

“Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled” Sermon
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“Do not let your hearts be troubled”. These words of Jesus appear in our gospel of John today. Jesus says these words to his disciples, his friends, right after he has told them that one of them (Judas) will betray him and another one of them (Peter) will deny him. He says these words to them shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. He says these words with the awareness that his death is imminent and knowing that there are many troubles to come for his disciples and friends. “Do not let your hearts be troubled”. These words are spoken smack dab in the middle of trouble...betrayal, denial, conflict, crucifixion, death, fear, grief, the unknown. “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

Therefore, these words are not fluffy words meant to ignore, distract or gloss over the troubles. These words are not words of reassurance that troubles will not come. Rather these are grounding words, meant to hold the disciples in the upcoming storm. Regardless of what is crashing down around you – “do not let your hearts be troubled”.

These words come to us today in the midst of this pandemic, smack dab in the middle of trouble.

All three of our *other* scripture readings for today involve stones. In the reading for Acts, stones are being hurled at Stephen as he proclaims his faith and cries out “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”. In our Psalm, the psalmist calls out to God to “be my strong rock, a crag and stronghold, a tower of strength”. In 1 Peter we are invited to come to the Lord and be living stones, chosen by God and built into a spiritual house with Jesus the cornerstone.

So I have had the image of stones and these words “Do not let your hearts be troubled” rolling through my head this week.

Often when we are on the shores of Lake Superior we play with the stones. One of our favorite things to do is stack stones into stone towers. How many rocks can you stack on top of each other before they topple? We search for the right rocks, the right order, the steadiest hand to place the rocks - all with the hopes of balancing the highest tower, all with the hopes that it won't come crashing down.

While this is a fun game on the beach, it is the all too real balance many are currently “playing” every day of this pandemic. How do I balance it all? How do we keep everything from crashing down around us? Can we manage to balance being an employee, teacher, parent, housekeeper, chef, spouse, student, socially distanced family member, pet caretaker and more all while taking care of ourselves?

In the moment when...

...you remember your clean clothes have soured in the washing machine,

...you just dumped lunch down the sink while draining the noodles,

...you totally spaced the Zoom meeting you were supposed to host half an hour ago,

...you are hopping around on one foot because the other is wet from the puddle left by the dog that hasn't been out,

...you can't help with the child's schoolwork without some time on Google because you don't remember ever learning the word abiotic in 7th grade science, and stem and leaf math has nothing to do with actual trees,

...you sit next to these children you are trying to help and entertain and physically *stick* to them because they haven't showered this month

...that you know the stones are crashing down.

While we are all trying to discern the way to balance global health, emotional wellness, jobs and income that all may be fed and sheltered...conflicts brew, tempers flare, tears flow and we know the stones are crashing down.

I built a stone tower in my living room this week. Regardless of how I stacked the stones eventually they toppled and my tower fell down. BUT I have come to appreciate the bottom stone - the stone that never moves. While all the other stones may fall away and scatter, the bottom stone remains.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled". Why? Jesus says more - "Believe in God, believe also in me". Do not let your hearts be troubled because God is your bottom rock, your foundation. Jesus is our cornerstone. While all else may crumble and fall away, God remains.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled" - Not just some fluffy words to distract us or make us gloss over our troubles, not the reassurance that the troubles will be no more, rather grounding words to hold us amidst the storm.

For we believe in a God that came to dwell among us and even when our sin, betrayal, denials, and fears carried him to the cross and left him in a tomb, he conquered death, rolled away stones and came back to offer us a love and life that cannot be moved.

When I was in High School, directing the youth choir at Trinity I taught the kids a song based on 1 Peter 5. "I cast all my cares upon you, I lay all of my burdens down at your feet and anytime I don't know what to do, I will cast all my cares upon you." I have often carried this song in my heart when it feels like the stones are piling up and the tower toppling.

I used to picture myself carrying stones - burdens, problems, overwhelming responsibilities represented by these stones. At times the stones would become too much to carry on my own and then I would go to Jesus. I would envision myself selecting which stones to lay at his feet - to stop trying to carry on my own, to ask God to take care of. "Here Jesus, I just don't know

what to do with this, it is too heavy to carry, I give it to you.” I then imagine myself walking away and leaving that stone behind. The problem is I am not good at leaving stones behind. I find I would quickly run back and pick up the stone again, start stewing over it, and try to find a new way to balance it, only to watch it tumble.

I think I’ve had the image all wrong. In today’s reading of Stephen being stoned, he is not concerned about the stones but rather about the placement of his spirit – Jesus receive my spirit. In the Psalm the writer calls to God “Be my rock, my stronghold”. In our reading from 1 Peter, it is not about how we place the stones but rather the call to be living stones built into a “spiritual house”.

I wonder if we are to go to Jesus and instead of handing him the rocks and then walking away, hoping God can take care of the burdens, INSTEAD we should be going to Jesus, dropping the rocks and laying our very selves at his feet, giving our very beings to God’s care. I picture Jesus, this great cornerstone, this bottom rock, opening his arms and pulling us into his being, into this living rock that cannot be moved. And there I remember that held by this rock-solid God, I have the foundation, the strength to carry on, despite troubles, even beyond death.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me”.

Listen again “Do not let your heartSSSS be troubled”. I have always thought this phrase read “do not let your heart be troubled,” but Jesus says “Do not let your heartSSSS be troubled”. Jesus is not just speaking to one disciple. He is speaking to all of them. I think it is helpful to remember particularly at this time that our hearts are not alone. That as we stand smack dab in the middle of all these troubles, we stand as heartSSSS. HeartSSS that will not be troubled but will believe in God. Not heartSSS that offer fluffly words hoping to distract or gloss over our troubles, not heartSSS that offer false reassurance that the troubles will be no more, but rather grounding heartSSS that hold onto one another in the midst of the storm.

As the stones fly, let us not be the ones hurling them but rather the ones helping one another to find refuge. As the stones crumble let us not lose hope but rather stand firm, built into God our rock, our stronghold, our foundation from which we can build.

My friends in Christ, do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God.