

NOT YOUR BATTLE

Sermon, March 29, 2020

Text: Selections from II Chronicles 20

A March 14, 2016 article by Time magazine correspondent Lilly Rothman told the story of one of the significant events in the entire twentieth century.¹ She wrote on the 74th anniversary of that event which took place March 14, 1942 ...78 years and two weeks ago yesterday. Thirty-three year old Anne Miller lay near death in the Yale New Haven hospital. She had been hospitalized over a month. Her body ravaged with a burning fever for weeks, her temperature spiking as high as 107; she developed septicemia (*blood poisoning*) following a streptococcus infection from a miscarriage. Ann's desperate doctors tried every known medical treatment of the time, but to no avail. As she slipped in and out of consciousness, her attending physician made a last ditch effort to try and save her life and gambled on a new and very experimental drug. The government, which had tight control over key medicines during wartime, needed to be persuaded to release nearly half of the entire national supply of the drug ... which was roughly about a tablespoon. They consented, the drug was administered. Ann Miller's hospital chart is now on display at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC ... it shows her temperature dropped sharply overnight. The next day she was no longer delirious and was eating full meals. Ann Miller was the first American treated with penicillin ... the wonder drug discovered by accident fourteen years earlier when Scottish physician Sir Alexander Fleming was experimenting with the staphylococcal bacteria in a London hospital lab, and the culture had inadvertently become contaminated with mold. Fleming happened to notice the mold prevented the bacteria from growing. It was years of testing before release for experimental trials that Ann Miller got the first dose of penicillin in the United States. Penicillin has saved millions of lives, it is still saving untold lives every day. Including my own life, by the way, in February 1969; I was in ninth grade and afflicted with spinal meningitis ... unconscious for nearly five days, penicillin worked its magic and I awoke the sixth day. Ann Miller, a 1931 graduate of the Columbian Presbyterian School of Nursing, went on to live a full life and died in 1999 at the age of 90; her obituary lists among her survivors three sons, seven grandchildren, six great grandchildren.²

True stories such as this are reminders for us, particularly in times of crisis, anxiety, fear and concern, of the possibilities of a new day ... whether it is comes by the brilliant use of the minds God has given us, or by the accidental discovery of what already exists in Creation by someone who was being attentive, or by overt and direct divine intervention. Recorded in the Scriptures are countless true stories of God's redeeming, saving love in the midst of crises, most fully exemplified for us in the promise of resurrection and new life, a wonderful story we will again commemorate in two weeks time. We tell and retell these stories each Sunday in obedience to the two most frequent commands given in the Scriptures. REMEMBER, AND FEAR NOT. And especially at times like this, we remember the biblical refrain that shows up over and over again in the pages of Scripture, including our text from II Chronicles: "*Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged; the Lord will be with you.*"

And as Jahaziel added, "*For the battle is not yours, but God's.*"

It hadn't been the best of times for the tiny nation of Judah. The good ol' days under King David, when the nation was strong and prosperous, were just a memory now. After David's son Solomon died, the Hebrews suffered under a succession of failed kings who led the nation into civil war, economic depression, the perversion of justice, military humiliation, and a general sense of social malaise. Then, in the middle of the ninth century BC, Jehoshaphat "jumped" into the scene, and became king. He was convinced his nation's problems were primarily spiritual. So he reintroduced his people to the reading of Holy Scripture; we are told in chapter 17 that in the third year of his reign he sent a number of officials and priests to all the towns in Judah; v. 9, "...taking with them the Book of the Law of the Lord; they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people." Chapter 20 begins by telling us that after Jehoshaphat had finally led the people into all of this spiritual and social renewal, things were going well ... the country prospered, the "rock market" was rising ... it was a good time to be alive. And suddenly, the kingdom was then faced with deadly challenge. A messenger came running up to the king saying, "*The Moabites, Ammonites, the Meunites are marching this way... a vast army, a huge multitude, is coming against you.*" We are told that after Jehoshaphat heard this multitude was coming, he became afraid. That's a rational response. The king knew the limitations of his tiny nation. He knew the odds were against him. We are told that "*Jehoshaphat was alarmed, so he resolved to seek the Lord; he resolved to inquire of the Lord.*" In the words of Franklin Roosevelt, "*Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear.*" For Jehoshaphat, the welfare of his nation was more important than his fear, so Jehoshaphat brought his fear to worship. Worship, where we focus not on the enemy, and not on our limitations, but on God. Jehoshaphat concludes his prayer in verse 12 by saying, "*We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes on You.*" Worship is the place where we stand before the Lord, to listen and watch for God's word to us. Through Jahaziel the Lord responded

¹ See <https://time.com/4250235/penicillin-1942-history>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/06/09/us/anne-miller-90-first-patient-who-was-saved-by-penicillin.html>

to Jehoshaphat, "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's." He goes on to tell him to go boldly out to meet this army, but adds, "you will not have to fight this battle. Go out and face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you!" (You'll have to tune in next week for what happened next ... or, just read ahead in your Bibles.)

Author Ramon Presson writes, "The most repeated command in Scripture is 'fear not.' It appears 365 times—one for each day of the year — and is usually followed by 'for I am with you.' **God would have us understand that factoring in His presence always changes the equation**"³ 365 times! I haven't checked his counting; I'll just take his word for it for now. Someone else counted there are some two hundred and seventy times in the Bible we are told to "remember" ... which makes "Remember!" the second most frequent command (I haven't checked his counting, either). **"Remember, and fear not."** Remember what God has done, remember what God can do, remember what He has promised, remember how He has delivered ... remember, remember, remember! And fear not. Don't be discouraged.

It was March 11, 2016 (three days before that Time article appeared) the Rev. Stuart A. Kenworthy, Vicar of the Washington National Cathedral, began his funeral homily with these words: "Today we are exactly where we ought to be, standing with this family and one another before the mystery of life and death, saying our prayers and farewell to Nancy Davis Reagan. The great twentieth century rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was once asked, "What is the most important thing a religious person can do?" His answer was given in one word: **'Remember.'** That is precisely what we do this day. This is what we do as religious people every time we gather ... we hear again and again the stories of encountering God ancient and cherished; stories that point to God as ineffable mystery, yet still revealed to our fragile and mortal humanity. We remember God's saving love for the human race and family. And in that act of remembering, the God of life and the Giver of every good gift is present to us."

What is the most important thing a religious person can do? "Remember. And in that act of remembering, the God of life and the Giver of every good gift is present to us" ... so fear not.

Fear can escalate a pandemic into a pandemonium. An excellent little devotional shared with me by one of our deacons this week made this point: Ever notice the five letter word that is smack in the middle of the word **Pandemonium**? The word 'demon' in 'pandemonium' is not a coincidence. Pandemonium is a word that first appeared in the epic poem "Paradise Lost" by 17th century poet John Milton. Milton is credited with coining that word by combining two Greek words: "pan" – meaning "all" and "daimon" meaning "demons", then adding a suffix -"ium" – which means "place." So, the word pandemonium literally means "the place of all demons", which Milton used in his poem to describe Hell. To put it a bit crassly, pandemonium is literally when all hell breaks loose. DON'T let fear cause a pandemonium in the face of this pandemic. Fear not; God will be with us.

Clearly people are afraid right now, even Bible believing people, so much so that we've hoarded enough toilet paper to last until 2030. Life can be frightening enough in ordinary times but clearly, as shelves empty and markets go crazy and the infection count rises, it is scarier now. With our governor's new mandate, families of six are in trouble starting tomorrow; one of you is going to have to leave the house! (actually, I understand families are exempt from this mandate ... so our videographer and tech wizard Matt can legally go home after worship). So-called non essential jobs are being cut ... which makes me want to ask, "Exactly what IS a non essential job?" Frankly, the truth is a "non-essential" job is a job that isn't YOUR job. What may be "nonessential" to some — restaurants, hotels, bars, stores, cruise ships, tourist sites, shops, malls, Allie's Donuts — are essential places of employment and indispensable sources of income for millions of others. We don't want the cure to be worse than the disease!

A remark attributed to an Army officer by NY Times reporter Peter Arnett Feb 8, 1968 from the devastated Vietnamese town of Ben Tre -- "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it."⁴ We don't want to do that! We don't want to act unwisely or out of fear and cripple or destroy the economy that sustains all of us in order to save us! Nor do we want to act unwisely by not taking this viral threat seriously ... and so we are here, worshiping as a community faith on line in an empty sanctuary with four people ... the pastor (me), the choir (Olivia), the Director of Music (John) and the cameraman (Matt). But we are here with all of you, standing before the Lord and waiting to listen for God's word to us. May we pray for ourselves, for each other, and for our representatives as they make decisions for the welfare of our community, our state, our nation and our world.

I close with this: In 1527, a deadly plague hit Martin Luther's town of Wittenberg, and while others fled, he and his wife stayed put in order to be of help to any in need. He wrote this in a letter to a friend (see back of cover page for full text).

Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take medicine. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, He will surely find me, and I have done what He has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, it is this God fearing faith that upholds me, because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.

³ See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/jared-c-wilson/the-fear-driven-life>

⁴ See <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-09/destroying-a-quote-s-history-in-order-to-save-it>

I quoted portions of the following in the sermon's conclusion; here's the full text:

WHETHER ONE MAY FLEE FROM A DEADLY PLAGUE

by MARTIN LUTHER

Others sin on the right hand. They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are.

They say that it is God's punishment; if He wants to protect them He can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God but tempting Him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.

If one makes no use of intelligence or medicine when he could do so without detriment to his neighbor, such a person injures his body and must beware lest he become a suicide in God's eyes. By the same reasoning a person might forego eating and drinking, clothing and shelter, and boldly proclaim his faith that if God wanted to preserve him from starvation and cold, he could do so without food and clothing.

Actually that would be suicide. It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have.

He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor's death and is a murderer many times over. Indeed, such people behave as though a house were burning in the city and nobody were trying to put the fire out. Instead they give leeway to the flames so that the whole city is consumed, saying that if God so willed, he could save the city without water to quench the fire.

No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate the house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city.

What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way:

Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it.

I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.

If God should wish to take me, He will surely find me and I have done what He has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others.

If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.

Moreover, he who has contracted the disease and recovered should keep away from others and not admit them into his presence unless it be necessary.

Though one should aid him in his time of need, as previously pointed out, he in turn should, after his recovery, so act toward others that no one becomes unnecessarily endangered on his account and so cause another's death. 'Whoever loves danger,' says the wise man, 'will perish by it.'

Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague," Luther's Works, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II (ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann; vol. 43: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 43: 131-132.