

*\*A sermon preached on November 10, 2024 at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Wayne, IN.*

November 8, 2024

Dear Henry, Tommy, Julia and Charlotte,

It's been an emotional week. While it has certainly been a week that has left many people satisfied and even triumphant, it has left nearly an equal number of people anxious and even despondent. In my world, on the other end of text messages and phone calls, there is far more heartbreak and fear. And when I called each of you on Wednesday (and talked to Charlotte when she got home from school), I sensed that heartbreak in you. My hope is that this letter will help you with that. Now I know you don't need to hear a sermon from your Mom; Lord knows you've heard plenty of them through the years. But I am a person of faith, and so are you. When in life we face difficulties, we need faith. So lean into your faith, because I think it has something hopeful to offer you and can help you navigate your way from here. And if by chance someone who feels differently than you gets a hold of this letter, I hope they will ask, how they would want to be treated if they were on the losing side? Because this letter could be written for anyone who finds him or herself on the losing side or for that matter, finds themselves facing hard times.

Now, I didn't watch any news or engage in any social media for much of the week, but by Friday when I was finally ready to engage, many of the op-ed writers were already moving on to what went wrong and what people need to learn from this election. There is a time and a place for that, but it's OK if now is not the time for you. It's OK if you need to lament. and I purposefully use that word: lament. It's a churchy word; a faithful word. To lament is to grieve.

In the book of Lamentations, the people are grieving. They're living through the destruction of their city Jerusalem. Their temple had been demolished; and the king's sons had been killed in front of his very eyes; and just before he was led away to captivity, they gouged out his eyes and burned to the city the ground.

The people are *lamenting*, and the questions they're asking in the face of that devastation may sound familiar to you; questions like: How could this have happened? How much worse can it get? And, Enough, O lord, enough!

Maybe this is why the anguish and despair screaming from the book of Lamentations are almost suffocating. Hear these words from chapter 3:

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
Is wormwood and gall!  
My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.

When they say, "Enough!", they really mean it.

Like a widow, Jerusalem cries all night long. The old men sit in dust and ashes, and the young women walk around as though lost. Babies are crying and children are starving.

Yet what happens next is completely unbelievable. Out of the depths of despondency Jeremiah (presumed to be the author of Lamentation) utters a single little word – not a noun, not a verb, but an adversative conjunction: *but!*

But. In spite of everything I have experienced, in spite of everything I have just said, "This I call to mind, and therefore, I have hope." That's what Jeremiah says. "This I call to mind, and therefore, I have hope." The statement is startling. what in the world would even suggest the possibility of hope under these circumstances? What force could possibly rescue hope from such unyielding lament?

Memory, that's what can, and that's what did. Memory. Memory is a powerful tool to have in your arsenal because It can heal and It can lead to hope. The people of Israel told and retold the stories of God's mighty acts in their history and in their remembering, they found hope.

Tommy, Julia, Charlotte and Henry, I know you don't have the gift of a long memory given your young age, and I lament that what you are witnessing in our leader's rhetoric has become normalized. I don't know when this came to be, I don't understand it and I'm deeply disturbed by it. as I said to you on Wednesday, this is not the country I was raised in; this is not how it used to be; and because of

my faith, I refuse to accept that any of that rhetoric is OK. Instead, I will hold on to the memory of what was and trust that it can be once again. I understand if this sounds naïve to you. It sounds naïve as I write it.

But I can't remain in a place of lament, and neither can you. Lament can teeter on the edge of despair and cynicism, and that can quickly turn into fear, and fear can be our worst enemy; it can destroy us.

Now I have said many times before that the phrase "Fear not" or "Do not be afraid" is the most repeated phrase in the Bible. So clearly the authors were concerned about fear!

What's interesting to me is that the phrase "Fear not" occurs at some of the biggest moments of the Bible. From Sarah and Abraham in the OT to Moses at the Burning Bush or Moses about to lead people in crossing the Red Sea, we hear "Fear not". And then on into the New Testament we hear the Angel Gabriel telling Mary to "fear not", and at the other end of Jesus's life the angels at the Tomb on Easter morning telling the women to "fear not", so it's told at very pivotal moments.

And while this may be surprising to you, when you think about it it's really not. The phrase "fear not" is something we all need to hear because it's a saving word. Families, Loved ones, and victims of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or gun violence need to hear it. People facing a new job and a new adventure need to hear it. People facing surgery and critical illness to hear it. The newly married and new parents need to hear it. The newly unemployed and unattached need to hear it. Many people this week need to hear it. "Fear not. Stand firm, God is with you." Those are reassuring words for people to hear.

Now fear, in and of itself, is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, fear keeps us safe. Fear keeps us from getting too close to the edge of a cliff so we don't fall or motivates me to eat better or exercise so we stay healthy.

So fear has its place in keeping us safe. But we can also find ourselves overwhelmed by fears, paralyzing anxiety, or unhealthy fretting about things we don't need to be afraid of, will never happen, or won't save us. The Biblical writers knew that as far back as Pharaoh to today's dictators, fear is what drives us inward, hardens our hearts, darkens our vision and stunts our imagination.

Fear makes us claim an “us versus them” world, which is death dealing at worst and paralyzing at its best – and all of that goes against what Jesus stood for and lived for and died for.

Fear, in so many ways, is at the root of the great challenges we face: war, economic inequality, community unrest, prejudice, misogyny, division . . . all of these have fear at their roots.

Fear of the “other” leads us to unfairly blame others, and to act in ways that are inhumane. There is a reason why fear is stoked Because fear is a motivator.

It paralyzes us, and causes us to say and do irrational things. Dare I say, unfaithful things. Which is why I think the Bible’s most repeated phrase is “Fear not.” Because the writers knew it is hard to be both fearful and faithful.

Julia, Charlotte, Henry and Tommy, remember that story in the Bible when all the disciples fell asleep in the boat at night, and a big storm came up and the boat is taking on water, and Jesus is off somewhere praying, but hears the commotion, sees the disciples are terrified, and starts walking towards them on water? Do you remember that story? You know what Jesus says to them? “Take courage! It is! Don’t be afraid.” And then Peter quickly responds, “Well, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you.” And Jesus says “Come on!”, and Peter hops out of the boat but as soon as he does he starts paying attention to the storm around him, gets scared, starts to drown, and with that Jesus grabs him and tosses him into the boat and says, “Ye of little faith, why did you doubt?”

If Jesus were here today, I think he would say, “Look, I’m in the boat with you.” So T, H, J, and C, when you find yourself fearing the worst, and becoming paralyzed and drowning, remember that. Let your memory take you to Spofford, and all those wonderful times on the boat . . . the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parades, the booze cruises, the tubing and snorkeling and Aunt Margie being convinced she can go over the sunken island --let those memories feed you and nourish you. Not your fears. Because here’s the thing, I can’t promise you there won’t be storms. But we can’t let fear paralyze us. Because there is work to do.

Our work continues no matter who the President is, because we are people of faith. I don’t say what I say, or do what I do for political reasons. I say what I say, and do what I do because I’m a person of faith. And nothing and no one is going

to change. And yes, I know there's a lot to think about right now; all the causes that need attending to. I often think about how Jesus told the disciples to shake the dust from their feet and move on, but dang, my feet are caked in mud and on my cynical days I wonder if it's all worth it. If any of it makes a difference.

But I refuse to accept defeat for the causes I know Jesus stood for, so I will challenge hate, and speak clearly against the toxic haze of racism, xenophobia, and misogyny. I will stand up, speak up, and show up, because that's what Jesus did and I believe calls me to do.

On Thursday morning, as I was thinking about what I wanted to write to you, I came across this poem, and I think it's apropos for today. It reads:

You are awakening to the same country you fell asleep too  
The very same country  
Pull yourself together  
And when you see me, do not ask me  
What do we do now?  
How do we get through the next 4 years?  
Some of my ancestors dealt with 400 years of this  
Under worse conditions.

Continue to do the good work  
Continue to build bridges, not walls  
Continue to lead with compassion  
Continue the demanding work of liberation for all  
Continue to dismantle broken systems large and small  
Continue to set the best example for the children.  
Continue to be a vessel of nourishing joy  
Continue right where you are, right where you live  
Into your days.  
Do so in the name of the Creator who expects nothing less of you  
and each of us.  
And if you are not continuing all of the above in community, partnership and  
collaboration,

What is it you've been doing?

What is it you're waiting for?

And finally, Charlotte, Henry, Tommy and Julia, I leave you with this, the most important thing, the very crux of our faith: and that is the resurrection. Frederick Buechner said, "The worst thing is never the last thing." Remember that death is never the last word. Hate is never the last word. Evil is never the last word. Life is the final word; love is the final word; goodness is the final word.

This is the crux of our faith. And I don't only believe it, I'm counting on it.

Love,

Mom

*\*A sermon preached on November 10, 2024 at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Wayne, IN.*