

*“Whatever You’re Going Through, Jesus Says, I AM”*

Based on John 4:3-42, Romans 5:1-11, 2 Timothy 1:7, Psalm 95 and Exodus 17:1-7

Delivered on March 15, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

When the Apostle Paul was imprisoned by Rome, his dutiful servant and the pastor he trained to take the reins in Ephesus, a young man named Timothy, started to have a crisis of faith. How could God let this happen to Paul? How? Why? What good could come of this? His vision was very narrow.

Paul’s response is a beautiful one, assuring the young man who is not in prison, that God is at work still in what is happening to him, Paul, the man who is in prison. The most famous line is one that is often shared in times of uncertainty, and I appreciate that our friend John Channell sent it to me on Sunday. And you may know it well, “For God did not give us a Spirit of fear, but rather a Spirit of power and love and a sound mind.”

Here we are in a time of uncertainty, moving our worship services online. Normally, this would be an exciting moment that we are testing out a new technology. This is something we should be celebrating, but as you know this is different – our pews are empty and we are acting in an abundance of caution. But let me be clear, this decision was made with much deliberation, with a great deal of prayer and wrestling with scripture. And the decision comes from a confidence that what we are not acting out of fear, but with a Spirit of power, love and sound mind.

We have the power to trust that God is with us whether we are gathered as one here, or gathered online and following up with each other in the week. We have the love to consider those most at risk, should not be here gathered together putting themselves at risk. And the sound mind to act now, before it gets worse.

What a wonderful thing it will be, if and we pray, when in a short time, people will no longer be concerned about a virus that has spread to 135 countries, and instead will be complaining that we overreacted. That it was no big deal.

I pray that this will be the case, and those naysayers will be proud, because they never worried one bit about any of it. But it will be the actions of those who did use a sound mind, who did trust God to do something a little different and take a risk, that will prevent the crisis we have seen in Italy, where 1 out of every 14 people infected has died.

I believe these are moments when God calls us to respond in God’s power, love and sound mind. These are moments when we trust that our justification, our being made right with God, is not based on the number of Worship services we attend, but on the basis of our faith, our trust in God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

As Paul said to Timothy, when he was in prison, he said also to the Roman church years earlier while still a free man, that we celebrate in our sufferings without shame. In our reading today, Paul goes further, saying that the suffering we face in life, the trials and tribulations, the challenges, and even the panic we feel over COVID-19, are all opportunities for us to grow in our patience, our trusting in God. They are to let that patience form our character, to reflect God’s image, and by that character, build in us Hope in God’s eternal power.

This hope in the face of struggles and personal trials, may seem out of place to the world around us, but we are not to be ashamed. It is something to hold onto, because God pours love in our hearts, and gives us the Holy Spirit, with its power, love, and sound mind.

This morning as I headed out the door to come here, Claire and I prayed, but while we were praying Josephine started carrying around a measuring stick. Now when I say measuring stick, I mean a decorative piece of molding that we bought to measure the kids with as they grow taller year by year, making marks to see their progress. It is about twice her height. And while we are praying, we just hear her saying, "I got this, I got this. It's ok. I got this."

This moment reminded me of the gospel reading we had from John. It is a long reading, and a beautiful one that marks the first convert and evangelist, the first person to recognize Jesus for who he is and then spread the good news. The woman at the well is an example of someone encounters Jesus, turns from whatever she was doing in her life, even turns from gathering water, and runs off to spread the good news without shame. Where she once had hidden from judgement, she now goes and freely proclaims the truth.

Now, I don't want us to have any false images of this woman. A woman in this era who has had five husbands is not someone who has been promiscuous, but someone who has been cast aside or widowed by five men. The shame she feels is not a sin that she chooses, but one that she is forced to commit by the circumstances of her life. She has been ostracized by her community and, no doubt, made also to feel like she is separated from God. She is so desperate for support that she lives with a man without the slightly greater security that comes from being legally married to him. But she is confident from her encounter with Jesus is that she is saved, she is loved, and that she has living water, the spring of faith inside of her that is her justification.

But what I want to key in on today is that she is also the first to hear Jesus admit who he is. Now this is subtle, but it is important to remember, especially in our times of struggle. Because Jesus tells her that he is the Messiah, but does so by taking the name of God. Jesus reveals to this woman at the well, even before His disciples, that He is both the Messiah, the child of Israel promised by God, and the anointed King, who also shares in the divine name. Jesus tells her, "I AM."

Now when we read our bibles, they add the word "he" because it sounds strange in English. I stand with the scholars and theologians who have said that when John writes these words "ego eimi" in Greek, and when Jesus spoke them, likely in Aramaic, there is no question what He is saying. Jesus is harkening back to the name of God from Exodus, YHWH, which the Israelites held in such esteem they would not even say it – the meaning of which is "I am who I am. I am who I will be. I will be who I will be."

Even in the name, God expresses such confidence. God says, "I'm not Zeus whose name means God of the Sky." YHWH says, "I am who I am. I will be who I will be." That's what matters. In whatever you're going through I will be with you – even slavery in Egypt – and God says, "I am who I am, and I will be who I will be. Trust in me. I will carry you through this. I don't need anything. You need me, and I choose to love you. I choose to seek you to be with you." Jesus shares in this name.

In John's gospel, there are many time when John centers stories on Jesus using these words, "I am." My favorite is on the waters, after Jesus has fed the 5,000, and when the Apostles head over to

Capernaum by sea without Him, a storm rises. The storm has them afraid and convinced they will die, but there is Jesus walking on the water to them. And He says to them, "Do not be afraid. I am." The winds go away, the storm settles, and they are immediately on the shore at the pronouncement of His divine identity. When they see Jesus for who He is, they are assured that they are safe.

The God who is all things, who created all thing, is the God who loves us, and is with us. In the third reading from the lectionary that we didn't read, the people of Israel are in the wilderness, worried and thirsty, and Moses strikes a rock to give them water. The people who were stubborn are reminded that God is with them. That's the link of these texts, that in whatever challenges we go through in life, God is with us. God was with the Israelites in the wilderness when they needed water, and God was there at the well revealed to be Jesus, the Word made flesh, the Messiah, and the one who shares that name, "I am who I am." In Paul's text, we are made right to be with God through Jesus who lived, died and rose again for us, and so we are allies with the one true God who is with us.

Whatever challenges we face. Whatever changes we have to make to deal with this crisis. God is saying, "I got this." And it goes without saying, that He's a lot more competent than my two-year-old or any of us. So, when Jesus says, "I got this." We can trust in Him. He's got this. Whatever you're going through, Jesus says, I am. Are you afraid because of COVID-19, Jesus assures you, I am.

The God who is "I am" came down to earth to share in our existence to live as we live, die on the cross and rise again, all for us, so that you and I would have a share of God's life, which is abundant and eternal. This is a life that is not ashamed of this good news, of the hope for a life filled with living water and the joy of knowing that God loves you and calls you to share that love with others. Amen.