

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Rev. John Tapscott

“FOUR SEARCHING QUESTIONS” (Responding to the current crisis)

Mark 4:35-41

I have changed things up for my sermon today. The situation we are going through now with COVID-19 is so unprecedented that I want to try and address it directly.

I suppose the true seriousness of the situation of became obvious last week when the NBA, the NHL and Major League baseball all suspended their seasons. One of our young people said, “I don’t mind being in quarantine for a couple of weeks but not being able to watch live sports during those two weeks is almost unbearable.” I agree. Then we heard that Mrs. Trudeau had contracted Covid-19, most likely on a trip to England. Thankfully she is doing well. And the Prime Minister has tested negative, so we’re thankful for that. You know, no matter what you think of Mr. Trudeau or President Trump or any other world leader, they all need support and prayers during this time. It’s not really a time for politicking. All that can come later. Yes, they will make some blunders along the way, and some good decisions. They won’t get it all perfect, but I believe our leaders and medical experts are all working diligently to help overcome this pandemic. This is new and uncharted territory for them, as well as for the rest of us.

Now my text today is from Mark 4:35-41. This is one of my favorite go-to stories in the Bible. In this story there are four questions which will guide our thinking today. I am going to read it for you. And I ask that you listen carefully for the questions in the story.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

So there we are – four questions. I suggest that as we consider the answers to these questions we may find our fears being replaced by divine peace, the peace that passes all human understanding.

Now I not going to consider the questions in the exact order in which they appear. The first one I want us to think about is Jesus’ question to his disciples: *Why are you afraid?*

Now we know why they were afraid. They were afraid because they thought they were going to perish in a dreadful windstorm. Now these were experienced fishermen who had sailed through many storms on the unpredictable sea of Galilee. But this storm was especially strong, almost demonic in its force. And that's not surprising considering that the devil himself would have loved to bury Jesus and his disciples in a watery grave. So of course, they were afraid, afraid for their very lives. "We are perishing," they cried out to Jesus. So they were actually more than afraid. They were panicking.

Why are we afraid? Well, there are many things that we fear. Jesus often addressed human fears and said, "Fear not!" Those were some of his most used words. But why specifically now in the midst of the Covid-19 outbreak are so many people afraid?

Well, I understand it. No one wants to become ill. Now honestly if you are in good health, and if you contract it the symptoms likely won't be too severe. People who have had it say that while it's not great, it's not much worse or perhaps no worse than the common cold. But of course, one of the problems is that you can have it and spread it even before the symptoms appear. And I don't think any of us wants to spread this to anyone else. For Covid-19 can be dangerous and even fatal for some people, especially the elderly, the feeble, the frail and those with pre-existing, underlying health issues. We should try to avoid physical contact with such people for a few weeks. But don't forget to call them. My mother is 95 years old and in relatively good health for her age in a retirement home. But if she or many of the people in her home were to contract Corona virus, they could be in real trouble. Thankfully her home is now shut down to visitors. It's certainly good we celebrated her 95th birthday there last week. So I'm not really fearful for myself, and for you who are healthy, but for the frail and the vulnerable. And even some young people could be at risk if they have compromised immune systems.

I suppose we are also fearful of the economic consequences of the disease, and while they will be painful for many people, especially if they are laid off with no pay. these consequences will likely be short-term. Within a few months the economy should turn around and catch up and then move ahead as it makes up for what is lost during these weeks and months.

I honestly believe that the largest fear over this is fear of the unknown. There is much we just don't know at this point. We become fearful when things are unknown and beyond our control.

Ten days ago a friend of ours saw a person in the local Wal-Mart wearing a HazMat suit, presumably because of the Coronavirus. Now I'm guessing that the person was afraid of contracting rather than spreading it, but I'm not sure of that. In any case, people were quite shocked, and children were apparently quite frightened by the sight of this suited individual. We are already fearful of this virus, and the sight of an individual in such a suit only adds to it. Fear breeds fear. And when that happens, fear turns into panic. Then you get people buying up loads of toilet paper and hand sanitizer and bottled water (though as far as I know the taps are still working). Panic causes us to act like a crowd of frightened sheep. The panic drives us over the edge.

But the risk is relatively low for most of us. It is said that you have a greater risk of being killed in a car accident driving to get a corona test than you do of being killed by the virus. Think about that and about the risks that we take in everyday living. The medical officer of health in British Columbia said yesterday that it's still ok to go shopping, or to a restaurant or outside for a walk. (Although that may well change). But I was glad to hear that because the media has not always been helpful in pointing these things out. In fact, the media sometimes seem to be stoking our fears by always reporting on the worst case scenarios. Maybe it's best to turn off our TV's for a while or at least stop watching them constantly.

Now I think we should have reasonable fears. Let's take all responsible precautions against the virus and be mindful of one another. But let's not let panic.

Second question. Back to the beginning of the story. The disciples woke Jesus up and said to him, *"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"*

Of course, Jesus cared. The very fact that Jesus was in the boat with the disciples riding with them in the storm is the sign that he cared. That's why he woke up and rebuked the demonic wind and said to the sea, *"Peace! Be still!"* Then the wind ceased and there was a great calm.'

People may wonder, *"Where is God in the midst of this outbreak? Does he care? Or is he asleep at the switch?"* Well, of course God cares. The God who became incarnate in Jesus and rode the stormy seas of Galilee, is with us now by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have a caring, compassionate, powerful God, a God who rides with us in the storm. And eventually this demonic storm of Covid-19, for make no mistake, that's what this is, a demonic storm, will be brought under control. God is at work in the midst of this and this storm will pass. And sometimes the greater the storm the greater the peace that follows.

Now part of the way God's care is expressed is through the leaders and medical experts and researchers and personnel who are working diligently to stop the spread of the virus. God is our provider and this world is full of his provision, both capable people and physical resources. There is enough for all of us if we use God's resources wisely. God does not leave us alone and helpless. And we must be grateful.

But we must look at the disciples' question a little more closely. They didn't ask *"Do you not care if we die?"* They asked, *"Do you not care if we perish?"* Perishing is worse than dying for it has the dimension of dying and being separated from God, of sinking to the bottom of the sea out of God's sight, lost forever. That thought was truly what made them panic.

But listen. Jesus came to save us from this very fate. You see, we are all infected with the most deadly virus of all, the sin virus. And the sin virus leads to death, not just physical death, but eternal spiritual death, where we would be shut out from God's presence and God's Kingdom forever. The power of sin would sink us in the depths of hell. It would cause us to perish forever. Let me tell you, Covid-19 is weak stuff compared to the sin virus. It's not really Covid-19 that is causing all this hoarding and gouging; it's the sin virus. And while we may not be doing any of that, we are all infected. *"We have all sinned and fallen short,"* says the Scripture. But Jesus, the Son of God, came to save us from this deadly virus. Throughout his life, he never caught this virus.

He was without sin, obedient in every way to the Father's will, even unto death on the cross. But on the cross he became sin for us. As he died he was infected with our disease. Jesus Christ is God himself, standing in our place, carrying our diseases, paying the price and saving us from the deadly virus. He won the victory and now he is the antidote for our disease. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Yes, indeed he does. He cares and loves us so greatly that he suffered for us on the cross. Of course, we will all die one day but all who trust in him will not perish. Instead, we will be raised with him to everlasting life in the Father's house. Nothing in life, in death or in life beyond death can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. And because of Christ's victory we look forward to hope to that time when God finally puts away all disease, death, mourning, crying and pain; when God's Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven and all things are made new. And that day is sure to come.

Next question. Jesus asked the disciples, *"Do you still have no faith?"*

Jesus seemed to be amazed that the disciples, having spent so much time with Jesus, could be so easily panicked. Even after all they had heard and seen and experienced, it seemed they were still without faith in him. Of course, over the subsequent months and years and especially after the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, their faith in him would grow rock-solid.

Now we are people of faith or we wouldn't be here today. But who or what is our faith in? Well, I think in these days we must have faith in our leaders and the experts. We are all in this boat together, and it is really for the best that we do follow their advice. And I think we also need to trust and obey our Lord's word to love our neighbour as ourselves. Hoarding loads of toilet paper and sanitizer and food and water is not showing love for your neighbour. In fact, it's very selfish. Take only what you need and leave enough for others. As the people of Christ, let's show that we really care for one another and our neighbours. And of course, our faith is in Christ for because He is the One who saves us from perishing and brings us to new and eternal life.

And the final question. The disciples were filled with awe and asked one another, *"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"*

They were starting to see who he is. God was opening their eyes. But we know who He is, don't we? We've heard the whole story. He is the Son of God, the Crucified Saviour and Risen Lord, the Great Victor over sin and death. He is the ever-living one. So we put our hand in the hand of the God-man who stilled the water. We cling tightly to him, knowing that he clings even more tightly to us, and will never let us go. And we hear his clear voice sounding, "I am with you in this storm. I am on board this vessel. I will never fail you or forsake you. So care for one another and do be afraid. Take my hand and be at peace."