

Sermons from Fort Massey
T. D. Cleveland-Thompson

A Letter to the Congregation - As the Globe Shakes

March 22/20

Readings

- 1) The Poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream and not make dreams your master;
If you can think and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with wornout tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitchandtoss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew

To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And which is more you'll be a Man my son!

2.) and from the Bible, the Epistle to the Philippians 4:1-9

Sermon: A Letter to the Congregation - As the Globe Shakes

Let me begin with a word of explanation.

Quite a few years ago I tried having someone tape a sermon with a video camera. Now to be fair, the cameras were heavy and difficult to operate smoothly and I had a fellow clergy person doing the taping in an empty church but, after viewing it, I promised I would never do it again.

The problem is that a sermon is not meant to be preached in an empty church. You pause for laughter and there is none. You look around to make eye contact and gradually it disintegrates and feels less and less like a sermon.

Some people are ok with it. They have the right personality, rather like some people are great on camera when being interviewed. And others seem to freeze and lose their train of thought. I fall into the latter.

So rather than even try to preach an actual sermon I am writing this more as a pastoral letter to the congregation which some of you can read as a letter.

This may work on video — and it may not. So if it works, it will be posted for a short time as a video on our web page.

But I am not convinced that preaching anything to empty pews is a great idea. And so in the tradition of the New Testament, where letters were written to churches from Paul and others.

This is a letter in March of 2020, in a world that is confusing and changing.

Dear Friends:

I write this to the church at the corner of Tobin and Queen at a time when the church is shut.

The church was shut for five weeks, we are told, during the outbreak of the Spanish flu in 1918. And in March of 2020 we face a similar crisis: a pandemic which alarms and confuses us.

Some of us have been glued to the news coverage and others of us have to walk away and think about other things to stay calm.

It is tough. During most crises human beings come together. We talk it over. We hug each other. We comfort each other. This is a new experience. This being told to stay apart and not to gather.

One of the more comforting addresses given to the people this past week was given by the governor of New York State.

He compared our lives right now to those of a snow globe. You know how someone comes along and shakes the globe and everything moves around. That is likely how you are feeling right now.

He told his people and then just when you get used to things the globe shakes again.

That has been the story of the past week. Last Sunday we were told not to gather if we had 150 people or more and to practice social distancing.

We don't have crowds of 150. So we gathered.

This Sunday we are no longer gathering and most of our seniors are barely leaving their homes — becoming increasingly isolated and wishing that life could go back to normal, whatever that looks like.

Someone once commented

Every baseball team could use someone who plays every position,

Never strikes out

And never makes an error.

The trouble is that there is no way to get him to put down his hot dog and come down out of the stands.

That is part of the problem. During a major emergency it is much easier to criticize from an armchair than to be on the front lines. And the world is hoping that the choices made by each country's leaders will actually work, but we don't really know

We have new words in our lexicon: Social distancing; Shelter in place — which looks like house arrest in some countries.

And so in the midst of all of that we hunker down at home and wonder what will happen next.

The closing of the American border was something few of us anticipated just a week ago. The closing of stores and restaurants; drive through coffee and offices working from home; deserted streets and schools.

But the New York governor, who was one of the few who seemed to know how to strike the balance between sounding the alarm taking serious action and yet comforting his people, quoted from that poem by Kipling

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;*

It is tough a lot of leaders seem to just follow. They appear timid and afraid and they wait until someone else makes the tougher choices and then they copy.

He said that he got more complaints about closing the bars than about any other decision which he made.

But he said, “I did it. I made the decision and I will live with it.”

Keeping your head, when others are losing theirs, is not easy.

But we need this morning to hear the words written to the church in the letter of Philippians:

**Finally, brothers and sisters,
whatever is true, whatever is noble,
whatever is right,
whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is admirable—**

**if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—
think about such things.**

That is advice for us today as much as it was in the first century.

In the midst of crisis some people do step up and some people do reach out and some of us can focus on the noble and admirable, rather than those who quickly take advantage of such situations.

Watching people who hoard cleaning supplies and then resell them for too much is discouraging.

Listening to people complain about how it impacts them, when they are doing fine, is discouraging, but many others are reaching out.

They are keeping in touch with older folk by phone and e-mail; with cards and letters.

They are trying to ensure that those who have to self-isolate have supplies.

It is extremely tough for those who work with the homeless and the most vulnerable. Many charities are now offering take-out meals, but on a bitterly cold day in March where exactly do the homeless take them?

The library is closed. The places where they could gather are closed and we are lucky that it is March and not December.

And so instead of focussing on what we don't have and can't do perhaps this is the time to keep our heads and focus on what we can do

We can pick up our phones.

We can even work in our gardens, if we have one, and if it is a nice day, we can smile when we have to go out

We can think about those on the front lines the medical workers who are overwhelmed and overworked.

There is not much we can do in a world of social distancing to support them, but we can try to remember them and be patient when we can't get everything we want quickly.

We can flip the channel when we find ourselves getting depressed, although, as my own mother pointed out this week, the problem with that is that they break into the other show with news of the virus.

So we may have to put in a DVD or read a book or make a puzzle.

Perhaps clean out that closet or drawer, where you throw everything and mean to sort it out someday.

Watch a few herbs grow on a window sill or read more bedtime stories to your children if you have them.

It is the winter of the pandemic, but it is also a winter and now spring, with plenty of possibilities.

We can give to charities who have to shut down their fund raising activities but still need money.

And we can do everything possible not to spread the virus to the most vulnerable, many of who are members of this congregation.

Keep your head while the globe is shaking and focus on the good and the noble. The true, the lovely, and the admirable.

The snow globe will eventually stop shaking and this congregation will be here to support each other during the shaking and in the aftermath.

Please join me in a prayer that came to me in an email on Friday

Prayer for a Pandemic

By Cameron Bellm

May we who are merely inconvenienced
Remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors
Remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home
Remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close
Remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips
Remember those that have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market
Remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home
Remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country,
let us choose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,
Let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors.

Amen.