

I am in the mood to preach two sermons this week: one for our comfort and one for challenge. So, why not? This is a good time for both. Let's start with comfort. We hear today that it is God in whom we live and move and have our being. This is a comforting thought. So is the information that we are not left as orphans.

When the greatest boxing match of all times took place between George Foreman and Mohammed Ali, the odds were overwhelmingly in favor of the younger, quicker Foreman. It was predicted, 4 to 1, that Foreman would win. His punches were so very strong and he was 7 years younger than Ali. Watching the first 8 rounds of this fight, it seemed like the odds were truth: Foreman had Ali on the ropes and was pummeling his body with blow after blow. This is what the camera picked up. This was the view outside the reality. The reality was that Ali was instigating Foreman the whole time: "Is

that all you got?” “I thought you had hard punches, where are they?” The more he instigated, the harder Foreman threw his punches. This was not an accident. Ali knew the odds and he knew his weaknesses coming into this match. He also knew his strengths: that he could deflect blows to the core of his body and that if he leaned into the ropes, the ropes would absorb a lot of the force of the blows. So he used these two strategies to stay in the fight until Foreman wore himself out. In the 9th round, having beaten on Ali for the whole first part of the fight, Foreman got tired and he dropped his hands. This was all that Ali needed: he came off the ropes and, with five punches, had Foreman on the mat, KO'ed.

This pandemic is like Foreman: it is throwing some hard punches, some really hard punches. It is vibrant and unpredictable, just like a young boxer. And many people are on the ropes. From the birds-eye view it looks like we

are in the impossible losing position. What we do not realize is that we are surrounded on all sides by God who is our rope. We, like Ali, can lean on the rope. The pandemic can give us a blow of fear: lean into God. It can give us the blow of uncertainty: lean into God. It can give us the blow of sickness: lean into God. It can give us the blows of isolation and loneliness: lean on God. This is what it means to live and move and have our being with God. It is what it means to not be orphaned. As bad and difficult as this pandemic reality could be, we have no idea how much harder it could be if we were not leaning into the ropes and letting God take some of the force of the blows.

Now that we have been comforted, the other reality that will get us through this time of difficulty is challenge. Always when we acknowledge and live into the reality that the world is not all about us, do we have the

propensity to come off the ropes and spring into our one-two counter-blows.

In chapter 17 of the book of Acts, (which, if you have not read for a while, I commend to you because it is really like an adventure story: there was a lot of action in the early missionary journeys (and a lot of arguing)), we learn that Paul, walking around Athens, waiting for Timothy and Silas to arrive, was disturbed because there were so many idols. It is in response to all of these idols that we get his teaching about God “In whom we live and move and have our being”. I am interested in this picture of Paul walking around Athens and seeing all the idols. I am not sure how well traveled Paul had been before he became a missionary, but one certainly gets the impression that all the idols surprised him” In the midst of this abundance of gods, it was Paul’s task, in his mind and heart, to convince his hearers about the One in whom we live and

move and have our being, the one called Jesus. Paul's preaching was a reaction to what he saw in the city, it was informed by what he observed in the new situation.

What would happen if we drove around Little Rock, Maumelle, Morgan, Conway, Marche, etc. What would we see? Actually that happened to someone who regularly prays with us on Mondays for Morning Prayer. She went from her home in North Little Rock and drove to Southwest Little Rock to the Food Bank to get some food to deliver to her neighbors. What she saw were boarded up neighborhoods and unsafe-looking living conditions, a line of cars for the food bank that backed up traffic for two hours, after the food bank had already delivered 850 boxes to folks in need. It was shocking to her, and has caused her some days of pondering. I dare say that if we drove around places in Central Arkansas where we usually don't go, where we do not live, we would see

some things that made us inspired but we also would see things that made us uncomfortable. And, then, the question is this: what would we do with our discomfort?

In the newsletter this week, we included a found piece about the pandemic and about being in the same storm but in different boats. It is an uncomfortable thing to read. But we live in uncomfortable times and to not name the specifics of our times would be like Paul being in Athens and not noticing all the little shrines to various gods. Part of the underlying sense of despair that we can be cultivating comes from seeing the disjointedness all around us in our world, problems that we seem unable to solve. Yet our inclination, as people in whom God lives and moves and has God's being, is to love our neighbor as ourselves, and thus to bring healing and reconciliation and justice and peace to the earth. How can we be assured that this is happening, that the love of God is winning?

I tell you what I worry about these days: I worry about the closing of our hearts. I worry about not being engaged. I worry about shutting down. I worry that we will become so overstimulated by fear and self-protection that, like going out to buy excessive amounts of toilet paper, we will be tempted to think only of the negative around us and not of the potential of love. I am treading on thin ice here, because you know that I do not believe in preaching condemnation or guilt. I think that invoking shame is a defeating proposition. What I want to say is that we are being shown, because of this pandemic, some things about our city, our country, our world, that do not line up with the faith story we tell ourselves: that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are being shown where human beings and our society has been out of alignment with the God within whom we live. But we are also being shown

that love and compassion breaks forth in new ways under pressure.

I have recently been thinking about all the people who have left the institutional church and have decided that faith is not for them. Many, if not all, have left the church on the grounds of hypocrisy and irrelevance. They see the church as saying a lot and doing very little. They cannot accept the solace of our liturgy and worship because they feel that we have not proven ourselves faithful to the application of Jesus' teachings to the physical, social, political, and economic world in which we live. This is the first week that I have seen their exit from the church as a blessing. It is time for the old church to die. In fact the old church, the one that is only about dressing up in pretty clothes and being in a societal club, is dying. The society-only church that only cares about worship in a building on Sundays has gone away. An emergent church is rising up, a church

so filled with God's love and mercy that there is no separation between what it says and how it lives.

The struggle of applying faith to life is not easy. It is a quest to live into our best selves. We fall into self-judgement and self-assessment sometimes. We are, after all, going to make mistakes. But once again, knowing who we are and what the temptations of the this time might be, I am mostly worried, not that we will do the wrong thing, but that we will close our hearts during a time when what is needed most is for our hearts to be open, for us to participate in bringing God's love and mercy to the world.

We are all in a storm together. The truth is this: we always have been. The storm is called life. Life is pretty intense right now. We know Him who can calm the storm. We also know Him who can give us instructions to build

better boats, boats in which everyone can be safe. I suggest that we start relying on God for some plans to build these new boats.