

**+Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ!**

Ginger Asian Bistro here in Pekin reopened on Wednesday offering carryout only. I picked up lunch for us and here is the message that was in my fortune cookie: "You'll accomplish more if you stay focused".

As obvious as that statement may be, it could not have come at a more appropriate time. I am sure I'm not the only one having troubles concentrating during these difficult times in which we live. Try my best to hold a single thought, my mind quickly wanders to all the events going on in the world. The estimates of how many are or will be sick with this virus. The horrendous calculated numbers of how many will die from this illness. The strain and stress of abiding the stay at home order, now extended to the end of this month. My mind is full of worry, worry for my family members who are scattered not only around the country but around the world. I worry about you all, my church family, hoping everyone is staying healthy both mentally as well as physically. I worry about those who are without income or without homes. I worry what this isolation will do to us all. I worry...I am a worrier...I get that from my father.

While struggling with this message, I came to the realization that I was trying to set aside all the earthly events going on and all my worries, in order to focus on the importance of today, Palm Sunday. The beginning of Holy Week in the Western Christian Church. This week, that the long Lenten season has led us to, is a time of reflection, introspection. A time to ponder Jesus' journey, remembered on this day, Palm Sunday, marked with His triumphant ride into Jerusalem, then moving to the events of His passion; the accounts of Jesus speaking at the last supper, His washing of the apostles feet, His prayers in the garden, His betrayal leading to persecution, mockery, cruelty and His suffering and death on the cross. That's where I thought our minds should be focused but this mess that we are living in, continually sneaks in to demand attention.

After wrestling with this and then hearing sound advice from Dr. Karoline Lewis in a sermon brainwave podcast from Luther Seminary, I was reminded that the importance of preaching is to set the scripture text into context, not only context in the setting within the bible or context of the original audience at the time the scripture was written. It is just as important to set the context of what these words mean for us in our daily lives. Whether times are good or bad or, as it feels today, possibly the worst of times in our personal history, the scripture readings have important meaning for us all.

One thing Dr. Lewis' advised was to pray the psalm chosen for this Sunday, Psalm 31, pray it daily and not just read it. I had been reading this psalm several times a day in my struggles to form a message, but then I began to pray it. I felt after praying this psalm several times I needed to change

the words in the midst of this pandemic; converting the me/my/I to us/our/we, because I saw this prayer as one we all need to pray in these desperate times, in these times of stress and isolation. In these times when we need to change our normal everyday behavior in order to save lives.

All which compounds to create a tremendous distress in our lives. Even though there is so much that we are refraining from doing in order to stay well, we should not, we cannot refrain from turning to God at this time. Now more than ever, we need to turn to God in our prayers asking for strength, comfort, healing and consolation in our lives. I found that Psalm 31 is a prayer that speaks of immense trouble and suffering but also guides us to turn to God, trusting in God for help that only God can provide.

I want to pray Psalm 31 and I ask your forgiveness as I changed some words in this psalm, only for greater inclusion. Although verses 9b through 13 speak of great worry and ailments, on the verge of hopelessness we find guidance to place our trust in God as we 'walk through the darkest valley':

***<sup>9</sup>Be gracious to us, O Lord, for we are in distress;***

***our eyes waste away from grief, our souls and bodies also.***

***<sup>10</sup>For our lives are spent with sorrow, and our years with sighing; our strength fails because of our misery, and our bones waste away. <sup>11</sup>We are the scorn of all our adversaries, a horror to our neighbors, an object of dread to our acquaintances; those who see us in the street flee from us. <sup>12</sup>We have passed out of mind like those who are dead; We have become like broken vessels. <sup>13</sup>For we hear the whispering of many - terror all around! - as they scheme together against us, as they plot to take our lives.***

***<sup>14</sup>But we trust in you, O Lord; we say, "You are our God."***

***<sup>15</sup>Our times are in your hand; deliver us from the hand of our enemies and persecutors.***

***<sup>16</sup>Let your face shine upon your servants; save us in your steadfast love.***

Our hope lays in verses 9a and 14-16 but we need to voice our fears, our anxieties, our worries, our pain in those 'between verses'. We are all living in those 'between verses' but we are surrounded by verses of hope.

***<sup>9</sup>Be gracious to us, O Lord, for we are in distress;*** This plea for God's help and attention gives us the hope that can only come to us from God. These words assure us that we can turn to God in our darkest times of misery, distress, fear, knowing God is always there for us. The King James version of Psalm 31:9 reads 'Have mercy on us' rather than 'Be gracious to us', which caused me to relook at the word gracious. The meaning that came to my mind initially for gracious was as in gracious host, someone who is welcoming and kind, which is okay but not what is needed in our time

of distress and trouble. Googling gracious gave a second meaning: 'showing divine grace'. Our plea to God is for God's divine grace in our desperate times. There is comfort, hope and relief knowing God's blessing of grace is always there for us.

Moving to verse 14: **14But we trust in you, O Lord; we say, "You are our God."** After voicing our troubles, concerns, and worries to God in this prayer, we come to the reality that our only hope is to place our trust in God and proclaim loudly: **You are our God!** Knowing God is always with us gives us a tremendous sense of relief. God is there waiting for us to turn to Him, the One we may always trust to listen to our prayers. In those words we find comfort that we are not alone, God is there watching over us all.

The last two verses of today's portion of Psalm 31, I reflected on together.

**15Our times are in your hand; deliver us from the hand of our enemies and persecutors. 16Let your face shine upon your servants; save us in your steadfast love.** God's Love is abounding and steadfast Love. And it is here and now that we must remind ourselves of God's love shown for the world through the gift of His Son, Jesus the Christ, whose life and death we contemplate during this coming Holy Week and we celebrate Jesus' resurrection a week from today on Easter. Jesus is God's promise to us fulfilled! The psalmist did not know how God would demonstrate such Love for us all, but they knew and trusted in God's Love. We have the advantage of knowing that Jesus came to earth, teaching and healing, and as we ponder in this coming week, He suffered and died on the cross for our sins, bringing us forgiveness that we could never obtain on our own.

The steadfast Love from God frees us to live in hope, it strengthens us to continue God's work, even in these days of distress and fear, we have to find new ways to carry out that work. It is through God's love that we maintain our relationships during this period. We work as we can to serve those that are in need, those without income, without homes. We must find ways to aid those that even in these times suffer the effects of racism, oppression, abuse and rejection. And we need to find ways to care for those who are suffering hopelessness, who don't know how to turn to God or for any reason unwilling to turn to God. It will be with the strength received from the Holy Spirit, that shares God's love in these times, we will do God's work as He intended. Our times, our lives are in God's hand and there is no better place for us to be. Save us with your Love, O God!

**Let us pray:**

**Almighty God, we thank you for this life, for our families and all your creation. Make your presence known as we struggle during these dark times. Strengthen us to carry out your work in the midst of our fear and worry. And thank you for your Son, Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord. For this we are eternally grateful. Amen!**