



## ***“Alone”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Matthew 27: 32-46; Romans 8: 31-39*

*July 3, 2022*

As a few of you may be aware, I had a bit of what I will call an ‘incident’ when I was attending the annual meeting of our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches this past week. Early this past Monday morning, the third day of the conference, I got up to use the restroom. Returning to bed in the darkness, however, I proceeded to slam my foot into the wooden leg of a large lounge chair - breaking my toe. Not fun, but not the end world. Some 30 minutes later, or so, the pain was throbbing pretty good, so I decided that I needed to get back and take some ibuprofen. I stood up, walked into the bathroom, and that’s when I felt it. I don’t know if it was the fatigue of the early morning, the shock of the pain in my foot, something else, or perhaps most likely some sort of combination of all of the above, but I could feel the blood begin to fall from my head. I immediately started to kneel down onto the floor in order to reverse that flow, but sure enough, on my way down, I simply kept going, and the next thing I know my head was jerking up as blood was pouring out all over the bathroom floor on which I’d just slammed my head.

I quickly grabbed a towel to put against my head, I crawled back to bed, elevated my feet to stabilize the blood flow, and spent the next hour or so laying there just trying to get my physiology normalized enough to take some next steps. Over the rest of that day, and the days that followed, there were various things that emerged from that incident – not the least of which was walking around the meeting, and leading multiple presentations from the dais, while trying to disguise the cut and swelling with these big Band-Aids on my forehead. But, what I really want to highlight is the isolation that I felt in those earliest moments as I laid in bed trying to recoup after the initial injuries.

You see, this was all taking place in Wichita, KS – some 800 miles away from home. I had traveled there alone. I was in the hotel room alone. And, in that moment, if I’m honest about it, I felt pretty alone. There was this sense of cold isolation that enveloped me. As I laid in that bed, my head spinning, shivering in cold sweats from the experience of it all, towel clutched in my hand and pressed to my head to try to stop the bleeding, and my mind running through what steps I was going to take in the coming hours to manage both the practical needs and the professional responsibilities that I held in the business meetings of the association throughout that day – I felt very alone! Now, we’re going to loop back around to this story in a few minutes, because the truth is that I wasn’t anywhere near as isolated as I felt in that moment, but the other truth is that it is not hard for life to make us feel that way.

Consider, if you will, that moment with Jesus on the cross. I know that it's a bit strange to be talking about the crucifixion in the middle of July. We tend to isolate those passages to the Easter season, and this one in particular mostly to Good Friday. We talk about the sacrifice and resurrection throughout the year, but we don't tend to delve into these crucifixion passages outside of the structure of Holy Week. The more I thought about the manner in which this world can bring us into to that experience of isolation, however, the more I couldn't get that singular moment out of my mind. Jesus has been marched to Golgotha and he is suspended on the cross with two common criminals at his side. The scorching heat of the midday sun is beating down upon him. Guards, temple officials and passers-by all mock him and cast insults in his direction. The pain is unbearable, the derision is inescapable, and Jesus cries out at the top of his lungs, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Now, scholars will immediately start drawing our attention to Psalm 22 and the historic and faith-grounded root of these words that Jesus shares. And, theologians will start talking about the principal of 'homoousios' and the oneness of Jesus and God even amidst their distinctness. But for me, today, the remarkable thing to consider is the manner in which Jesus, fully divine and yet fully human – that even Jesus found himself in the moment of feeling abandoned, forsaken, and isolated. Even Jesus, in his full humanity dwelling amidst his full Godliness, knew what it was to feel alone.

The simple truth is that we don't have to look very far to find those places where life can make us feel that way. Relational discord... medical challenges... mental health difficulties... social rejection... cultural subjugation... grief... sorrow... loss... financial despair... The list is endless. Whether it's cracking your head in a solo hotel room, or being cast aside by the world around us – whether you're a 48-year-old preacher from WI or the son of God himself – this life has an uncanny capacity to make us feel alone. And, alone is very difficult place to be.

I think that the exhaustive list of 'lessons learned' throughout the pandemic would make a large book, if not a multivolume encyclopedic set of wisdom. And, I'm sure the books already published are but the tip of the iceberg of the catalog of literature that is yet to come. I would suggest that one of the clearest lessons that we've learned, however, is just how detrimental that experience of isolation can be. The physical and emotional impact that Covid-related isolation has created is incalculable. The medical issues that we are seeing in a large swath of the senior community, and the mental health crisis that Covid has spawned in the youth of our country, are just a small snippet of the visible impacts that bring to bear just how damaging that experience of isolation can be, and there are a lot of angles to be explored on that topic. What we can do when we feel isolated... How we seek to break through the isolation of others around us... How we address the current and future impacts of isolation both experienced and perceived... There's a lot there – and there's a lot that the Bible can and will say about each and every one of those things. I think the first and foremost message that the Bible preaches to our sense of isolation, however, is the simple and unbreakable principle that we are never, ever, as alone as we can so quickly believe ourselves to be! And, that's what brings us to reading from Paul's letter to the Romans.

There's going to come a day in which you all are going to get sick of hearing me read these

particular words from Paul. And, you know what? I don't care. Because this is that passage for me. There are few richer passages in the Bible, for me, than these that we get in Romans 8, and I think they speak volumes to that sense of isolation that this world can bring upon us.

*What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 31-39)*

Turning our attention back to that morning in Wichita – as I laid in bed with that bloodied towel pressed against my forehead – the reality was that my sensibility of isolation was far different than the reality. I was the only person in the room in that moment – which is what fed that sensibility in the first place. The truth, however, is that there were 150+ conference attendees and staff throughout the hotel – many of whom I've known for decades. The Rev. Mike Fales, a friend colleague with whom I've worked for more than 20 years, was literally in the room next door with his wife, Judy. Doug and Lisa Wermuth, who were there representing our church, were just a floor below. Craig and Carol Reynolds, my sister's godparents who have been part of my life since the day I was born, were at their home 5 minutes away. I was the only person in the room, but I was far from the only person around – and even with that, I wasn't the only one in the room!

Listen, again, to the clear and unmistakable message of Scripture:

- “Be strong and courageous...for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6)
- “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.” (Isaiah 41:10)
- For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 38-39)

These are but a few of the many, but the Biblical message is clear. We are simply never, ever, as alone as we might imagine ourselves to be. If we can look beyond the darkness created by our sense of loneliness, we will quickly see that there are many around us that we have overlooked in our moments of distress. And, even more so, there is simply never, ever, a moment in which we are actually alone. There is nothing that can separate us from that love. There is nothing that can distance us from God's presence in our lives. There is nothing that would actually cause us to be alone, because God is there. No doubt, there will be times we have trouble seeing God's presence in the midst of turmoil. There will be times that the strife of the moment will cloud our sights and bring us into that sense of isolation that can stir such struggle in our hearts. If we can

settle our minds just enough to look beyond the moment's horizon, however, we will see the one thing that has remained the same every step of the way – God is there. In both Spirit and in the love of those around us, God is there. And there is simply nothing that can separate us from that love.

Whether it's cracking your head in a solo hotel room, or being cast aside by the world around us – whether you're a 48-year-old preacher from WI or the son of God himself – this life has an uncanny capacity to make us feel alone. To every moment in which that sense of isolation creeps in, however, the Biblical response is crystal clear – we are not alone! We never have been. And, we never will be. Because, there is simply nothing – nothing! – that will separate us from that love!