.

Like Martin Luther when he emerged from his room where he had sequestered himself in hiding for three days because he was being hunted and was profoundly depressed. It was the very height of the Reformation.

In his hand he had a copy of a hymn he had composed in that room. It was "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." And the third verse of that hymn shouts, "The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for Him."

This isn't Germany or France in the 1930s. It's the United States of America. Not the Divided States of America, the United States of America.

There's still time to exercise our democratic rights, there's still time to put ourselves in the shoes of those on the other side of the aisle like Adam Schiff did Friday night and try to understand what angers but more importantly what frightens them; and then to reach out a hand to those with whom we disagree, to reconnect, to reestablish respect and common concern and purpose.

There's still time to uncover this sacred common ground we share as Americans and in the church as followers of Jesus and to treasure and protect it. There's still time to sing like Martin Luther against Satan and his minions. Amen.