

A sermon preached on the 6th Sunday after Easter, May 22, 2022
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Acts 16:9-15. Psalm 67. Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5. John 14:23-29

When I first read today's Gospel this week, what grabbed my attention was Jesus' familiar words: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." I found myself repeating this sentence over and over throughout the week.

Perhaps that sentence hit me because I was aware of how troubled and anxious I felt, and how troubled and anxious our society is at this time. The truth is, we are living in a society and world which is experiencing many traumatic disasters that keep assaulting us. As followers of Jesus, how are we called to live in the middle of all that is happening around us?

Recently I read some research about the patterns of emotional responses to disasters. First there is shock, disbelief, disorientation, anxiety when a disaster strikes. Then immediately after the disaster there is often spirit of cooperation, helping each other, optimism that we can overcome this together, gratitude that we survived the disaster. Then before long discouragement, fatigue, stress, blame, anger, rage, sadness, depression set in as it becomes clear there will be no quick recovery and return to normal. These negative emotions are contagious. People catch them from each other and pass them along to others.

Remember how we followed this pattern of emotions when the Covid disaster hit our nation? Many of these complex emotions are still impacting us and the people around us. And research shows that, depending on the complexity and dimensions of the disaster, it may take as much as 5 to even 25 years for people and communities to recover after a major disaster.

And Covid is not the only disaster we are experiencing. The war in Ukraine is stirring up global fear and anxiety because it is not only destroying the people and infrastructure of that nation but increasing the threat of extended war and economic/ecological disaster on the whole world.

Last week we experienced yet another racially motivated mass shooting of Black folks in Buffalo, which raised more anxiety there and across the country. What is wrong with our nation that we keep perpetuating verbal and gun violence against each other, especially against people of different races and religions?

What is additionally troubling for many of us is that the false claims of white supremacy and the false critique that people of other races and religions are inferior is proclaimed, and violence is often perpetrated, in the name of Christianity, by people who call themselves Christians. It's not surprising that many Americans no longer want to have anything to do with Christianity.

We need to start talking more about how we understand the Bible. We see that God lovingly creates every human being in God's image. God so loved the whole world that God sent Jesus. God sent his Son Jesus to this planet as a brown skinned middle Eastern Jewish man...who constantly taught people to love all their neighbors, including their enemies. He taught people to be peacemakers and modeled bringing healing and compassion to all people in need, regardless of their race or religion. On the cross, Jesus forgave the people who had unjustly condemned him and nailed him to the cross. So when some Americans, in the name of Christianity, perpetuate violent words and actions against God's beloved children of different races and religions, we need to speak and act from a more loving, just and respectful perspective.

We could go on and list several other traumatic disasters that are also impacting our nation and world, but I'll stop here. Since we are experiencing multiple traumas and disasters, it is sobering to realize that we may continue to experience the volatile emotions of disaster recovery for many more years. We may have to continuously deal with new disruptions and dangers. The temptation I see in myself and in all of us, is that the contagious emotions of fear and anxiety, of despair, anger, blaming can take over our minds and hearts and lead us into perpetual self-centeredness, depression, anger, withdrawal and hopelessness.

I ask your forgiveness if you feel that I've spent too much time talking about these disasters, but I've spoken this way because, as followers of Jesus, we need to be honest and talk about the frightening realities which are impacting each of us and our nation and world. Jesus regularly talked with people about the fears and anxieties they were experiencing and Jesus can help us in our situation.

For example, in today's Gospel, Jesus had gathered his disciples together in an upper room and had washed their feet at the Last Supper. Judas had just left to set up the betrayal and capture of Jesus. The disciples were beginning to feel that a disastrous crisis was imminent. Jesus wanted to prepare his disciples for the trauma and disaster which would begin later that evening, when he would be arrested, condemned unjustly, then crucified. So Jesus said to them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Of course, it is easy to hear those words... and very difficult to practice them under pressure. Even Jesus felt deep fear and anxiety that night, so he asked his disciples to pray with him as he agonized in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. When we feel fear and anxiety, like Jesus, we need to ask our friends to pray with us.

Because Jesus knew what it was like to be afraid, he had compassion on his fearful disciples when they hid behind locked doors for fear that the soldiers might also come to arrest and crucify them. After his resurrection, Jesus came through those locked doors to his frightened disciples and breathed his Holy Spirit of peace on them. They began to learn that, even in the middle of their fears, they could trust the loving Spirit of Jesus to be with them and guide them. They continued to be vulnerable to attacks and

persecution in the following years. And they learned how to keep opening themselves to receive the Spirit of peace which Jesus kept giving them, day by day, to sustain them and to help them carry on his mission of bringing good news to the world, practicing love for God and their neighbors. Instead of being overcome by evil, they kept forgiving those who persecuted them and kept overcoming evil with good. Jesus wants us to hear this same message as we live in this anxious time of multiple disasters.

We hear more guidance and hope in today's reading from Revelation. John, who was the bishop overseeing the churches in Asia Minor, writes to those persecuted congregations from his exile on the Island of Patmos. The Holy Spirit gave John a vision of what the Risen Jesus was doing now, creating a new heaven and a new earth. Just as God planted a Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, so God had planted a Tree of Life by the River of Life in heaven. "The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations...There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

John shared this vision with his congregations to remind them that God was much greater and more cosmically powerful than all problems they were facing. The God who created the universe in the beginning is not finished with his world yet. The arc of history is long, yet, as Jesus taught us to pray, God will bring his kingdom of Love on earth as it is in heaven. John was saying, you can trust this great God who rules the universe to guide you and help you be part of his mission to bring the hopeful Good News of Christ's love to the despairing world in which you live.

When you and I feel fears and anxieties about the future, it may help us to remember that God is much greater, more loving and powerful than all the destructive disasters and forces we are experiencing. Sometimes singing a hymn of praise, like our opening hymn this morning, or praying Psalm 23 about God as our Good Shepherd, can help us refocus on the goodness and greatness of God, in comparison to the problems around us.

In the reading from Acts, even though Paul constantly encountered problems in his travels to start new churches, he was not anxious or afraid. He constantly trusted God's guidance, "convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news."

Paul and the early Christians did not allow the contagious anxiety and fear stirred up by constant traumas to control their daily thoughts. They prayed and trusted that Jesus' Spirit of love and peace would guide them, help them live and share the Good News of the Christ's healing, forgiving love, peace and hope with the people around them. This was their daily focus.

So today's Scriptures show us how to live this week, and in the years ahead, amid the complex post-disaster emotions that swirl around us and our society.

First, it is helpful to be aware of our anxieties and fears and at the same time, to stay attentive to the comforting words Jesus keeps speaking to us. Please turn with me to the top of the last page of our Scripture insert.

Let's be still for a moment, take a deep breath, and be aware of the fears and anxieties which you are feeling at this time in your life. I'll read lines 2, 3 & 4 and pause. Then invite you to read with me those same lines two more times...letting them sink into our souls. "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."

Everyday this week, I invite you to begin your day by reading these three lines from the Gospel several times and welcoming them into your soul.

A 2nd message of guidance we heard was to look for the little ways Christ wants us, every day, to live and share the Good News of his love and peace with people who are struggling with their fears and anxieties. We are called to overcome evil with good. Some days we may not feel like doing this. But this is our commission from God, no matter what emotions are swirling within and around us. So in a few moments of silence, I invite you to talk with Jesus, and ask how his Spirit might want you to share the love and peace of Christ this week with people you know who are anxious and afraid....

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.