

## **Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church - March 21, 2021 – Lent 5**

**Hymns:** 15 – The Lord’s My Light; 196 – Throughout these Lenten Days;  
64 - Be still and know; It Is Well

**Scripture:** Psalm 27 (selected verses); Romans 8:35-39; John 14:27

**Sermon Title:** All Shall Be Well

Psalm 27 – selected verses

*The Lord is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid?*

*I remain confident of this:*

*I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*

*Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.*

Romans 8:35-39

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

John 14:27

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

One year ago, this very Sunday, I preached to an empty sanctuary, recording the service on my iPhone. One year ago today, COVID protocols had come into place on PEI, and in much of the world, and public gatherings were prohibited, our sanctuary – actually, our whole facility – closed down.

Looking back, I remember the wide range of predictions: “We’ll be open for Easter.” “We’ll be back in business by the May 24 Weekend.” “The warm summer weather will clear this up.” The pessimists were saying September. Those saying we’d be lucky to be back to normal by Christmas were regarded by most in the same way you regard the crazy guy with “The End Is Near” sign. Surely it would be over before then.

Yet here we are. And those saying this September – a year later than the original September – are now the optimists. And as far as “getting back to normal” – well, no

one is sure what normal will mean anymore. Our lives – our world – have changed. And we still aren't sure just how. Will anything ever be normal again?

I looked back at the sermons I preached in those first weeks of Pandemic, and I was struck by how what I said then is still so very applicable – and very necessary - today, one year on. Maybe even more so, as we have transitioned from the initial shock and fear to a kind of weary resignation, and maybe even exhausted despair. And now, the added uncertainty of the “variable strains.” One year on, and as much as ever, we need to be assured of this one thing: that, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” And so, in an unusual step, my message today will be much the same as it was a year ago: that, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

These words, powerful words of great hope and comfort, were written by Julian of Norwich over 600 years ago. We call her Julian of Norwich, after the church in which she served. Her original name has been lost to time.

When only thirty years old, and on what she thought to be her deathbed, Julian received a series of visions of the compassionate, suffering Christ. She felt surrounded and suffused by the love of God in Jesus, a love that nothing – not even death itself – could ever take away. Rising from her bed, she began to write of this transformative experience, in what was to become “The Revelations of Divine Love.” Twenty years later, she would expand upon this, adding the reflections and insights gained over the years of her experience.

And her experience was not an easy one; the town of Norwich was fully in the grip of the plague, and its resultant poverty and famine. As news of her experience spread, Julian became known increasingly far and wide as a source of wise spiritual comfort, and the church to which she had confined herself became a place of pilgrimage for those suffering in body and soul. She, with only her cat for companionship, lived entirely with a small cell and a small enclosed yard with a high wall. Her one room had three small windows: One so she could hear Mass and take the Sacrament, a second where a servant placed her food, and the third through which she gave counsel. All who sought her received the comfort and assurance of the love of God, a love enfolding us, holding us close. Pilgrims would leave knowing more fully the extent of God's grace, and carry with them the words, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Inspiring, brave and hopeful words; but words not written in a time of prosperity and ease; they were words proclaimed in the midst of plague, in the face of suffering, but nevertheless in the assurance of faith, and the loving care of God.

It is important to remember that the Scriptures were written in similar situations. The world of the Bible was a hard world; famine, disease, slavery and war were the constant unwelcome companions of the Hebrew people, and the Christians who followed. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, ends with the nation in famine, leaving their homes to find food in Egypt. The second book, Exodus, begins with the nation enslaved, and ends with 40 years of wandering the desert. Leviticus has extensive sections outlining how to deal with infectious diseases plaguing the camp. The Book of Job is nothing other than the story of a man desperately trying to maintain his faith in the face of complete and utter ruin. The Psalms, from which we derive such comfort, are upon even casual reading, filled with passages outlining the despair which plagues the writer's heart – the triumph of the evil, the suffering in illness. The major prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, are both written as first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians are putting the Kingdom to the torch and the sword, burning the cities, enslaving and deporting the populace. And yet, as one, the Prophets proclaim this message: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

The New Testament world is little better; the Gospels were written in a time of brutal Roman occupation and oppression, in which people lived hand-to-mouth, where the prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread,” was heartfelt, literal, and real. The Gospels were compiled because the Apostles, those eyewitness companions of Jesus, were being systematically slaughtered, and there was a need to get their words and experiences down in print before it was too late.

Around the time of their composition, Israel was being laid waste by the Romans, and Jerusalem and the Temple itself would be completely overthrown, “not one stone,” as Jesus predicted, “left upon another.” The New Testament concludes with the Revelation, written during a time of horrifying persecution, with Christians being thrown to the lions, burned in the arena, put to the sword. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “reflect for five minutes on the fact that all the great religions were first preached, and long practiced, in a world without chloroform,” and you get a small sense of what conditions were like in Biblical times. And yet: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

The words of faith, hope and comfort the Bible gives are not empty words, mouthed as platitudes in times of great plenty; they are words clung to in times of trouble, trial, uncertainty, and despair. And as such, they are God's word to us today.

Even in the face of the pandemic which continues to ravage our world, we ourselves on PEI are still reasonably secure. The extent of our hardship is in the most part a continued isolation from the freedom of unmasked social interaction, a painful and continued separation from our extended families, and a constant state of anxiety about how and when and to what extent it will hit our Island again, as surely it will. However, already for others it is more serious still: a heartbreaking inability to care for and support our elderly in nursing homes; limitations on visits to the sick in hospital and hospice; reduced numbers for funerals; weddings postponed; dealing with the emotional, physical and educational needs of our children; and for still others, a grim financial future, with bills due, groceries to buy, and no end to layoffs in sight. And yet, the message of the Scriptures and the Word of God to us remains the same, regardless of the difficulty we face: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

Jesus tried to teach the disciples this very thing, as they made their way to Jerusalem, and all that would await Jesus there. And he knew it was coming; at the very start of their journey from Galilee to that final Passover week, Jesus laid it out for them (Matthew 16:21-23): *"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."* This isn't what the disciples were hoping to hear: *"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"* But it would, it would.

You get the idea that they didn't like the plan, as Peter made clear, but you also come to realise that they didn't really believe it. Just a chapter later, Jesus reiterates (Matthew 17:22-23): *"When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief. They're beginning to understand. But on the brink of entering the city, Jesus tells them again (Matthew 20:18-19): "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"*

Again and again, he tells them, even predicting their abandonment of him at the end: *“This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”* (Matthew 26:31-32)

And then, of course, it happened, as he told them time and again it would. But notice this: even in the face of what was to come, and the horrifying realization of their worst fears, Jesus’ message carried with it the word of certain hope: each of his predictions of his death carried with it the assurance of his Resurrection. *“On the third day, I will be raised to life,”* he tells them, each and every time. And then with even greater certainty, as though a fait accompli: *“after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”*

Or to put it another way: *“The worst is coming. Arrest. Betrayal. Torture. Abandonment, Death. But I will rise again. And so nevertheless: All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”*

That didn’t mean it would be easy. It certainly wasn’t for Jesus, and it certainly wasn’t for the disciples. Peter denied him. Judas hanged himself. The others scattered, went into hiding. Jesus himself was to utter the most heartbreaking cry of all – *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* It did not appear as though all would ever be well again.

The third day after that most terrible of days, the women found themselves at the tomb. Expecting to find the long-dead body of Jesus, they found instead an angel, who greeted them with these matter-of-fact but world-changing words (Matthew 28:5-7): *“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”* Did you get that? *“He has risen, just as he said.”* Just as he said. Even in face of death itself, *“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”* Just as he said.

Luke, in retelling this same event, adds this (Luke 24:8): *“Then they remembered his words.”* And this is where we come in. *“Then they remembered his words.”* This is how we will be able to maintain our faith in a time of crisis; this is where we will find hope, in the face of all that shall come to pass: We shall remember his words. His words that he will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5); his words that he will send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit to us (John 14:6); his words that, *“Surely, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20).

But to remember his words, we first have to hear them. And God has given us the gift of the Scriptures, in which the word of God, in which the words of Jesus, are preserved and passed on. The pandemic in which we find ourselves carries with it a blessing; the terrible “self-isolation” and “social distancing” which has separated us from one another and our regular day-to-day life, has put a complete halt to travel, and which still limits our interactions, at the same time provides us with the opportunity and, I pray, the inclination to read and discover and listen for the Word of God in the Scriptures, the words of Jesus in the Gospels, and the words of those whose lives were changed by him in the remainder of the New Testament.

These words are what enabled the Psalmist, in the face of personal loss and crippling anxiety, to declare (Psalm 73): *“Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand... My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”* They are what enabled the Apostle Paul, awaiting death in prison, to write, *“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

The time to put the words of Jesus in your heart and mind is now, while you have the opportunity to build up and to strengthen your faith for whatever is to come. Set aside time each day to read your way through the Gospels. Chapters are only a page or so long; commit to reading five chapters a day. Then move on to the Book of Acts, into the letters of Paul and the others. Pray that God would help you store these words in your heart, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that these words would be the very Word of God to you today, as surely they are.

And then I trust and I know that this assurance will come: that “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” When news reports fill us with anxiety, that “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” When we feel so distant from those we love, when we feel powerless to help, when we lie awake at night wondering what tomorrow will bring, when vaccines still seem a long way off, when we ourselves or those we love, God forbid, test positive; nevertheless, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Thanks be to God; Amen.