



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
1200 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
(612) 332-3421  
[www.westminstermpls.org](http://www.westminstermpls.org)

## *The Power of Hope*

Timothy Hart-Andersen

Sunday, March 29, 2020

*Psalm 46; Romans 5:1-5*

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

We’ll never know what calamity – what *trouble* – the ancient Hebrew psalmist refers to in these lines.

“Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.” (Psalm 46:1-2)

Perhaps it’s an actual earthquake, with mountains trembling and waters roaring. Or maybe it’s a metaphor for personal tragedy...or community disaster. Whatever it is, the world, for the psalmist, is not right. Something’s out of control. It’s a crisis. It’s unpredictable. It’s happening and they feel *powerless* in the face of it.

All of that sounds familiar right now. The poet might as well have been describing a global pandemic.

“The nations are in an uproar,” the psalmist reports from some forgotten time, “The kingdoms totter.” (Psalm 46:6)

It sounds like what we’re going through. Nearly half the world is on lockdown. The virus has spread into almost every country on earth. The U.S. is now the epicenter of the pandemic. Three weeks ago, there were no known cases of the virus in Minnesota; today there are 400.

So, when the poet of old says the earth is changing, the ground is shaking, and the world is in serious trouble, we get it. We’re kindred spirits with that psalmist in the midst of a crisis we alone cannot manage.

But, like the psalmist, we, too, are people of faith. *We are not powerless.* In the midst of that distant crisis, the psalmist doesn’t panic, but instead holds fast to the assurance that “God is in the midst of the city. It shall not be moved. God will help it when the morning dawns.” (Psalm 46:5)

Across the ages, then, comes this word that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble – that we need not fear. The psalm gives us what we long for in our time of trouble – the reminder that even when the world seems to be coming apart, there’s reason for hope for those who trust in God.

Last week we explored together the power of *community*. Next week, on the Sunday of Palms and Passion, the start of Holy

Week, we will look at the power of *vulnerability*. Today we focus on *the power of hope*.

As people of faith we're in the business of hope, not only for ourselves, but, perhaps especially for the community around us. Our witness to the power of hope is more important now than ever.

We're on Day Two of the Executive Order issued by Governor Walz to stay at home. Knowing that such an action might be coming our staff team here at Westminster had prepared to assemble worship for this morning piecemeal from our homes, patch it together, and put it online for you.

But the governor's order exempts Minnesota faith leaders leaving home to record or broadcast religious services, as we are doing today. We're considered, in the government's words, "essential to continued critical infrastructure viability." All of us carried exemption letters as we came to Westminster today. We're here with a skeletal crew, just a few of us, operating under strict guidelines to keep ourselves safe.

Last Monday, Attorney General Keith Ellison arranged a phone call with the downtown interfaith senior clergy. I was privileged to be part of that congregation. Religious congregations, he said, provide – as we would hear later in the governor's order – an essential community service, especially in times like these. Ellison is a devout Muslim, and he spoke of how his faith was sustaining him and his family right now.

The Attorney General said the state would harness medical resources and act to prevent the spread of the virus and work to alleviate the economic impact, but Minnesota, he said, needs its faith communities to offer the public something altogether different, yet equally important: *the power of hope*.

He and the governor, he said, wanted to learn from us, and to listen to how our congregations were responding to the pandemic and to hear any counsel we might offer.

One by one, the clergy spoke. The rabbi described offering confirmation class by Zoom. A minister spoke of providing pastoral care by FaceTime. An imam told of organizing to feed hundreds of people in north Minneapolis. A pastor told of offering Bible study on You Tube. A priest described celebrating mass on behalf of his absent congregation. I pointed to the huge spike in worship attendance with our online services, and also of the emergency grants we're at Westminster making to local partners on the frontlines of community assistance.

We were describing that infrastructure – *an infrastructure of hope*, built as each congregation goes to work in the community around us, either online or in safe ways with our neighbors.

The downtown clergy decided on that call to create and post an online interfaith prayer service, with each of us submitting a recorded segment from the safety of our homes. I commend Channel 9 for airing Westminster's service of worship this afternoon at 1:00, and I encourage the station to do the same with

other faith traditions, to affirm the diversity of religious expressions in our Minnesota community.

Some of you may have seen the photo from Israel this week of two emergency medical technicians outside their ambulance praying together. The Jew, named Mintz, was wearing his prayer shawl and facing Jerusalem. The Muslim, named Abu Jama, was on his prayer rug facing Mecca, side-by-side.

“The two men said their back-to-back worship was nothing new. ‘We try to pray together, instead of each one of us taking the time for himself, because we have a lot of situations we’re dealing with right now,’ Mintz, said.

“‘The whole world is battling this,’ Abu Jama, added. ‘This is a disease that doesn’t tell the difference between anybody, any religion, any gender... You put that aside. We work together, we live together. This is our life.’”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/middleeast/israel-virus-prayer.html>

That’s the sound of hope in the midst of an earthquake of trouble – and he’s right. Now is the time to put aside our differences and work together in new ways to make it through this time. We will learn to live together creatively, in spite of being apart, and we will be a better people on the other side of this pandemic, for having gone through it together.

The downtown clergy shared with the Attorney General our concern for the most vulnerable in our communities. We pressed for assistance for those facing evictions, and for those precariously housed. We reported that we're hearing from our congregations and colleagues and the community of an increase in acts of racial and religious hatred. And we shared concern about a rising number of incidents targeting immigrants and the LGBTQ community and people of color.

The psalmist was right to address fear in that long-ago time. A crisis tempts us to give in to fear. *Fear is the enemy of hope*. Fear in a time like this causes scapegoating and blaming. Fear lures ugly human tendencies out of their hiding places. It divides us and pushes us to "otherize" people, especially strangers.

But hope keeps fear at bay.

In times of trial, those of us in our tradition who follow Jesus must not forget his commandment to love one another, as he loved us. Every faith tradition shares the same rule of life, saying it one way or another: to treat others as we ourselves would want to be treated. Hope is born when we live together like that, especially in difficult times.

Some might think of hope merely as passive optimism or wishful aspiration, but the hope of people of faith is more dynamic, more assertive, more resilient than that. Mitri Raheb, Westminster's partner in Bethlehem on the West Bank, likes to say of his work as a Christian pastor in that biblical city, "Hope is what we do."

We make hope happen – you and I – by how we live, by what we do, by who we are in the midst of this pandemic.

The Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans describes how hope emerges in responding to a crisis. “Suffering,” he says, “Produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint.”

When Paul refers to *suffering*, we understand what this means, increasingly each day. When we feel unsettled and anxious, or when a friend loses their job, or when we face financial hardship, or when we feel terribly alone and isolated and down, or when we watch the markets tumble and unemployment rise, or when our children are confused and upset, or when we cannot be with those we love, or when someone we know becomes seriously ill – that’s the *suffering* referred to in the Letter to the Romans.

I’m sorry to report that as of Friday we have our first church member hospitalized with covid-19. His wife and children cannot be with him, of course, which only adds to their suffering. I have assured them we will pray for the family and for those caring for him, as he is critically ill.

*Suffering produces endurance.* We’re in the early stages of understanding what that means. *Patience. Perseverance. Persistence.* When we feel as if these past two weeks have been more like two months, when we feel an emotional intensity that simply will not let up, when we feel as if it will never end, when we worry non-stop and lose sleep because of it, when we realize we’re in this for

the long haul – that’s the *endurance* referred to in the Letter to the Romans.

*Endurance produces character.* This crisis has the capacity to bring out the best in us. When we see medical personnel working long hours to care for those who are ill, when we see volunteers safely distributing food to those who are hungry, when we see teachers and students learning overnight how to do school together online, when we see strangers being kind to one another from a distance – that’s the *character* referred to in the Letter to the Romans.

*Character produces hope, and hope, Paul says, does not disappoint us.* We’re beginning to understand what this means. When we sense that we are not alone – that the community understands that we are in this together -, when we have faith that God is at work in the midst of the crisis, when we find ourselves saying, “We will get through this,” when we trust that medical science and public health practitioners and elected officials will lead us to the other side of the pandemic, when we refuse to give up – that’s the *hope* referred to in the Letter to the Romans.

*Hope is what we who follow Jesus do.* It’s our responsibility – and not only for ourselves, but for the world around us.

A Westminster member who’s a med-school student at the U has helped organize Covid-Sitters, a program of childcare for families of healthcare workers engaged in caring for those with the disease.

That's what the power of hope looks like.

Two days ago, our Hunger Ministry Team at Westminster released funds to support emergency meals in north Minneapolis coordinated by Masjid An-Nur, Mosque of the Light, and Liberty Community Church.

That's what the power of hope looks like.

Our lay leaders are telephoning 100 isolated older adults who are part of our Senior Center program, and 200 church members who are older and living by themselves.

That's what the power of hope looks like.

In the midst of this storm, as the waves of unpredictability and chaos strike us again and again, and as fear tugs at us, you and I are called to be people of hope, to stand steadfast with the psalmist – and with the author of that great hymn of the faith:

“Our God, Our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come.  
Our shelter in the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home.”

May it be so.

Thanks be to God. Amen.