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Sermon: Courage in a Time of Corona

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Be strong and let your heart take courage (Ps 31.24)

Walking in the woods yesterday with Paul calmed me. The clouds cleared our path and I held my breath as the sun lit up the rocks like green moonstones covered in mounds of fresh moss. The chatter of birds in the trees above us and the chorus of bullfrogs in the pond nearby softened my fear.

“I go among trees”, writes Mary Oliver, “and I would say they save me, and daily.”

Perhaps like me, you have been waking up in the middle of the night fearing the worst as COVID-19 spreading around the world. Tossing and turning night about all that this pandemic means for our families, friends, congregation, the vulnerable and the wider world. I’ve been praying for all of our partnership friends and the larger and larger circles of our care that connect us from Old Lyme to New London to Green Grass, South Dakota to Honduras to the West Bank to South Africa and beyond--and back here again. When I heard about Tom Hanks and his wife, Rita, in Australia, I added them to my worry pile too.

In between calling everyone I love, I found myself praying for the whole world.

Praying for the healing of the whole world right now isn't such a bad coping mechanism, is it? That and singing an Alicia Keys favorite from 2014, which simply goes like this, “*We are here. We are here for all of us...*” Alicia Keys

We are here. We are here for all of us. Regardless of how these next days and weeks go.

As people of faith, we stand on a broad shouldered inheritance of making it through troubling times with God’s grace. We can hold onto deep roots for the living of these days. We have wisdom figures dating back thousands of years, (in our Hebrew scriptures, the Talmud, in our gospels, in the Koran and other Holy books across religions. We have poetic and prophetic voices that can help us to manage our way through this and remember our own relationships forged in love. We have local poets

and bards like our own Marilyn Nelson, and -- as Steve would remind us, there's always -- Bob Dylan!

*As Jesus said to his disciples in the gospel of Matthew, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. **29** Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matt 11:28-29)*

Thanks to technology we can keep connected in meaningful ways. Many of our Deacons and other church leaders are stepping up to make phone calls, send texts and emails to ensure that each of us is checked up on. As ministers, we'll be sending out regular blog posts and on-line FB messages to keep us all in the loop as best as we can.

Yes, we're in the midst of a scary chapter of life with many unknowns. I'm frightened, too. Our plans are changing literally by the hour based on the growing geography of the virus. But at the same time, as we engage actively in what the CDC and other health and governmental organizations call "social distancing" and self-quarantine measures, we still have choices to make in how we move through this-together.

How shall we live our lives now with one another?

How can we offer a different kind of PRESENCE, remembering that fortunately we have resources to support us and community connections to keep us from feeling too isolated. We have each other! And through it all, we can pray for one another and the life of the world.

Be strong and let your heart take courage (Ps 31.24) sings the psalmist.

We can put our trust in the love of God, our ancient faith stories and one another. Rediscovering that our community, our humanity lives outside the walls in our very human hearts. The heartbeat of God is living within and around us.

We can do this! In many ways, as a church community we are well suited for this season of fear and uncertainty. We are built for it!

Remember our sanctuary work? Those 8 months we spent with our beloved Malik Zaida and Roniya. It was deep, enlivening work as we forged new ways of being together, sharing the uncertainty, loving this one family into a new family with all of us.

This, too, is another kind of sanctuary moment. It's the theology of presence. We are being reminded that a church isn't just these 4 walls as beautiful as our building is and as treasured as a sacred space...we are the church wherever we are.

We remain a place of home and belonging even as we are physically separated, even as we aren't able to gather together in our meetinghouse at the moment. We'll find a way to get food to those who need it. We'll seek more creative ways to worship out there in the pine woods or on a beach or on-line one. And we'll bless the spaces between us every single day. With Old Testament prophet Isaiah as one of our guides on this unknowable journey: speaks into this Lenten wilderness time:

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert. Isaiah 43:19

With God's grace, and one another Steve, Carleen and I want you to know that *we are here, we are here for all of us*. Let's face it, we're all scared. If you're alone, we're going to pay special attention to you. You may feel frightened about getting the virus. You may feel you're the target. Please know we understand, we are with you, and we're going to be reaching out to you. We don't have answers but we stand ready to support you.

In that spirit, hear this poem by writer, Lynn Ungar called, *Pandemic*:

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel. Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now, on trying to make the world different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those to whom you commit your life.
Center down.
And when your body has become still, reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives are in one another's hands. (Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands. Reach out your heart. Reach out your words. Reach out all the tendrils

of compassion that move, invisibly, where we cannot touch.

Promise this world (our world) your love--for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, so long as we all shall live.

Stay well, my friends, call or text us and each other every day if necessary. We're all in this together and we'll hope to be together again someday soon.

Amen.