****

**Sunday 26 April to Sunday 3 May**

****

Sunday 26 April 2020

**Facing fear? Trust God**

by Pastor Kevin Bell

**‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me’ (Psalm 23:4).**

Read Psalm 23

In Psalm 23, David talks about trusting God when he opens up to God and talks about the valleys of life, or in other words the darkest and fearful times in life.

Trusting God does not mean we do not experience fear or pain. Trusting God does not mean we won’t go through troubles or crises. The reality of life means you can’t go around the valleys, or under the valleys, or over the valleys. You can only go through the valleys. That is when David encourages us to declare, ‘I will fear no evil’. It implies a reliance and trust in God’s strength, power, wisdom and goodness and to ask him to bring peace and comfort to our hearts. Often that will mean we have to say, ‘God, I don’t understand, but I have decided to cast off this fear onto you. I cannot do this of myself. I will trust you through Your Holy Spirit, who enables me. I will not take this fear back on myself, but I will leave it with you Lord.’

To trust God is to recognise that he is in control; it is to claim his promises, like those given to Isaiah:

*When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up – the flames will not consume you* (Isaiah 43:2).

God says, ‘I am with you every step in the valley. I will lead you through this. Will you trust me?’

***Father, when I walk through the valleys of life, I will not fear, for you are with me. Amen.***

Monday 27 April 2020

**Are we there yet?**

by Georgie Schuster

**‘The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you or forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged’ (Deuteronomy 31:8).**

Read Deuteronomy 31:8

People are generally familiar with the question, often repeatedly asked by children on long car journeys, ‘Are we there yet?’ A parent’s response might be tempered by several factors, including distance yet to go, how many times the question has already been asked, and the general mood in the vehicle. Inevitably though, a degree of frustration usually sets in.

I’ve been thinking about Moses and the people of Israel after they left Egypt. Even before it was determined that they would spend another 40 years in the desert, there were a lot of big feelings happening – frustration, worry, anxiety, and a desire to go back to what was recognisable. The fear of the unknown.

Sound familiar?

And yet time and again, God showed them that he was their faithful guide, provider and protector. They just needed to learn that.

It is interesting to note that after everything, when Moses was handing the reins over to Joshua, who had witnessed for himself God’s faithfulness, Moses implored him to remember that God was with him, so he didn’t need to be afraid or discouraged.

In the present circumstance, we might ask, ‘Are we there yet?’, but experts aren’t able to answer with what we want to hear. Our journey through these present challenges has no fixed end date. We are in uncharted territory. Plans that once served us well don’t work where we are now, and when we come through this, life will look different.

But be assured, God is with us, at every stage. And we will get there yet!

***Dear faithful God, thank you that you are our guide, provider and protector, through these uncertain days and beyond. You will get us there! In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Tuesday 28 April 2020

**Zoom in**

by Darren Pope

**‘[Jesus] got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm (Matthew 8:26b).**

Read Matthew 8:23–27

Power on, plugged in and charging. Calendar invitation, camera angle, lighting, headphones, microphone and background checked, I click on ‘Join Now’. Okay, here we go, time to Zoom in!

Thirty minutes later, deep into my virtual meeting, no-one involved can see that I am in my living room, comfortable in shorts and bare feet, looking out the window, sipping coffee. Then it happens! Just as I unmute the microphone to speak, hot coffee gets knocked over, spills, scolds and makes a massive mess. My invisibility cloak has instantly vanished, my surroundings unceremoniously unveiled by loud squeals, exclamations and sounds of smashing on glass on the timber floor. Hmmm, the perfect storm!

Sleeping in the front of the boat doesn’t mean that Jesus was unaware, detached, unreachable or insensitive to the needs of his people. Right in the middle of the storm, Jesus was authentically present and in close relationship with them. In fact, Jesus models inspiring leadership while being impacted by a furious storm.

Surveying the daily ‘storm scene’ presented by COVID-19 potentially allows our broken humanity to prevail, unveiling our weaknesses, exposing our doubts and stripping away our cloak of safety. Jesus gets it! Our comfort and strength don’t rely on the narrowly focused image we project to the world. In our personal storm of uncertainty, health concerns or job insecurity, even as the waves of future fears sweep over us, Jesus calmly comes to us each day. It’s always God’s work. His invitation to be together is personal and real. It’s okay to zoom in with a clear focus on our struggles, doubts and fears. It’s okay to question, wrestle, pray, thank and ask. Through it all, Jesus sits next to us with his unconditional love.

Invitation received. Microphone and headphones on. Okay, here we go, time to zoom in!

***God of relationship, you are my calm and my peace place. Thank you for always being real and personal as you come to me each day. Thank you for the invitation to sit with you today and to zoom in on how I am doing life right now. Thank you for the hope that we will walk together again tomorrow. Amen***.

Wednesday 29 April 2020

**Faith over optimism**

by Pastor David Schuppan

**‘For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith”’ (Romans 1:17).**

**Read Romans 1:8–17**

Optimism’s a healthy thing, but my nature is to be pessimistic. I’ve tried to be more ‘glass half full’ but the best I’ve managed is a glass that’s just … half a glass. There is however something more powerful and enduring than optimism – faith. My baptismal faith has been reinforced, by the love and good teaching others have regularly showered on me.

Faith is not optimism. It’s neither emotional nor dependent upon personality, nor is it an independent choice. Faith is the gift of God that clings fast to Jesus. Faith and hope are the indestructible umbilical cord that tie us to Jesus. Faith says, with Jesus anything is possible, even prolonged suffering and then at the right time, resurrection.

Eternal resurrection will come on the clouds of his glory when he returns as visible and undoubtable Lord of all. In the meantime, by faith, we trust in his promises for today. In Christ, we look for the signs of resurrection in the small, daily things – and in larger things also, as we persist in prayer for answers and enlightenment.

***Father, in these difficult times, by the power of Jesus’ resurrection, may we be an enduring and flourishing people. Give us the boldness of spirit to save others by your mighty name as we ourselves have been saved. Amen.***

Thursday 30 April 2020

**When fear is your friend**

by Linda Macqueen

**‘The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock’ (Matthew 7:25).**

Read Matthew 7:24–27

Mr Google tells me that there are 365 commands in the Bible to ‘Fear not’ or ‘Do not be afraid’. So there’s something to not fear for every day of the year. It’s pretty clear that fear is not something God desires for you, and I’m confident you won’t have heard a devotion writer over this pandemic season suggesting that fear can be a good thing.

Until now.

Yes, it’s true that God wants you to be able to trust him completely, in every situation and circumstance, and if you obeyed the First Commandment to perfection, you would do that. You would never be afraid – of anything, ever. But in reality, despite your best efforts to muscle up your faith, sometimes your heart trembles and your knees shake – and you get frightened. You shift your attention from the One True God to other gods. Maybe this global pandemic is one of those times. Is the ground beneath your feet feeling pretty shaky right now?

So, when (not if) fear sneaks in uninvited through the laundry door of your life, don’t fight it; instead, invite it to sit with you for a while and get to know it. Listen to its story. Find out where it’s coming from.

Fear can become your friend if you follow it back to its source. What is it that you are clinging to that the thought of losing it rattles you so fiercely? Is it your superannuation, your job, your lifestyle, your house, perhaps your life? Facing your fears will help you to identify your false gods, the slipping sand you’ve built your life on.

Maybe your fear of this pandemic and its impact can shine a floodlight on your false gods, exposing them as frauds and thieves, and turning you back to the One True God. If your fear does that, then it can indeed be your friend.

***Dear Father, forgive me for building my life on sandy ground. Reveal to me during this time of uncertainly and anxiety those things that have turned into false gods. Help me by your Holy Spirit to turn away from them and return to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.***

Friday 1 May 2020

**What happened to church?**

by Pastor Robin Stelzer

**‘Consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together … but let us encourage one another’ (Hebrews 10:24,25).**

Read Hebrews 10:19–25

I am attending a new form of church – by Zoom, at home, with Lis only. It’s so bizarre after a long lifetime of gathering together, in a church building, in touch with present friends, family, kids. And overflowing from worship inspiration, conversations and faith-building relationships. And we often have our wide family with us – 19 in all.

I want my church back, please Lord!

‘What do you mean, back? You already have it. Check your Bible: it’s my body, my saints, my sheep, members one of another, chosen, children of God.’\*

‘Well, yes Lord, but isn’t it really about Sundays, altars, sermons and sacraments – in church! Besides, that is what I’m familiar with and comfortable with.’

All this is making me reconsider. Someone said to me: maybe it would help us understand that church is not a building, but a people. Maybe we can better learn what it means to be Jesus’ disciples, with gospel news to share, rather than his ‘church members’, living in our comfortable church-life routines.

Lord, is this a time when you are getting your church back? Is this a time for us to get closer to the millions of saints who worship in hiding because of persecution? Is this a time for drawing near to you and to each other in ways that are person-centred more than buildings-centred?

What happened to church? Maybe it’s not about what we have lost, but about gaining and sharing more of Christ, who we cannot lose.

***Lord of the church, hold us close to you as you did in the early church. Use this time to draw us near, to see you and worship you in every way we can. Show us how to rejoice in the wide family of saints who are spread across our troubled world. Amen.***

\* 1 Corinthians 12:13, Ephesians 1:1, 1 Peter 5:2, Ephesians 4:25, 1 Peter 2:5, 1 John 3:2

Saturday 2 May 2020

**Recruiting from the pit**

by Jane Mueller

**‘For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do’ (Ephesians 2:10).**

Read Ephesians 2:1–10

You litter. You use your phone while driving. You never leave a slice of pizza for your brother. You cannot escape your addiction. You put others down to lift yourself up. You lie to your parents. You dishonour your spouse. You use God’s Name for self-seeking purposes. You reject Jesus over and over again.

If you think you are so substandard, so repulsive, that God can’t possibly have a calling on your life, you are sorely mistaken. If you feel inadequate or ill-equipped to fulfil your part in God’s plan, you’re not the first person.

God makes a habit of calling the most messed-up people and using them to achieve the seemingly impossible. Noah drank to excess. Jacob deceived his father and brother. Miriam was a mud-slinger. David committed adultery and murder. Jonah ran from God. Martha was anxious. Peter was impulsive and disowned Jesus. Paul persecuted Jesus and made death threats towards his disciples. And yet these people played vital roles in God’s plan.

This is evidence of what many have said: God doesn’t call the equipped, he equips the called.

Nothing you have done is so unspeakable that God can’t call you for his purpose. After all, you are fearfully and wonderfully made in his image. Surrender to God’s will. Listen to him. Believe him. Trust him. Listen to him again. Know that it is through your weakness that God equips you and makes you strong.

‘God tends to recruit from the pit, not the pedestal’ (Jon Acuff).

***Hello God. What would you have me do today? Amen.***

Sunday 3 May 2020

**A faith that trusts**

by Pastor Kevin Bell

**‘So then, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through preaching Christ’ (Romans 10:17).**

Read Romans 10:5–17

Sometimes our troubles and tragedies in life are hard to understand. Recently I was asked to pray for a lady whose husband broke his hip in a fall and was admitted to hospital for an operation. She had been caring for her aunt, who is in the same hospital as her husband. In the midst of all this stress, her mother is dying.

In order to trust God we need to recognise that so much of the indecision, the uncertainties, the pain, hurt and fear we have in life doesn’t make sense. So many of our dark times are inexplicable from a human point of view. The apprehensions we might have about the future cannot always be divorced from uncertainty. Trust in God, then, is seeing our circumstances, our decisions and our reasoning through the eyes of faith. But how do we get faith? How do we receive faith so we can trust God?

Faith to trust God in all circumstances comes through the word of God alone. Only in Scripture can we find the beautiful words and promises of God that describe to us how God understands, and is involved in our hurts, tragedies and ordinary problems.

‘The Lord is near to those who are discouraged; he saves those who have lost all hope’ (Psalm 34:18). Only in Scripture do we come to know that our God through the Holy Spirit can make his word come alive in our hearts and create faith. St Paul writes, ‘I want you to know that no one who is led by God’s Spirit can say “A curse on Jesus!” and no-one can confess “Jesus is Lord” without being guided by the Holy Spirit‘ (1 Corinthians 12:3).

So, faith is not simply willpower or a decision; it is a creation of the Holy Spirit. We are dependent on God for a faith that trusts. He is waiting and willing to give us that faith.

***Heavenly Father, grant me a faith that trusts your promises that you are near. Amen.***