

Calmed – Connected – Called
 The body of Christ
 Reading from the Psalms: Psalm 131
 Reading from the Epistles: Philippians 2:12-13; 4:4-9
 Reading from the Gospels: John 14:27

T.S. Eliot once wrote, “The life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying . . . jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them.”

I read those words this week knowing that an ill-tempered scirocco was rolling across continents, fueled by the stolen breath of its victims, wiping calendars back to blank, and threatening to separate people from their most elemental need – relationship. Yet, I was naïve to think it would not arrive so quickly, upending our plans, endangering loved ones, and sending people to their dictionaries to look up terms like *hermetically sealed*. I know I am not alone in this. I have heard a number of people, their startled faces stricken with uncertainty over what level of alarm is required, say, “I feel like I’ve walked into the shooting of a movie.” And unfortunately, there is no director to yell *Cut*, so that we can resume to some facsimile of normalcy.

This is our reality – empty stadiums, arenas, campuses, and pews. Even in the rare Southern snowpocalypse, I don't know that I have seen this level of panic over toilet paper. I'm kinda wishin' I'd planted that magnolia tree ... This is indeed, one strange Spring. This Corona virus has broken the protective glass and pushed every button of vulnerability within us: Disquietude, panic, unbridled fear, complaint, hostility, aggression, all laced with a hoarder's pathology. I wonder if, to a certain extent, all of our running around in search of sanitizer like amoebous toddlers on a soccer field, is a way of distracting us from those other buttons waiting to be pushed: grief, sorrow, suffering, loss, death.

Health-compromised? Practically no one can limit the number of loved ones who are so categorized to the fingers on one hand, or even two.

We cry, *How long, O Lord?* We pray, *Come, Lord Jesus!* Yet, the questions and doubts, like the weeds that scoff at our pre-emergent herbicides, continue to pop out and disturb the lush landscape of our “proper” American religion. The threats are real. It does not do us any

good to deny that. That would only heighten our vulnerability and hasten our undoing.

However, I am here to tell you that this is not when faith falters. This is when faith shines! Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

I know little of T.S. Eliot other than what is gleaned from a Wikipedia profile. Of course, I did note that he was born and raised in Missouri, where his grandfather had settled to start a Unitarian Christian Church in St. Louis. Later in life, Eliot joined the Anglican church, even becoming a warden of his church in London. He once described himself as possessing "a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament". That, you could say, is covering all bases.

I do not know anything about T.S. Eliot’s spirituality, but I see the hints of mainline Protestantism and Reformed theology in his words. “The life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying . . . jarring and incompatible

ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them.”

In a way, Eliot’s observation relates to the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification. We certainly know the experience of living amidst jarring and incompatible worlds where discordant views impair relationship, preclude cooperation, impede progress, and imperil our children’s future. As a culture, we’ve been living as if we are Joker Jackson and Noah Cullen at the beginning of *The Defiant Ones*, the classic 1958 film with Tony Curtis and Sydney Poitier portraying two prisoners, one white, one black, who are in a Southern chain gang, but manage to escape.

Yet, remaining shackled, they are forced to escape together in spite of their mutual disdain and lack of trust. We know that crisis can either peel away the thin veneer of civility resulting in chaos, or bereft of ammunition, can actually inspire a forced cooperation that disinfects presumption and hostility, and opens the way toward relationship, mutual concern, shared purpose, and hope. Where at the beginning of *The Defiant Ones*, there is contempt, as the movie progresses there

evolves a mutual respect, kinship, and concern. By the end of the movie, each of the former adversaries, has sacrificed self for the good of the other, refusing to break the bond, the friendship, the love that has been forged.

Theologically, we call this sanctification, the ongoing work of God's Spirit through which God equips us and motivates us to meet the highest purpose God has for us, to actively and with our whole hearts love God and love neighbor. As the Apostle Paul describes it, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." The Psalmist exults in the impact of God's gracious work of sanctification, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! ...It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore."

That is how I feel when I consider this staff and this congregation. What a joy it was this week to read the gratitude cards you composed last Sunday. Again, and again, I read words that celebrated community, hospitality, and mutual love and concern. The threat of Covid-19 does not eliminate our capacity to continue to be that kind of community. By

the grace of God, we have some pretty sharp minds here that make up for my lack of technological savvy, and they are busy creatively conjuring ways for us to remain connected. And so, we pray that you would see our website as a portal to community. Though our bodies may be isolated, it is extremely important through our hearts, our spirits, and our senses to intentionally make the effort to remain connected. That calls upon you to reach out to those who experience tech anxiety and shepherd them through the clicks and apps allowing us to maintain “our unity in the bonds of peace.”

The author of Hebrews challenges us, “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Even in this strange season, there is no reason for us to not meet this challenge, and it is of critical importance that we do so.

Earlier this week I was preparing for my book study and I was feeling a bit guilty. It is a good book with profound insights for our times, entitled *The Invasion of the Dead* and written by Brian Blount, the President of my alma mater, Union Presbyterian Seminary. Now

Brian ranks as one of the finest preacher scholars of our time and he is known to be an even more wonderful person.

But here is where the guilt comes in. Now, don't tell anyone, but I have a confession to make. I actually selected the book and set up the class before reading it, thus transgressing every known pedagogical principle. I knew of the author and the reputation, and the title was such a great hook. What I didn't take into consideration was that the book was the product of a series of lectures given to an audience of academic types at Yale University. Sooo ... it is a challenging read ... worth the effort ... but daunting. I was already feeling guilty for beguiling a group of folks to dive into some Reinhold Niebuhr last year. So, let's say I've been most apologetic to the slowly shrinking class ever since, promising them and you that the next book for study will be much more approachable.

The irony, however, is that the book is immensely profound for a time such as this because its focus is on the relevance of the Bible's Apocalyptic literature for today. In a culture obsessed with dystopian, post-apocalyptic movies and books about an earth decimated by aliens, zombies, or pandemics, the message of the Bible's apocalyptic literature

contained in places like the books of Daniel, Revelation, and slices of the epistles and the Gospels, becomes suddenly relevant. The works are not meant to be allegorical, taken literally, or predictive of future events. Too, often the Bible's apocalyptic passages are interpreted as a trailer for a horror movie that is good news only for a few.

In contrast, the message of Revelation along with the other biblical passages is a word of hope and a source of strength for a people besieged with overwhelming threats and vulnerabilities. The wild imagery can be distilled to a simple essence. Where life is most bleak, most frightening, most threatened, God has not and will not abandon us to face any threat alone. The warrior angel Michael has crushed the dragon called the Devil, Satan, representative of the powers and principalities of this age that will not separate us from the love and presence and reign of our God.

In the 19th chapter of Revelation, John writes, "Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has

come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.”

Whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's, and thus, in crisis, we become our truest and best selves as we reach out to others with courage and hope, knowing that the Lord is our strength and salvation. Such is the fuel of Paul's challenge to us for the living of these days. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.”

By the grace of Christ and the fellowship of the Spirit, we are up to the task before us. When we falter God is our strength. When we're afraid, God is the Mother who holds us close and brings us calm. When we stay connected, God is the love of Christ we experience in each other that gives us hope now and forever. Amen.