

Since this is Super Bowl Sunday, I decided that I needed a football illustration to start this sermon. So, I found this one which not only talks about football, but also, miraculously, about the subject of my sermon.

The most famous football coach of all time was Vince Lombardi. He coached the Green Bay Packers for many years and was famous for his intensity. He was known as a demanding, oppressive, hard-nosed coach. It was Lombardi who was quoted as saying, “Winning isn’t everything. It is the ONLY thing.”¹

An interviewer once asked player Jerry Cramer whether, with the high pressure life that Lombardi lived if the coach had ulcers. Cramer thought a little bit and said, “No, Coach Lombardi doesn’t have ulcers, but he is a carrier.”

Stress. We all know about it don’t we? Stress is rampant these days, isn’t it? There are high school seniors who are awaiting news about which colleges will accept them. Will they get that honored scholarship? Will they continue to have the status long years of school has afforded them?

There are young families who struggle with how to maintain their style of living with the threat of layoff looming

¹ Credit for many of the ideas in this sermon is given to Carl L. Schenck, Columbia MO, Theological Web Publishing, LLC.

in the background. Will they be able to stand another week of a crying baby and still carry on at work as a professional? Will they be able to afford the school, the clothes, the food, the extras that are necessary to live?

There are middle aged couples who are wondering if the retirement nest eggs and pensions that they have set aside will be enough to carry them through the retirement years. Will Social Security disappear? Will the stock market ever rebound or is this a horrible precursor for what is to come?

There are older couples who face decisions about the future; where to live?; whether to relocate?; will the kids come through? Can we make it without the kids? Should we even TELL the kids about our failing abilities?

There are those among us who are struggling today with debilitating diseases; those who don't think too far ahead, but instead deal one day at a time with the horrible realities. Will the resources needed be affordable? Will the Doctor cooperate with my wishes? Will I live? Do I have the courage to die with dignity and grace?

Stress.

We all live with it and we all deal with it.

Many of you live with the reality that things seem to have changed at our beloved church. Our beloved Pastor, Joyce,

only had one glorious Sunday back after spending two months in isolation with her wonderful husband at City of Hope while he went through a bone marrow transplant, only to come down with The Shingles.

Stress.

We live with it. We deny it. We suffer from the effects of it. We all live with a low level stress hum that rises and falls with the vagaries and vicissitudes of our lives.

There is a popular test in the psychological world. It supposedly measures your stress level by asking you to answer a series of questions and then score yourself. Anything over a “300” on the test indicates that your stress level is dangerously high. I have so consistently rated over 300 on this test throughout the years that I have stopped taking it. It stresses me!

One of the reasons for stopping taking that test for me is this beautiful Psalm 27 as well as the hope implied in this Lukan passage that we have read this morning.

“Hope?,” you say. Yeah. I say hope. Of course, I can speculate hope because I am seeing the passage “post-Easter.” That is, I (and you) know how the story ends. I know (as do you) that in the end we find out that Jesus triumphs, and the war is over. Won by the lambkin. We also find out that this

God to whom the Psalmist so beautifully sings is a song to a loving and a comforting God.

I put these passages together because I want you to see that the fate that Jesus turned his face toward when he turned toward Jerusalem is a fate promised by the political leaders of the time. “That fox,” says Jesus, referring to Herod Agrippa, the son of the Herod who slaughtered the innocents after Jesus was born. Cunning. Sly. Immoral. Dishonest. Jesus knew these things about the Roman leader. He knew that he was heading into trouble. He didn’t need the Pharisees to tell him. Yet, Luke tells us that Jesus was warned.

Stress.

I suspect that Jesus must have been stressed when this incident happened. I suspect that he was experiencing way over 300 on the stress test. A death threat from the leader of your government certainly would put you over the top. This is the same leader who had beheaded John (Jesus’ cousin) just a few months before.

A few years ago I took a stress management course offered by University of Massachusetts in Worcester. It was six intensive weeks of learning how to manage stress. My focus in this class was on me. And, that’s the trouble with most of the stress management techniques today. The focus is on the

individual. We learn that we are in control of our lives. We also learn that we are in control of our stress. We struggle to recover the control, so that the guilt of how we have allowed stress to disable us will disappear. We long to know that we are truly in control of our own lives.

Yet, what Jesus did in our passage today is instructive. It is the master learning from the master teacher. It teaches us that to turn our face toward that which we fear is the only way to live. It teaches us that God wants to live out our lives with us. It teaches us that when we turn toward our fears, God reaches out her wings and surrounds us. We are protected.

There is a story told about a barnyard brush fire that burned so fast and so hot that it destroyed everything in the barnyard including all of the chickens. The farmer went out the next day to walk the barnyard and saw the charred and stiffened carcass of a hen with her wings outspread. When he kicked over the carcass with his toe, several tiny chicks scurried out from under their mother's wings.

Jesus promises us the protection of a loving God who walks with us through the lonely times of our lives; the stressful times of our lives; the times in our lives when it seems as if everything is changing and there are no answers.

Jesus also models for us that we are called to be more than passive victims of life. We are to keep on living. We are to keep on bearing. We are to face into our fears even it feels as though we may be destroyed by them.

Jesus also models for us that the way that we quiet the voices of negativity in our lives, mostly about ourselves, is by turning outward; by turning our focus to the needs of others. It is in turning our focus away from ourselves and upon the needs of those who are hurting around us that we find peace and tranquility. Now, I don't want you to believe that I am calling for a bypassing of the hard work of looking at your own life and what is causing stress. I mean, that service can be healing. It can heal a lonely heart. It can calm a stressful Mom or Dad. It can reassure a restless teen.

Jesus cried for the city.

We must be agents of change in a society that is often the carrier of ulcers. As Christians we must be willing to stand up to the voices of our culture which seduce us into believing that change is always within our control. We must be willing to trust in the God who gathers her chicks when it is necessary. And we must be willing to trust in the God who turns towards the pain and faces what is ahead because this God knows that God is not alone.

**May we be followers of the one who modeled courage.
May we be able to take courage from the words of the
Psalmist. May we take courage from the actions of Jesus. May
we take courage from each other for we are the incarnation of
the One who rose on the third day.**

Holy One:

**We face stresses today that hold the power to unseat us
from our world. For some of us here it has been a difficult
month, never mind week. We pray that you will give us
courage; that you will give us strength; that you will be
present with us so much that we can feel the protection of your
wings. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.**