

I

Earlier this week, I found myself sitting in my youngest son's Kindergarten classroom. Amy and I were there for the spring parent-teacher conferences, and as we talked with our son's teacher, I took a long look around the classroom.

In many respects, his Kindergarten classroom is much like the classroom that I sat in when I was his age. There's the American flag, hanging proudly near the door, ready for the daily Pledge of Allegiance. There's the reading nook in the corner, with bean bag chairs and a soft rug and shelves full of colorful books just waiting to be read and explored.

But as I glanced around the room, I couldn't help but recall something that my five-year-old said to me a few days ago. His class had gone on a field trip, and at dinner that night, I said, "So when you got back to school from the field trip, what else did you do?"

And my Kindergartner said to me very matter-of-factly, "Oh, we had our second lock-down drill."

And so as I sat in his classroom this week, I found myself taking note of the location of the door, and the sightlines from the window, and wondering which corner he and his classmates and teacher had huddled under during last month's drill.

And that conversation made me mindful of just how different our experiences are. My generation

certainly has had our share of challenges, but when we were coming of age, although the Cold War was still very much being waged, we had dispensed with the "duck and cover" drills of earlier generations, and the term "lockdown drill" had yet to be invented.

I promise, I'm not telling you this because I'm trying to be a "doom and gloom" "turn or burn" kind of preacher. I truly do believe the words of the Heidelberg Catechism – in life and in death, we belong, body and soul, not to ourselves but to our faithful savior Jesus Christ.

I'm just being honest with you - I find myself less at ease about the state of the world than I used to be, and I'm a little more anxious and frightened these days.

II

And I suspect that I'm not the only one that feels that way. These are anxious times in which we live. The emergence and spread of a new virus and the worldwide disruption it has already caused has made us more mindful of just how truly connected the world has become in the 21st century. And when we're fearful, we have a natural human tendency to close ranks, to circle the wagons, to begin looking out for number one.

III

And that brings us to our story from Mark's gospel. We're picking up this morning right where we left off last week. Jesus has begun his march from

the Sea of Galilee toward Jerusalem and the final showdown that awaits him there with the powers that be.

As we read the text, note how Mark describes the mood among the disciples and the crowd that follows along behind Jesus on the way: they are amazed and afraid.

They are amazed, because by this point in the story, Jesus has had enough run-ins with the Pharisees and the scribes and with King Herod's henchmen that he's got a reputation in Jerusalem. The prudent thing would be to stay in Galilee and steer clear of trouble in the capital city. And so the people are amazed that Jesus is intentionally heading straight for the lion's mouth, so to speak.

And they're afraid, because the political situation is already tense. There have already been several attempts at a revolt against the Roman forces that occupy the land, all of which were brutally put down.

Remember, public execution by crucifixion was Rome's preferred method of capital punishment – their version of a gallows, and the message was clear and unmistakable – this is what happens to those who would dare challenge Roman rule.

And so with that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God from Mark 10:32-45:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and

those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your

servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.

I think it’s easy to read this story and to cluck our tongues at James and John, the sons of Zebedee. There they go, trying to work an angle. There they go, trying to work a scheme. There they go, trying to secure for themselves the best seats at the table, giving no thought to the rest of the team.

But I wonder. What was their motivation in making such a bold request of Jesus? Was it greed? Was it ego?

I submit to you, friends, that they were *amazed* and *afraid*. I submit to you that they saw that this Jesus train was headed to Jerusalem, and they weren’t certain how it was all going to come down in the end, and so they decided that they’d better get their seat reservations in now, while there was still time.

They were amazed and afraid, and so their natural human inclination was to look out for themselves and their immediate family, and to let everyone else fend for themselves.

Notice, friends, that while the other ten disciples get angry, Jesus doesn’t rebuke the brothers outright.

Instead, he uses this as a teaching opportunity.

He calls the twelve together and says, in Ryan’s Revised Translation, “You’ve seen how fear can be a great motivator. You see how King Herod and Governor Pilate use fear to keep people in line. But that’s not how we roll in my kingdom. In my kingdom, the way to become great is to help somebody else. In my kingdom, the way to move up is to move out – move out toward those in need. In my kingdom, leaders don’t rule with spears and swords and fear, leaders rule with washbasins and towels and love.”

IV

My eighth grade math teacher had a big sign in her classroom that said this, “The best way to forget about your problems is to help someone else with theirs.”

My friend, if you’re feeling anxious about the state of the world today, if you’re feeling afraid, if you’re feeling apprehensive about what might be coming next, I get it. And I don’t think for a second that you’re the only one in this room that feels that way.

And if you’re feeling a strong impulse to look out for number one, to circle the wagons around yourself and those closest to you, to pull whatever strings you can pull to reserve a seat in the lifeboat case of trouble and let the rest of the world fend for themselves, I get that, too. That is a perfectly valid,

perfectly natural human response to fear.

But Jesus teaches us that the best way to overcome your fear, the best way to overcome your anxiety, the best way to relieve the tension, isn't to circle the wagons and ball up your fists. It's actually the complete opposite.

Jesus invites you this day not to draw in on yourself, but to move out toward another. Jesus invites you to relieve your tension by relieving the suffering of others. Jesus invites you to be lifted up by moving down.

I know, it's completely opposite to your basic human instincts. I've discovered that so much of this gospel-life asks me to do things that seem backwards to my instincts for self-preservation and self-promotion. But I invite you to try it this week.

When you're feeling especially afraid, when you're feeling especially anxious, do something for somebody else.

Write a note of encouragement to a schoolteacher.

Pay for the coffee of the person in line behind you at the drive-through window.

Drop off a case of bottled water at the fire station.

Sign up for a shift to deliver meals on wheels.

There are a hundred different ways you can resist fear, you can resist

the temptation to draw in on yourself, by moving out toward others.

V

As this virus has emerged and spread across the world, it has reminded once again that we are truly a global community. From the Atlanta airport, we can fly nonstop to almost every continent in the world. When our church was chartered two centuries ago, a trip abroad that would have taken weeks now takes a matter of hours. Whether we like it or not, we are all in this thing together.

One of the best books I've read in the last year is titled *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't* by Simon Sinek. Sinek makes the argument that from a biological perspective, you and I are no different than our human ancestors who first emerged on the planet thousands of years ago. He also points out that of all the creatures with whom we share this planet, we are not the biggest or the fastest or the strongest.

What makes us different than the lions and the tigers and the bears, he argues, is our remarkable nature as social creatures. That is, it's our ability to work together to solve problems and our ability to accumulate, store, and share knowledge that has enabled us human beings to thrive. Without one another, and without the gifts of the generations who came before us, you and I would still be sitting in a cave somewhere trying to light a fire, argues Sinek.

We are all in this thing together. What affects one of us affects us all. In times of trouble, Christ invites us to overcome our anxiety and fear not by drawing in, but by moving out. As a 20th century Georgia preacher reminds us, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, what am I doing for others?”

Whoever wishes to become great among you must become your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Thanks be to God. Amen.