

I was in Great Neck, on Long Island, serving as pastor of a non-Methodist church that had lots of money but many challenges. Attendance was low. A new couple I'd hoped would join the church had not returned after a few weeks of visiting. The people in my congregation were mostly elderly, and frail. They were also contentious; they loved to fight with each other, especially at their carefully structured meetings. One Sunday morning as I waited to begin the service, those coming through the doors of the church seemed to grow more and more frail, right before my eyes. A man who had had a dispute with another in the congregation was not present. The Elders & Deaconesses meeting earlier that morning had been a downer. My depression deepened as I waited for the organist to finish the prelude. When it was over, I could barely choke out the call to worship. Our opening hymn was 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' with its third verse which says: 'Holy, holy, holy, though the darkness hide thee, though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see...' 'Though the darkness hide thee.' This line pounded within my heart and became my strain of hope for the day, for the week, and even for now... Joy sneaked in as I realized that God was right with us even though I couldn't see it. And so it continues: Just when we cannot see that God is here or what God is doing, God nevertheless is at work on our behalf, whispering guidance to the deepest parts of our hearts, leading us to do little things for big reasons, and giving us hope right when we can't seem to conjure it up for ourselves. '

In several ways, I have found this week to be deeply challenging. For one thing, our world seems to be unraveling into a complicated mess, as Iraq is being forcefully taken over by harsh conservatives; as nothing seems resolved in Ukraine; as our own politics continue to be combative and pretty much unproductive when it comes to getting anything through Congress; as we finding ourselves horrified but also almost numbed by reports of more school attacks...And here, in our own congregation, as those of us who attended last Sunday's meeting – and too many did NOT – found ourselves troubled by some of what was said and by our own uncertainties as to how to even proceed. 'Though the darkness hide thee.'

We live in a time when technology offers us a sense of control, but it also reveals how out of control we are. No matter how small a nano-bit we find ourselves able to grasp and manipulate or how many galaxies we become able to map and explore, we are still not Creator. We still are unable to fulfill ourselves. And we continue to discover that the hardest thing to do in life is to love others. We need God.

This morning we did not use my favorite Statement of Faith as the Call to Worship because it seemed good for us to share Psalm 8. But I want to share it now, because it seems to do a good job of reminding us of God's presence with us and our call to be the church in this world.

I read the Statement of Faith from the United Church of Canada, number 883 in the Hymnal:

We are not alone, we live in God's world. We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the Spirit. We trust in God.
We are called to be the church:
to celebrate God's presence, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil,

to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God!

This statement clearly articulates the basics of our faith and delineates what God hopes we will do as a church, as those who are a community of folks trying to follow Jesus. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus made it quite clear what we are to do as his followers: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." And *remember*, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20, edited) It is all too easy for us to lose sight of our mission and the promises our Lord has given us.

Preacher/professor Tony Campolo wrote a neat book a few years ago entitled, *Let Me Tell You A Story*. In it he declares that one of his favorite stories is Soren Kierkegaard's parable of the ducks. I share it today as a challenge to all of us who are Christian, all of us who are trying to let our faith in Jesus Christ make a difference in our lives, in our world, and even in our church.

"...(Kierkegaard) describes a town where only ducks live. Every Sunday the ducks waddle out of their houses and waddle down Main Street to their church. They waddle into the sanctuary and find their proper pews. The duck choir waddles in and takes its place, then the duck minister comes forward and opens the duck Bible. (Ducks, like all other creatures on earth, seem to have their own special version of the Scriptures.) He reads to them: 'Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings and you can fly like birds!' All the ducks shouted, 'Amen!' *And they all waddled home.*" (*Let Me Tell You a Story*, Tony Campolo, pp. 81-82)

The *Christian Century* magazine included a sermon/article written by Jennifer Copeland, a Methodist chaplain at Duke Divinity School, where she compares Jesus' instructions to his followers that they "Baptize, Teach, and Remember" to the way churches tend to try to grow today. In her words: "The basic church growth plan Jesus offers is refreshingly simple: 'Go and make disciples.' Over the years, our favorite construction model has become instead 'wait and welcome converts.' Because we want to extend the utmost in hospitality to those we are waiting for, we pour unbounded resources into the place where we wait. We wait in the comfort of our ...sanctuaries. When newcomers arrive we provide ...programming options ranging across the spectrum of human need. And we employ (a lot) of people to keep it running. Alas, the converts are not showing up for us to make disciples of them. Cavernous sanctuaries, spacious family life centers, hallways of Sunday School rooms sit empty all week long and are increasingly empty on Sunday morning, too. To solve the emptiness problem, we fix up these vacant places and hire more people to plan more programs. Some of us do this until the money runs out.

"But Jesus never said, 'If you build it, they will come.' He said, 'Go.' The first action of going is to baptize – and Jesus knew firsthand what can happen to a person right after baptism...Baptism as Jesus experienced it propels us into wilderness wandering, where we can be prepared for a life of countercultural behavior that will lead to the (foot of the) cross." (Jennifer Copeland, p. 20 in *The Christian Century*, June 11, 2014 issue; edited a bit by FTE).

I share this because Rev. Bn Copeland has helped focus for me Jesus' challenge. Go out into the

world, don't stay huddled with people who agree with you. Baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which means there has to be a lot of teaching going on, so that newcomers can learn what it is Jesus taught and did. And REMEMBER, all this would be impossible except for one thing: Our Lord promises: "I am with you, all the way through to the end of time." So it's not impossible! So we don't have to waddle around bemoaning the state of what we have or the money we don't have. Our mission, if we are following Jesus, is to step outside of these doors and make a difference for someone else in Jesus' name.

In their book, *Outflow*, pastors Steve Sjogren and Dave Ping offer a lot of embraceable challenges to modern Christians. Steve has often enjoyed talking with restaurant servers about their life stories, and about their favorite and least favorite days to work. His report: "Almost without exception, they say the same thing regarding their least favorite day to wait on tables: 'I hate coming in on Sundays,' they say, 'especially right after church lets out.' They will frequently go on to say that church people are often the rudest, most demanding, and least generous people who come in each week. If they leave a tip at all, it's very often small." (*Outflow*, p. 214)

"Go, make disciples..." Not enemies, not people who want to avoid you because of your lack of concern for their well-being...Disciples, because you know that Jesus is right here with you, through the good times and the bad.

While I was in Avon, I was blessed to know a woman named Barbara G, who ended up battling a recurrence of ovarian cancer. Every time I would visit her, she wanted to hear about my life. She kept up with the needs of others in our congregation and prayed for them. The day before she died of cancer, Barbara smiled at me with her whole being and declared, "I am so blessed..." And she began naming her many blessings. This woman died full of abundant life, thankful to her last breath. She took the life that had been given her and *flew, soared* – no waddling for her through any of it! She knew that God was with her in good times and bad, and the Light of our Lord showed through her profound faith and her love for others. (Pause)

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee, though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see.... Even so, the Holy One is at work, right now, among and within us. God's Holy Spirit can fill us and lead us and teach us and bless us, even right now.

Whatever happens in your life, wherever you go, whatever happens in our congregation, we must not lose sight of what has been given to us. God made us, God loves us, God has a claim on our lives, God offers us forgiveness and hope when we mess up, and in every moment, God is with us. NOTHING can keep this from being God's truth for us!

In a minute we will sing "Into My Heart," which is found in *The Faith We Sing*, p. 2160. Through the prayer of this song, let us invite Jesus into our hearts; and then, in the spirit of his final words to his followers, let us pray that through our attitudes and actions others may be able to see the light and love and hope of our Lord as we soar forth - no waddling! - into this world. Hear again God's promise from Isaiah 40:31: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

And remember, Jesus is with you always, even to the end of the age." (Mtt 28:20) Thank God! Amen.