

07-31-2022 Worship Service

SERMON – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Luke 21:25-36

Don't Forget to Breathe

This morning it's my job to try to tie up this series on mental, emotional and spiritual wholeness. I'm really grateful to have had this series – I think it's a topic that doesn't get nearly enough air time!

One of the challenges for me in preaching a sermon series is deciding on a text to preach from. I was much more accustomed to preaching from the lectionary which gives you four texts each Sunday, so you still have some choice but the scope is much more limited than just starting with the entire Bible. "So", you might be asking yourself, "she chose to preach from that very strange, apocalyptic, end-of-the-world, scary speech that Jesus gave?" Yes, yes I did! And there were several reasons why I chose this passage, but the main reason is that the first couple of verses express some of the angst that I'm feeling these days and I think some others might be feeling it too.

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶ People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. NIV

Here are these same verses from The Message... "It will seem like all hell has broken loose— sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom.

This is, literally, how the state of our world feels to me right now – it's disorienting, disconcerting, discouraging, discombobulating and just plain scary. One of my favorite theologians and preachers, Nadia Bolz-Weber says that these days she is nearly overcome by fear and rage – she's calling it frage. She says that when she feels frage, it's like a "speedball of emotion". It causes her heart rate to speed up, her insides to tighten and her breath to become shallow and fast. I feel that. And I feel like these verses in Luke describe that! But when these verses were written, they were intended to bring comfort and calm. Some have made the case that the comfort can be found in the words that follow, the words that indicate a sort of time-frame and road-map towards the end of the world. So, the idea is at least you can identify and see the horrible end that's coming. Now, I don't know... maybe for some of us there IS some comfort in that.

But I can't help but think that for *some* of us, these kinds of images and words tend to accelerate and exaggerate the stress and anxiety that we might already be experiencing just living our every-day lives. This kind of cataclysmic warning can really only amp that up. So, I'd like to go back and look at those first two verses again. There will be signs, in the heavens and

on the earth and in the seas. Everything and everyone will be in an uproar and a panic. Now here's the part that's particularly interesting to me and what I want to focus on – the NIV says “people will faint from terror”, the NRSV says, “people will faint from fear and foreboding”, The Message says, “the wind will be knocked out of people by the threat of doom”. There it is. Threat. Frage. Racing heart. Knots in the stomach. Shallow, quick breath. The word “faint” in Greek literally means “breathing life out”. Let's think for a moment about the breath. In the Bible, the word for breath is the same as the word for wind or Spirit.

In Genesis when God creates humans, they are only dust until life is breathed into them. Ezekiel prophesied to the dry bones that the Lord would make breath come into them and they would have life. On the cross, Jesus breathed his last and died. And the resurrected Jesus came to his disciples in their fear. He said, “Peace be with you”, and then he breathed on them.

Nadia Bolz-Weber says, “We are a people who can forget to breathe.” We're fragile and vulnerable, we come from the dust. And as many times as we read, “Do not be afraid!”, we ARE afraid. I'm afraid! There's so much to be afraid of!

- Getting sick. My loved ones getting sick.
- Prairie grass fires.
- For my friends who have black or brown skin.
- For my grandchildren who will bear a much heavier responsibility to care for the earth than I did.
- Tornados.
- Bitcoin – and that all the banks might suddenly switch over to cryptocurrency.

What about you? What are you afraid of? What is it that causes you to forget to breathe? Whatever it is, it's real and it's part of being human. But here's the thing. Our fears are not the most basic part of being human. What is the most human – the thing we ALL have in common, no matter what, is the invitation from Jesus to breathe, and to pay attention to our breath. Because it's in our breath that Jesus, the Spirit, can be present with us, close to us. The Spirit of God, the one who created us gave us breath so that we can experience life in the moment. Did you ever consider that in the vast expanse of the Universe this teeny little planet earth is the only place (that we know of) where breath is possible! So, let us not hold our breath! Let us breathe deeply! And think thoughts! And sing songs! And ask questions! And love people! And try new things!

Some have suggested that Yahweh is more than just a name for God. The ancient rabbis believed that it was the sound of God. The letters made the sound of breath. Yah...weh... Yah...weh... If the practice of breathing slowly and deeply and paying attention to your breath feels like a weird and hard thing to do, you might try it this way – using the sound of God's name to help you.

And while you're doing that, you can take comfort in the knowledge that people have been afraid for a very long time. These freaky, apocalyptic texts were written 2,000 years ago, and they're a reminder that none of our fears are new. Everything that we can be afraid of has

happened before, in one form or another. There've been pandemics and wars, insurrections and tyrants, empires have risen and fallen and the Creator has always been there, in the midst of it – as close as our next breath. Having faith doesn't mean that we won't have fears, but when we're afraid, we can try to remember to breathe. Yah... weh... We can try to remember that God has been in the past and is in the present and is already in the future that we're fearful of and worried about. And in this moment – as you sit there and I stand here, Christ is among us, breathing on us, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit, peace be with you."