

Sermon 3-22-20

Paul Purdue preaching

A few weeks ago, I saw a sincere portrait of Jesus in a church classroom. **An enormous buff Jesus stood atop the entire earth.** One massive foot touched down on the North Pole and descended over Canada. Was it Easter or maybe the Second Coming? This brunette Jesus wore a dazzling white robe with a crimson tunic. The clouds rolled back like a scroll as a massive holy wind flew Jesus' crimson tunic out behind him like Superman's cape. I doodle a good bit so I began studying the painting's lines. **I realized Jesus' light brown hair was not moved despite the clouds parting and his cape flying like a victory flag.** Immediately, I wondered if Jesus used a lot of hair product, or was Christ's perfectly kept hair just one aspect of the miracle? **Those kinds of questions drove my youth directors over the edge.** I am unsure why I still have these kinds of middle school questions? **I wish you were here so I could gauge the laughter to frown ratio. It might improve my preaching.**

I only share this image of Jesus, Come as Superhero, because growing up, I understood verses like Phillipians 4:6 or 13 as calls for otherworldly superpower. *"Do not be anxious, but pray and peace will come."* In the worst times, *"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."* **Once upon a time I believed that if I could not do all things, then I let Jesus down. And if after prayer, anxiety or fear returned, I lacked enough faith.** Such a theology just adds shame and guilt to anxiety and fear.

The superpower theology is still out there. Maybe you saw on social media the church where the pastor preached, *"We will defy coronavirus. You are safe in church. Jesus will protect you. Shake each other's hands. We are raising revivalists not pansies.... hug each other."*

One of the great sins of American civil religion is our tendency to pick a Bible verse, lift it completely out of its context, and jam it like a magic bullet point into any argument we want to make. Such proof-texting turns the **Bible into a magic book** filled with laws and incantations, instead of **the story of God's** unfolding love for humanity. **We often use the Bible to reinforce what we already believe and thereby construct a theology that suits our cultural biases.** Such proof-texting closes our souls to true worship. The devil is a proof-texter, offering unnecessary miracles and ill-gotten gains. **Theology built on isolated citations instead of grand themes twists the scriptures to suit itself.** It thinks it honors God, while remaining closed to the prophetic word embedding within the parable, passage or Gospel.

In America, our proof-texting leads us to altars of sanctified wealth, rugged individualism, bootstrap capitalism, and hero worship. Our cultural bias towards rugged individualism gives us a faith too focused on a personal relationship with God. We forget Moses led a people and Jesus gathered disciples. Could it be that "Christ who strengthens me" is Jesus who promises to be with us whenever two or three of us gather together?

Our chapter begins, “*Therefore, my brothers, sisters and siblings, whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.*” **Consider this: Paul is not sending a confidential email to a single Christian.** Paul is writing to *brothers, sisters and siblings, who he loves and misses.* **And Paul is not present with his friends. Paul is experiencing social isolation. Paul writes from prison.** (Phil 1:7) I find hope knowing that **20 of the 26 New Testament books are letters passed between Christians experiencing enforced social distancing.**

Listen, for the message of community, as Paul from prison writes: *to brothers, sisters, (and siblings) whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord. Loved ones... Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. From now on, brothers and sisters...focus your thoughts on whatever is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you (guys) learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.*

I suppose my rugged individual blinders always framed these verses in terms of my private prayer life. The context suggests Paul is not calling for private prayers at all. Paul seems to tell his brothers, sisters and siblings to **pour out all their anxieties, fears and worries before God and one another. Get all those requests out into God's safe and open space! Paul often shares in his letters personal struggles, longings, disappointments, and boasts.** (2 Corinthians 12) **How did we turn these letters to brothers, sisters, and siblings into tracts for preaching personal or individual faith? Maybe our sharing inside a beloved community, who longs for us, helps usher in God's peace that surpasses understanding?** Galatians 6:2 teaches us to “*carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ (to love your neighbour as yourself).*” Love listens. Listening heals. Love shares. Love reaches out for help. Love responds with hearing prayers.

“I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength!” **Maybe this is not a boast at all, but a prisoner reassuring people deeply worried about his imprisonment that with God's presence we will get through this!** Paul continues, “*Still, you have done well to share my distress.*” “Enduring all these things,” and “*doing all things*” are different translations. **Clearly Paul can't break free of Roman chains and fly over to Phillipi, his purple cape flapping in a holy wind!** Listen to the context, **flip over** to Phillippians 1:12-13: “*Brothers and sisters, (siblings) I want you to know that the things that have happened to me have actually advanced the gospel. The whole Praetorian Guard and everyone else knows that I'm in prison for Christ. Most of the brothers and sisters have had more confidence through the Lord to speak the word boldly and bravely because of my jail time.*” **Perhaps, Paul is not saying,** “I can do anything through Christ's strength,” but “I can get through this with Christ and your sharing in my distress brings Christ closer.”

Did you notice how Paul says both, “Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions... (and) you have done well to share my distress.” The call to not be anxious is not a Get Out Of Jail or Distress Free card. It is not a call to shut down our sharing of our anxieties, fears, and needs with God and each other. **God’s peace is not otherworldly: Christ’s peace runs within this world’s distressing times. After speaking of not being anxious, Paul names his own distress.** When beloved people, crowns and joy, travel with us through distressing seasons, perhaps we find that we can do all things through Christ. In naming our wounds and worries together in prayer, maybe we find God’s peace that surpasses understanding. **Did not most of Jesus’ healings involve conversations?** (Matthew 8-9 or 12) Faith is not found within superheros with unflappable hair. Brothers, sisters, and siblings, **maybe our collective exhaling of all our anxiety is the tool that allows us to breathe in what is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise.**

I have been wondering how Matthew knew that Jesus was starving or even spent 40 days in the wilderness? I imagine Jesus just told Mary, Martha, or Matthew about that wilderness ordeal. **I imagine Jesus telling how the brown creek stones came to look like loaves of bread. Jesus never came as superman. Jesus knew temptations and hunger. Jesus came to create a kingdom, a beloved community, a band of brothers, sisters, and siblings sharing a journey.**

Just before the cross, Jesus reaches out for help. In the Garden, Jesus turns to Peter, James, and John and says, “my soul is overwhelmed to the point of death, keep watch with me.” Surely we should follow Jesus’ lead and do the same, reaching out to share each other’s distress. Oh, I hear you skeptics, saying how they all fell asleep while Jesus prayed, **but there is deep comfort in friends who love us enough to fall asleep in their chairs.** In these isolating days let us remember our longings and missing each other remind us of the beauty of our human connections.

So in this season of physical distancing, let us bear each another’s burdens. Listen when people are hurting. Love listens. Love reaches out for help. Jesus did. Let us realize that Paul is not banning anxiety, but encouraging us to share in each other’s distress. And let us remember, that even physically apart, we will get through this together through Christ who strengthens us. Amen.