

Skyfall Living

Sermon, May 17, 2020

Texts: Isaiah 1:12-18; Hebrews 1:10-12

(During the Time With the Children I did a shortened reading of the childhood story Chicken Little, which I'll attach to this document. From Wikipedia: "Henny Penny, more commonly known in the United States as Chicken Little, is a European folk tale which has passed into the English language as a common idiom indicating a hysterical or mistaken belief of imminent disaster. Similar stories go back more than five centuries. A 1943 animated short of Chicken Little was released during World War II as one of a series produced at the request of the U.S. government for the purpose of discrediting Nazism. It tells a variant of the parable in which Foxy Loxy takes the advice of a book on psychology (on the original 1943 cut, it is entitled Mein Kampf) by striking the least intelligent first. Dim-witted Chicken Little is convinced by Foxy Loxy that the sky is falling and he whips the farmyard into mass hysteria, which the unscrupulous fox manipulates for his own benefit."

Sunday, May 3 we read Jesus words from John 10: Jesus' words: "the thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy." Well, this pandemic is a thief. Among other things, **it stole our calendars**. All of us had events scheduled throughout April, May, and into the summer. Good things. Easter celebrations, May breakfasts, mission trips, retreats, church picnics, Confirmations, baptisms, family events. My son is supposed to get married in June, and they want me to conduct the ceremony, but travel restrictions right now make that difficult; hopefully they'll be lifted soon. I had to cancel plans in April to help my daughter move to another apartment in Ohio. It is difficult to plan anything in this environment. **This pandemic stole my congregation**. For 23+ years, minus some vacation and study weeks, that's at least one THOUSAND two hundred Sundays I was privileged to gather weekly (and throughout the course of those weeks) with this wonderful congregation ... but now, what is this, the ninth week I'm talking to a camera in an almost-empty sanctuary?! I've never gone this long in my entire life without gathering with a congregation to worship. The church is the people, not the building; I miss the WE in worship, and I miss the community. And not a few in this congregation have been worshipping here each Sunday long before I arrived on the scene; for some of you, I'm still the new pastor! You've been robbed of an essential routine you've had for decades. And for many of you, **the pandemic** (and the related harsh measures) **has stolen your livelihood**. The Friday **Wall Street Journal** just cited another dismal statistic: Not only have 35,000,000 lost jobs, some **27,000,000** people in the United States have lost their employer-based health insurance since the pandemic began (and the \$1,200 stimulus check might cover the cost of about one third of one visit to the ER!).

Many of our nerves are frayed hearing from government officials who are relatively unaffected by this "thief;" they have plenty of money, fully stocked refrigerators, their jobs and income are not threatened, and they're out there saying, "Don't open too soon! It could be disastrous! It could lead to needless suffering and death!" But what happens if we open too late? What happens if the economic damage and the educational damage is so bad we can't recover, with all the related human pathologies that entails? The goal was to flatten the curve, not flatten the nation! What happens if we open too late; what if the economic damage is so severe that we're killing the patient in order to cure the disease? All of the really smart people in Washington, on Wall Street and in state capitals throughout the country seem to be arguing with each other about what is to be done to keep us safe. But you don't have to be all that smart to realize no one really knows for certain what to do. That uncertainty is a huge part of what worries us. It makes us anxious.

Living during a "skyfall" (a term borrowed from the James Bond movie, which THEY borrowed from the Chicken Little fable); everything seems to come crashing and cascading down all around you at once. Many of you have been through a "skyfall" at some point in your lives, or maybe you're living through one right now. As Dr. Walter Kaiser liked to quip, "I'm no prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet, and I work for a non prophet organization" ... but I do know, sooner or later, every one of you will have a "sky is falling" experience, if you haven't had one already. Maybe the company you've poured your life and heart and soul into shuts its doors. Or maybe the medical tests show that you do, in fact, have a grim disease. Or maybe your spouse slips off his/her wedding ring, puts it on the kitchen counter, and slams the door forever behind him/her. The details of your "skyfall" experience will vary, but whatever it is, in that moment, and in the days and weeks ... maybe even years ... that follow, you're convinced the sky is falling, that your life is basically over. You just want to draw the curtains and turn out the lights; the party's over.

I've been there. (Tomorrow is the 21st anniversary of my wife's passing.) As have many of you. That sense of "the sky is falling" hurts. It's scary, debilitating, frightening. At times it's just overwhelming. **And it's highly deceiving**. As bad as it gets, as much pain as it inflicts, it is most likely not the end of your world. In fact, it may not be even close. It just feels that way. But if you're not careful, you can become so overwhelmed with all the bad stuff that you'll spend so much time staring up at the sky that you're convinced is about to fall, and you forget or neglect the reality that you still have work to do, people to take care of, vocations to carry out, responsibilities to perform, dreams to fulfill (and, in the case of the version of Chicken Little just shared with the kids, you have the trash to take out ... simple duties that just might save your life!)

We are not the Church of Chicken Little; we are the Church of Jesus Christ! Our central message is not "The sky is falling." Our central message is "There Is Hope." Part of that message, that work, that mission, is no matter how bad it gets we are to do good, we are to do what we can do in the here and now in the midst of how it is to save our culture from moral collapse, to raise up faithful and law abiding progeny, to work with our Lord making this world a bit more like heaven (as we pray each week, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven") and not to fritter away our time

and energy whining wistfully about the good ol' days. The mission of the church is to proclaim HOPE through the gracious and living ministry of Jesus Christ. Until the sky really does fall, as it will in that day when the Lord comes again (*according to our reading from Hebrews*), that's the work God has given the church to do. Let's keep doing it.

I would venture to say there is nothing that makes us as anxious as uncertainty. We just don't handle it well. Uncertainty drives us nuts, it makes us lose perspective, and, frankly, this anxiety itself may be what we have most to fear (*to paraphrase that famous quote of Franklin Roosevelt*) ... because when we are afraid of an unknown future, we are often at our worst. We are often at our worst when we are anxious, when we are uncertain about the future. When we *fear* it is going to get really, really bad, that's when we are most tempted to give up on civility. That's when people become pessimistic and cynical. In anxious times, it's every man for himself, take care of your own ... and go on Facebook to snipe at each other and post nasty memes about our politicians.

Well, it was during an anxious time that Isaiah became a prophet in the land of Judah. The reason for the anxiety in those days was that the Assyrians were developing a larger and larger empire to the north, and it appeared to people that they were going to conquer most of the known world. (*For those of you who remember the Jonah story, Ninevah was the capital of Assyria*). The Assyrians were already gobbling up other small countries like Judah, and everyone seemed to think it was only a matter of time before they would come and capture Jerusalem as well ... which, by the way, **never happened**. The Assyrians never did gobble up Jerusalem ... the disaster never actually happened ... but the people were all running scared. And whenever people are running scared, historically, they run not only from the enemy but also from their neighbors. Justice, compassion, charity, mission, all these things were being ignored in Jerusalem at the time because the people were all too concerned about the dangerous, unknown future. It seems they were just too afraid, too pessimistic, to care for others, to care to do their duty.

What the people apparently *did* do during this period, though, was come to worship. Worship attendance boomed in Jerusalem where people would gather together in solemn assemblies around the Temple, stretch their hands heavenward and pray, "*O God, please protect us from THEM. Don't let THEM get us. Please God, protect us, save us.*" They prayed fervently God would relieve their fears and prevent the Assyrians from destroying them. However, it seems they were all so busy praying, that no one had much time or concern to do the right. So it was through the prophet Isaiah that one day God interrupted these prayers to say, "*I cannot endure your solemn assemblies anymore I am weary of bearing them, and can't bear the burden of them Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen anymore take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong, learn to do right, learn to do good. Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Defend the fatherless, care for the orphan. Plead for the widow.*" And by inference, "*And until you do, don't come back to worship.*"

These were not novel or new ideas to the Hebrews. Caring for the poor and the oppressed and the fatherless and the widow, these were all part and parcel of their faith, all written into the Hebrew religion, just as they have been written into the Christian religion. We know we ought to care for those in need. We know we ought to be caring for each other. We know what we ought to be doing with our money, even when we are worried we aren't going to have enough. We all know God blesses us so we may in turn be a blessing, we know God put us on this earth to be distribution centers of His blessings, not warehouses hoarding His blessings all to ourselves lest we somehow lose them. None of us are really confused about what is right; I think we know what God calls us to do in our unique situations. But the problem is when we become afraid, historically, we get so overwhelmed by the fear that we are tempted to ignore what is right. We don't argue with it; we just ignore it. We just stop doing it. But Isaiah gives a very dire warning. His warning is that if we are too afraid of the future to do what is right, right now, in the day and the time we have, then don't bother coming to worship because God just may stop listening to our prayers.

We here at Greenwood Community Church take great pride in our worship services; we want to provide a worship service that inspires. Our liturgy is designed to be orderly, traditional, beautiful, comforting, honoring to God. When you are anxious, this sanctuary of worship can give you an hour of peace (*or an hour and fifteen minutes on communion Sundays ... or when the pastor speaks too long*). But the true purpose of what happens in this hour is to help equip and inspire us do the right thing, the good thing, in all of the other hours of life. Worship is not just a time to bracket out the stress of our lives, as if this were little more than your corner of the boxing ring to which you retreat after getting beat up out there. Now, there are times when we need that boxing ring corner, but the main purpose of our liturgy is to hear the word of God, to renew our vision of Jesus Christ Who is at work out there, in the rest of life ... and to boldly go out there to work with Him to do what is right and good. (*Just as a bit of an aside, in this current crisis so many here at Greenwood have risen to the occasion. THANK YOU for your faithful financial support, for all the countless acts of kindness you do on a regular basis, to the Women's Association for their spontaneous drive to raise funds and food for the local food bank, resulting in over \$2,500 worth of contributions!*)

We don't worship for our own sake, for our own pleasure, for simple escape from the world out there; we worship for the sake of God and for His pleasure and for the sake of the world He loves. Again, we are not the Church of Chicken Little; we are the Church of Jesus Christ. Our central message is not "The sky is falling." Our central message is "There Is Hope." Until the sky really does fall, and the Lord comes again, that's the work God has given the church to do, to proclaim hope through the living ministry of Jesus Christ. Let's continue to do it.

I closed the service with a special benediction I heard years ago, a benediction which is a sermon in itself:

May you love God so much, that you love nothing else too much. And may you fear God so much, that you fear nothing else at all.

CHICKEN LITTLE

Once upon a time there was a little chicken, and everybody called him-- Chicken Little. And one day while he was out walking, up in the sky a bird flew over and it dropped an acorn, and the acorn fell down and-- bip-- bopped him on his head. Chicken Little said "AWK!" and looked up, and didn't see anything, and he looked down and didn't see anything. So he said "Help, help the sky is falling! Help, help the sky is falling! I have to tell the King!"

And he went running down the road, looking for the King. As he was running he met **Henny Penny**. And Henny Penny said, "Buk Buk Buk BUK! Hello Chicken Little. What's wrong with you?" And Chicken Little said, "Oh Henny Penny! The sky is falling! I have to go tell the King." And Henny Penny said, "Oh my, how exciting. Buk buk buk BUK! Can I go too?" And they went down the road together, shouting "Help, help the sky is falling! Help, help the sky is falling! We have to tell the King!"

After awhile they met Goosey **Loosey**. "Honk! Honk! Hello Chicken Little, Hello Henny Penny. What's wrong with you?" "Oh, Goosey Loosey, haven't you heard? The sky is falling! We have to tell the King!" "Honk Honk! That's terrible! Honk honk. Can I go, too?" And they all went down the road together shouting "Help, help the sky is falling! Help, help the sky is falling! We have to tell the King!"

And along the road, they met **Turkey Lurkey**. And Turkey Lurkey said "Gobble gobble gobble! Hello Chicken Little, Hello Henny Penny, Hello Goosey Loosey. What in the world is wrong with you?" "Oh, Turkey Lurkey. Haven't you heard? The sky is falling! The sky is falling! We're looking for the King!" "Gobble gobble gobble! Oh that's terrible! Can I go too?" And they all went down the road saying "Help, help the sky is falling! Help, help the sky is falling! We have to tell the King!"

And they went down the road, and they met **Foxy Loxy**. And Foxy Loxey said, "Hello, Chicken Little, Hello Henny Penny, Hello Goosey Loosey. What in the world is wrong with you?" And they told him, "Oh, Foxy Loxey, haven't you heard? The sky is falling! We have to tell the King!"

"Well, how about that," said Foxy Loxy. "The king just happens to be visiting me today; he is back there in my den. But the King doesn't like to feel crowded, so I'll have to just bring you in one by one. Now, who wants to go first?"

Everybody wanted to be first to see the King, but the Turkey was the biggest. "Gobble gobble gobble. Me first! I want to see the King!" and he pushed everybody else away. "Come with me," says Foxy Loxey, and they went into the hole together. Then there was a lot of squawking down there, and some feathers came flying out, and the fox called up, "NEXT"

"Honk Honk. Me! I want to go! Me" said Goosey Loosey, and she pushed her way in. More squawking, more feathers, and the fox said "NEXT!"

"Buk buk buk BUK!" said Henny Penny, and she jumped in the hole. Squawks, feathers, and then ... no sound at all.

Right then, Chicken Little remembered it was his turn to take the garbage out ... so, he left and he went home to do his chores.

So poor Chicken Little never got to see the King.

