

Trinity United Methodist Church

March 22, 2020

“Talking With God: ”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Good morning, everybody, and welcome to online worship. Let's start off with our thought for the morning, prayer and scripture. On that note, let's pray, shall we?

God, we give thanks for this day. We give thanks for this opportunity to gather virtually in the confines of our own homes and spaces, to stay safe in this time of social distancing. We thank you for the gift of technology, for the ways in which we are learning how to connect with each other anew. We pray, Lord, that you would send your spirit to sustain us during these times. We pray especially for all of the health care workers on the front lines, especially those in the most affected parts of our world and our country. We pray for our local ones here, for the many doctors and medical staff of our congregation and our community. We pray, Lord, that you keep them safe and keep them free from harm as they fulfill their calling to treat others in this pandemic.

We pray for all of those who have been sickened, who have caught COVID-19. We pray for their families and loved ones, that they *don't* catch it. We pray that you would help us to do what we need to do. Your word tells us to obey those who are in authority over us, so we pray that we would do so as we follow the guidelines being put out by our government agencies. We pray that you would help us to make the smartest of decisions during this time.

We pray for those financially impacted, and we pray that as you have given us the means, that we might share with others in this great time of need.

We pray for this, your church, and even though we can't gather together physically, we thank you that the church is all of us wherever we are, as we live out our faith in you. So, Lord, we pray that you would raise us up for such a time as this. Let your church be a light in a dark and hurting world around us. And Lord, help us to be your hands and feet in all of these different situations.

Speak to us now through your word, that we might be encouraged, that we might face the future unafraid, for *you've got it*. You're still in charge. You're working all things for good, even in the midst of bad circumstances. And so we pray that you would continue to do so and more. These things and more we pray in the name of Christ, amen.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 20:1-12 (NIV)

(We continue with our *Talking With God* series today, and again, this sermon was planned before all of this happened. And wow, how timely it is. I think it is, and I hope that you might think so, as well.)

After this, the Moabites and Ammonites with some of the Meunites came to wage war against Jehoshaphat. Some people came and told Jehoshaphat, “A vast army is coming against you from Edom, from the other side of the Dead Sea. It is already in Hazezon Tamar” (that is, En Gedi). Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him. Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the Lord in the front of the new courtyard and said: “Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. Our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name, saying, ‘If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.’ But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt; so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. See how they are repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us as an inheritance. Our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

This is the word of God for the people of God. Say it where you are: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Let’s pray once more. Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord, Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

What is our first step when we have a problem? What do we automatically do when presented with a problem that we face? Maybe we work or we try harder at whatever it is we were doing. Maybe you remember as a kid trying to put the blocks into the matching shapes in a box or whatever it might have been. Or maybe you’ve watched a kid who’s trying to do that. They’re trying to put the square in the circle and it’s not

going, and that's a problem. So what do kids typically do? They just try to shove it harder, right, and make it go in there. Of course, trying the same thing over and over again and expecting different results—that's the definition of insanity, right? So maybe we just work at it harder, we just try harder—doggone it, we're going to break through.

When presented with a problem, we might learn a new skill. I think this is often the case when it comes to something medically related. We or a loved one will get a medical diagnosis. Maybe it's something like a broken limb. So we learn a new way to feed ourselves or a new way to get around, even at least temporarily, because of the fracture. Maybe it's a disease of some sort that requires at-home treatments, so as a caretaker of a loved one we learn that new skill and how to provide that treatment, whatever it might be.

Oftentimes when we're presented with a problem, especially in our culture, we look for the quickest fix, right? Part of what is going on here in our culture right now with this quarantine, and I know part of what drives my anxiety with it is, how long is this going to last? We're so accustomed to immediate, instant gratification and getting things taken care of quickly and easily, that if it takes longer our anxiety starts going up. We look for that quick fix when faced with a problem.

Sometimes when we're faced with a problem we stick our head in the sand, and we just hope that it will go away entirely. We call that denial, right?

And then sometimes, and we've seen it here lately, especially the rush on toilet paper. I've seen the posts—I agree with them all—why toilet paper? It's a respiratory disease, not another kind of disease, but anyway...we panic, right? We panic. We start running around like Chicken Little: "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" Sometimes the more acute the crisis or the bigger the problem, we can default into that kind of response as well.

So when we have a problem we might work harder, try harder, might learn a new skill, we might look for that quick fix, we might be in denial, we might panic...but do we think to pray? I know in my own life, prayer is often at least number two or three on that list, in just about that order. We always reach a point, if we're followers of Jesus, and especially the more that we've been doing this, we go, "Oh yeah, right, we need to pray about this."

Why isn't prayer our first response? I think it's because our human nature is to default to these other options. To just try harder, to figure it out, especially in our American, pull-ourselves-up-by-our-own-bootstraps type of culture in which we live. After all, we are descendants of the age of enlightenment, especially in the latter half of the 1900s, the idea of human progress. The smarter we get, the more enlightened we get as the human race, the more we'll be self-sufficient. The more we don't need this

idea of God. We'll get it all figured out eventually. If you have particularly persons not of faith on your Facebook feed or you've seen responses on the news and stuff, you might have seen this type of response. "Hey, dig down deep within yourself for how we respond to these crises in which we find ourselves."

You might have seen, a few weeks ago, a picture of Vice President Mike Pence. President Trump placed him in charge of our COVID response as a country, and one of the first pictures that came out immediately after that was a picture of the Vice President and many advisors sitting in, I guess it was his office, and they were praying. And some lifted that up as, "Hey, isn't this great." But boy, did you see the response from others to that picture. Politics aside, the amount of response that I saw on Twitter and in other places of people that were just lashing out. I saw comments like, "Why are you praying to some invisible, made-up deity? Get off your rear ends and do something about it." Some people were doing the Chicken Little thing. "Oh no! We are so in trouble because instead of doing something about this, our Vice President is praying about this." Now, I certainly do not agree with all of their policies, but certainly as a person of faith, I was comforted to see the leadership of our country praying in the midst of responding to this pandemic. But we see this response from culture, and it leads to a bit of why prayer might be less than our first response, even for us as followers of Jesus.

Now, some seem to be on that path of human enlightenment quite well in the midst of this pandemic. So many of the responses that we see are appealing to the basic good in people. As Methodists, our understanding of grace is that even that basic good that we have within ourselves is grace at work, God prompting us to do those good things even when we don't realize that it's God prompting us to do those things.

But, eventually, nearly everybody is going to hit some crisis. Some moment in their lives where trying harder and figuring it out isn't going to work. Where a fix is seemingly nowhere to be found. So what then?

Well, in our scripture reading for this morning, Jehoshaphat (all these Biblical names that people name their kids; our kids are Chloe and Mark, both names found in the Bible. Honey, why didn't we name our kid Jehoshaphat? That's a pretty cool Biblical name. She probably said, "Over my dead body." That's what she said when I suggested John Wesley Elmore, too...I was joking about that one.)—anyway, Jehoshaphat was a king of Judah, which if you remember your Biblical history, King David united all the 12 tribes of Israel into the kingdom of Israel. Then under Solomon, who was David's son, who took over after David's death. He was a little too harsh, and after Solomon's death, the kingdom split into two. So you had the northern kingdom, which retained the name of Israel, and the southern kingdom, which took on the name of the kingdom of Judah. And Jerusalem is, or was, its capitol.

So Jehoshaphat reigns, and Jehoshaphat is one of the better kings of Judah. Some of the kings followed the ways of the Lord, some of the kings didn't. Jehoshaphat is one that is more toward following the ways of the Lord. That's another lesson for another time, not terribly important today. But Jehoshaphat, in chapter 20, has a problem. He's got a big problem. People are coming and telling him, "a vast army is coming against you." Now, you've got to remember, in ancient times, the nature of war was that it moved much more slowly. We didn't have response teams that could be halfway across the world at a moment's notice within just a few hours. And you had to gather your forces, you had to travel by land. So often a letter would get sent ahead to whoever you were attacking that said, "Hey, we're on the way to attack you, and we're going to win. Surrender or else." So then sometimes, as in this case, the people on the edge of the kingdom would send in reports that the army was advancing.

So one of the ways the king being attacked could respond would be to send a letter back to say, "Wait. Please don't do this." And they might send a big financial gift, all kinds of goods and services and things like that in an attempt to appease their enemy. And that's the way it worked a lot of times. Another response would be to gather your forces and prepare for the siege. We're going to fight hard, we're going to try harder, we're going to figure this out. And, of course, you could surrender altogether. I don't know many times in history where somebody actually did that. They just folded, right?

Those were the responses available to Jehoshaphat, pretty much, according to the ways of the world. So what did Jehoshaphat do? We read that Jehoshaphat was alarmed. Perfectly human response. We hear, "Hey, these people are coming to attack you," our fight-or-flight response is going to go up as well, right? And so Jehoshaphat is alarmed, but we read that Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord. And he proclaimed a fast for all of Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord.

Now friends, let me remind you as we are in this season of Lent, the purpose of fasting is not to make your quarantine snacks go longer. The purpose of fasting, in normal times, is not to lose weight for swimsuit season. The purpose of fasting, whenever we do it, is to help us focus on God.

So he calls this nationwide fast. What if we did something like that right now? He calls this nationwide fast for all of Judah, and they all came together to seek help from the Lord. And Jehoshaphat then leads them in prayer. And let's take a look at the content of that prayer.

In verse 6, Jehoshaphat says, "Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might

are in your hand, and no one can withstand you.” So Jehoshaphat reminds God, “Hey, you’re in heaven. You rule all the nations. You can do something about this, God.”

Secondly, in verse 7, “Our God, did you not drive out all the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham, your friend?” Jehoshaphat reminds God, “Hey, you gave us this land. Why are we now possibly going to be giving it up?”

In verse 8: “They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name.” “Hey, we’ve even honored you by building this temple here.”

He quotes Solomon’s prayer in verse 9: “If calamity comes upon us, whether with the sword or judgment or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.” He quotes that prayer of Solomon when the temple was first built and dedicated.

And then he turns to the present circumstances. “But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt; so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. See how they are repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us as an inheritance.” So he’s reminding God of how Moab and Ammon have treated Israel: “Hey, on the way into the Promised Land we wanted to conquer them; you said no, let them be, so we obeyed you. Now here’s how we get repaid by them.”

Why would Jehoshaphat need to tell God all this stuff? God is God. God already knows this. God knows who He is. God knows what He’s done. God knows the present situation. Why would Jehoshaphat need to remind God of all this?

Well, remember a key component of prayer is not so much that it changes *God’s* mind, but it changes *our* minds and hearts to more closely align with God’s. But even still, it’s reminding *ourselves*. As we remind God, we’re reminding ourselves: “God, you are God. God, you are good. God, you have a plan, somehow. We trust in that, in all of these things.”

A preacher named Robert Smith, Jr., said, “If you want to see God move, tell God what God said.” *“If you want to see God move, tell God what God said.”* Because guess what we’re doing in that. We’re also telling ourselves, reminding ourselves, what God has already said. **“I will never leave you nor forsake you. When you walk through the waters, you won’t be overwhelmed. When you walk through the fire, I will be with you, like I was with Daniel in the lion’s den; like I was with Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, I will be with you as well.”**

And that gets us to that verse 12: “Our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us.” Jehoshaphat admits that they are powerless. And then, in one of my very favorite verses of scripture, at the end of verse 12, Jehoshaphat says on behalf of the people: “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” *We don’t know what to do, but our eyes are on you.*

What’s the result of that prayer? In verse 14 we read that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel—another great Biblical name. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him and he prophesied and said to the people and to Jehoshaphat, “Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s.” And he gave them encouragement to go out and to face their enemy.

So that’s what Jehoshaphat did. He began to gather his forces. Now, typically in warfare, you would put your fighters at the front, right? Maybe not your best unit, but you would lead with some firepower. Right? You want to be able to strike first and inflict some casualties on the other side. That’s not what Jehoshaphat did. Instead, we read that “after consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.’ As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.”

Praise. Leading with the choir. Leading with the Praise Team from Rivers. Leading with Richard at the piano—what in the world? Leading with song, with praise, with giving thanks, for His love endures forever. Leading with love. And note that causal connection. As they began to sing and praise, the Lord fought the battle and won.

We see it elsewhere in scripture as well. One of those places is when Paul and Silas were in prison in the book of Acts. They sing praises to God, they sing hymns there in prison. And then we get the earthquake that lets them out of prison. There is so much power in praise, especially in times like these. Because praise enthrones God in the situation.

Psalms 22 verse 3 says: “The Lord inhabits the praises of Israel.” The Lord inhabits the praises of Israel, or His people. And I love this Japanese translation of this verse, in Psalm 22 verse 3: “When God’s people praise Him, He brings a big chair and sits there.” *When God’s people praise Him, He brings a big chair and sits there.*

What happens when we praise? Praise is a form of surrender, or relinquishment. In the book of Hebrews, we read, “Let us continue to offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess His name.” A sacrifice of praise? What does that mean? It means that when we praise, we sacrifice, we give up our right to understand what’s going on. We don’t have to understand what’s going on when we praise. We give up our

right to be bitter or resentful when we praise. In fact, it's next to impossible to truly praise God and still remain bitter or resentful against people, against a situation, whatever the case might be. In fact, I confess, sometimes I'm reluctant to praise God because I want to hold on to that grudge or that anger so much.

When we praise, we surrender our right to complain about the situation. We move that language from "I have to" to "I get to." I heard some of y'all using that this past week. We shift that language, we shift that mindset. When we praise, it helps us surrender all that negativity so that we focus ultimately on God and His goodness and all things positive.

Praise causes us to focus on God and not ourselves. E. Stanley Jones, who was a great evangelist in the last century, said, "Whatever gets your attention, gets you." *Whatever gets your attention, gets you.* It goes back to that old colloquial proverb, "Instead of telling God how big our problems are, we tell our problems how big our God is."

So as they led with praise into battle, the Lord fought the battle and the Lord won. We read, lastly, that "on the fourth day they assembled in the valley of Berakah, where they praised the Lord. This is why it is called the Valley of Berakah to this day." Berakah is a Hebrew word that means, "praise." So that's why it's the "Valley of Praise," even to this day.

So Jehoshaphat had a problem. How did he face it? With prayer. *We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you, God.* And with praise. *Give thanks to the Lord, for His love endures forever.*

I've got a plaque here in my office. This was given to me by somebody in my home church when I went into ministry. It says: **Prayer is our first resource and not our last resort.** *Prayer is our first resource and not our last resort.* I keep it on my desk to remind me of that, because I need that reminder more often than I don't.

I know you've heard me joke about not believing everything you read on the internet, and instead of saying Abraham Lincoln, I said Martin Luther King Jr., said "Don't believe everything you read." This is an *actual* quote from Abraham Lincoln: He said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day." Prayer and praise.

So how might we be more intentional people of prayer, especially in light of the situation in which we find ourselves? I mentioned last week a booklet that I use in prayer many times; it's called Field Guide for Daily Prayer. And this helps in terms of Praying the Office. I mentioned that in my message last week. Again, it's not praying in the style

of Michael Scott or Dwight Schrute; that would be hilarious if you prayed in those styles—God would still hear you. But it helps you pray the prayers of the church and helps guide you through a time of morning and evening prayer, especially as you're at home with your families these days. You might check that out. You can find it through Seedbed, which is seedbed.com. They are available to you there. Again, Field Guide for Daily Prayer, to help guide your own prayer times. Use this time now to set those new patterns so that when life returns to normal and we all get crazy again, we've got these patterns that we might continue to roll with.

But secondly, how might we be people of prayer even out in our community? Now, we're all supposed to be staying at home and not going out and so forth, but let's face it, sometimes we need to go to the grocery store to get restocked or whatever the case might be. Back in January our bishop, Sharma Lewis, gathered all of us clergy at Virginia State University for a Day Apart. She had been on medical leave, wanted a chance to reconnect with her clergy, so part of that was a time when we could go to the microphone and share whatever was on our heart that day or at that time. (Of course, a lot of people talking about the potential split in Methodism and all that sort of stuff. All that's on hold right now; General Conference has been postponed, so we don't have to worry about that for a while longer. Let's get through what we've got to get through right now.)

A colleague from Virginia Beach got up to the mike, and he said that when he got up that morning his car wouldn't start, etc. He was feeling dejected and down about that. He finally got it started, and he could have been in a sullen mood, etc., but on his way to Virginia State, I presume he was coming over to 460 to come up to Petersburg, he said he stopped in Smithfield to get gas. My ears perked up; "hey, that's my turf." He said that when he went in to get a drink, the cashier asked him how his day was going and he said, "well, it's been better." He said that the moment struck him, though, and he said that he asked the cashier how her day was going, and he said, "You know, I'm a pastor and I'm headed to this gathering of pastors. Is there some way I can be praying for you today?" And my first thought was, "Hey, wait a minute. That's my turf! Why are you encroaching, doing that on my turf, man?" And then, one of those times God hit me upside the head with a 2x4 and said, "Um, Dan, when was the last time *you* did that?" "Okay, God."

That's one way in which we can be people of prayer out in our community, when we engage with those in the service industry who are working their tails off to try to keep things going right now. Ask them: *How can I be praying for you?* Pray with them on the spot. This whole series about prayer is just talking with God like you do a friend. *Hey God, what's up? I just want to pray for so-and-so right here. Please help them, give them strength, keep them safe, keep them healthy, amen.* Simple prayer. And that's a way we

can really bear witness to our faith here in this community around us during this time together.

We've also got to get our praise and worship on at home. Richard provided some wonderful music and hymns for us this morning. Pay attention to what you're putting into your mind and into your heart right now. Turn off the Facebook feed. Turn off all the news and everything. Turn on your favorite music app, whatever the case might be. It might be iTunes, it might be Spotify, YouTube, whatever. Google praise and worship music or hymns or whatever, and listen. One of my favorites has been, and especially right now continues to be, a contemporary praise song called "Raise A Hallelujah." It has such powerful words and is a fantastic song. There's going to be a T-Mail going out right after this; I'll include the YouTube link with the lyrics so that you can sing along to it here in a little bit. But part of the lyrics say, "*I'm gonna sing in the middle of the storm / louder and louder, you're gonna hear my praises roar / up from the ashes hope will arise / death is defeated / the King is alive.*" Amen to that! There's this great chorus that builds and builds and builds, and you can't help but feeling the Spirit when you get your worship on with music like that.

If you're more traditional, and I can worship in all ways and grew up on traditional hymns, one of the best maybe for this season in which we find ourselves—I think I heard Richard playing it this morning—"It is Well With My Soul." *When peace like a river attendeth my way / When sorrows like sea billows roll / Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say / It is well, it is well with my soul.* And then verse two: *Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come / let this blessed assurance control / That Christ has regarded our helpless estate / and hath shed His own blood for my soul (for your soul / for our souls).*

And then lastly, and again, we'll be sending this out as part of the T-Mail that will be forthcoming, our bishop has asked us as a Conference to join her every day at noon in prayer with this prayer, the text of which will be included in the T-Mail. Be on the lookout for it. So let's close together with this prayer, shall we? Join me in prayer.

Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank you for your blessings, past, present and future. You are our rock and source of our hope in all things and at all times. As Jehovah Jireh, our provider God, we ask you this day to stretch out your mighty hand and eradicate from the face of the earth forever this virus called COVID-19 that is spreading rapidly from continent to continent.

We also pray that you, Jehovah Rapha, our healing God, would place your hand upon all of those who have been stricken by this virus and restore them to full health. Be with those who have lost loved ones and are grieving. Protect all who are caring for those with this virus and keep them from contracting it themselves.

Calm our fears and provide us with your peace that surpasses all understanding. Strengthen us with the joy of the Lord and help us to hold firmly to the hope that only you can provide.

Unify us that we, the Virginia Annual Conference, may be able to experience anew the promise of your presence in and through the unity of our faith, hope and trust in you in the days ahead and forever. We offer this prayer in the mighty name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen and amen.

Thank you so much for joining me this morning. I hope this word is an encouragement to you. The battle is not ours; it is the Lord's. Let us go forth, friends, in prayer and in praise into every situation that we face together. Thanks be to God. Amen.