



March 22, 2020  
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## Defiant Hope: Our Perspective

Philippians 1:19 ff, Romans 14:8

Hello Chapel Hill. I'm so glad to welcome you to worship...even in these unusual circumstances. A year ago when we began to make plans to live-stream our worship services, we had no idea how vital this technology would become to us. Aren't you grateful that even in this time of isolation, we are all able to come together in worship!

In fact, last week we had 2000 views of our online worship service! And those pictures you posted of your little worshipping communities were such an inspiration. So today, whether you are viewing this alone or with your family or with a few friends...I believe that God is going to meet us in this moment. Scattered as we are across this community and region, let's unite our hearts in prayer.

It was the summer of 1939. The Nazi war machine was rumbling and by September, Poland was invaded and World War II had begun. The British government knew that England would be drawn into the war. Hoping to bolster morale, the Ministry of Information printed up 2.5 million copies of a poster. The poster "Keep Calm and Carry On." Those five words epitomized the "stiff upper lip" stoicism of Victorian England. Whatever might come, keep calm...and carry on!

We don't have a Ministry of Information today, but we do have mass media, cable news and Facebook. And if they were to print up a poster to capture this present moment, it might read something like this: "Keep Terrified and Freeze Up!" It is not hard to sense the hysteria that is being fanned by organizations that profit from hysteria.

But here's the thing: every one of us can choose how we are going face to this present moment. And I want to encourage the people of Chapel Hill to "keep calm and carry on" Not because we're British or because we have stiff upper lips. But because we stand in a long line of Christ-followers who have done exactly that in similar circumstances. Who have dealt with pandemics and maintained a sense of peace and calm when the rest of the world was going frantic.

This morning, I want to set our present situation in perspective. Historical perspective and theological perspective. And by the end of this message, I pray that you will feel empowered to carry on in the calm that only comes when we are certain of who we are in Jesus Christ.

As Pastor Larry reminded us in his blog, this is not the first pandemic the world or the Church has ever faced. In the second century, a plague swept through the Roman Empire, killing ¼ of the population. In the third century, the empire was again ravaged by a disease that resembled

Ebola. Beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Bubonic Plague swept across the Europe and Asia with a mortality rate between 30 and 60%. One hundred years ago, the Spanish Flu took around 50 million lives, half of them in the United States. And last year, 31 million Americans caught the flu resulting in more than 30,000 deaths.

To put this present epidemic in perspective, there are around 300,000 cases of Coronavirus worldwide and so far, around 12,000 deaths. Of course that number is climbing...and I do not mean in the slightest to diminish the seriousness of this disease. It is nasty and contagious and needs to be dealt with aggressively. One member of my LifeGroup has a family member who has been diagnosed positive. Another member of our church lost an uncle to this disease. If you or one you love are fighting this virus, it doesn't matter how widespread it is. For you, it is real and frightening isn't it?

Still, I DO want us to set the scope of this crisis in historical perspective. 12,000 deaths are horrible. Fifty million deaths were worse. The vast majority of people stricken with this are recovering...and this, too, shall pass. And here's one more thing: in every one of those pandemics...it was the Church of Jesus that rose up in defiant hope: defiant of fear...defiant of the temptation to hoard ...defiant of paralyzing self-interest. When the rest of the world was fleeing or hiding, Christians remained to care for each other.... as well as for those who were not Christian.

During a fourth-century plague, a man named Eusebius wrote that "the deeds of Christians were on everyone's lips." A modern historian, Rodney Stark, claims that the explosive growth of Christianity in the early centuries was due, in part, to their compassionate care for others during epidemics. And he further claims that the death rates in cities with Christian communities were in some cases half that of those without.

In 1527 when Bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Germany, Martin Luther remained to care for the sick. He even wrote a tract called *Whether Christians Should Flee the Plague* in which he argued that Christian leaders should remain at their posts. Luther, who loved to trash-talk the devil, had this to say to the devil about that plague.

"No, [devil], you'll not have the last word! If Christ shed his blood for me and died for me, why should I not expose myself to some small dangers for his sake and disregard this feeble plague? If you can terrorize, Christ can strengthen me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you have poison in your fangs, Christ has far greater medicine. Should not my dear Christ, with his precepts, his kindness, and all his encouragement, be more important in my spirit than you, roguish devil, with your false terrors in my weak flesh? God forbid! Get away, devil. Here is Christ and here am I, his servant in this work. Let Christ prevail! Amen."

Before ever there was a British Empire, the Christian Kingdom on earth had already learned to "Keep Calm and Carry on." And not because they never got sick or died. Luther lost his beloved daughter in that plague. Rather because Christians had an unshakeable vision of heaven. The

Apostle Paul captured that in his letter to the Philippians. Remember, Paul is writing this letter from prison. Any moment he expects to hear his executioner's footsteps outside his cell. And yet, though he faces imminent death, Paul's letter is full of joy and hope. Listen from chapter 1:19ff.

Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

You know the expression, "Win-Win." Paul is sharing the ultimate win-win situation. "To live is Christ, to die is gain." On one hand, he does not fear death! He looks forward to being with Jesus in heaven. He believes in the resurrected Christ who conquered death; he trusts that Jesus really did go to prepare a place for his disciples in heaven. If those things are true, Paul says, I have nothing to fear from death! Indeed, death is something to be mocked, as he did in I Corinthians 15: "Death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

On the other hand, Paul realizes there is fruitful work yet to be done on earth. The gospel still needs to be proclaimed. More people need to hear the good news of Jesus. So...if the executioner's hand is staid...THAT will be a good thing, too.

See what I mean? To live means to continue proclaiming the good news of Jesus. To die means leaving this broken world and gaining a perfect eternity with Jesus. TO live is Christ; to die is gain. It's a win-win.

That is what Paul believed. That is why he could face his death with courageous joy. That is why Christians down through the ages have run into the places others were fleeing. Caring for those that others were abandoning. Because they really believed what they said they believed.

This is our moment to ask ourselves... do we really believe what we say we believe? I'm not talking about easy intellectual assent. I mean...do we REALLY trust Jesus with everything we have, including our lives? Do we really believe Jesus when he says that he is the way, the truth and the life? Do we really trust Jesus when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, YET SHALL HE LIVE!"

Paul once wrote this to the Romans: For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (14:8)

This is what we say we believe. This is what we sing of...this is what the Creeds declare which we stand and pronounce...this is what our prayers assume....this is the victory cry summarized on Easter when we declare, "Christ is Risen...He is Risen Indeed." Now I realize it is easier to say we believe this when the world map is not red with virus, when the stock market is above

27,000, when we are able to gather in huge crowds and eat in our favorite restaurants and drink in our favorite pubs. But the question for us in this moment is...do we also believe it when the world map is aflame, the Dow is below 20,000 and we are compelled to worship in our living rooms instead of our sanctuary?

This is our moment, beloved. This is our moment to rise up in defiance of the gloom and despair the world is peddling. A moment to proclaim the inextinguishable, defiant hope that is ours because we serve the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. THIS is why we can keep calm...and carry on. Not because of courage that we gin up but rather because of the Spirit of the Living Christ who has laid claim to us...in life, in death...and nothing can snatch us out of his grasp. Nothing! That's defiant hope!

So...how can we declare our defiance? Let me offer a few ideas. Turn off the TV. For a long time. Turn it off! Turn off your phones for a time. Resist the temptation to surf through the bad news. Instead, use your phone to reach out to five people in your neighborhood. Or to call an elderly shut-in. Ask if they need food. Or if you really want to go crazy, walk around your neighborhood with a basket of toilet paper to give away!

Take a fresh, long look at the beauty that surrounds us. Find delight in a bowl of popcorn and a board game. Practice defiant generosity. Keep giving to your church, to the poor... to your neighbors in need. Devote a regular part of your enforced solitude to the study of the Bible and prayer. Join Pastor Ellis for 6:00 am prayer on Facebook. Join Pastors Larry and Megan at 1:00 pm for a Bible Study. Read my evening blog to prepare yourself for a restful sleep. There are a thousand ways for you to declare your defiant hope in Jesus as Lord over all...even over this pandemic.

In 1948, in the shadow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, C.S. Lewis was asked how people ought to live in light of the atomic bomb. If you replaced "atomic bomb" with "corona virus," his words are as apt today as they were 70 years ago.

*In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. "How are we to live in an atomic age?" I am tempted to reply: "Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents."*

*In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways.... It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.*

*This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.*

POSTER Keep calm...and carry on. Not because this isn't serious. It is. Not because it doesn't require prudence. It does. Not because it won't impact us or ones we love. It might. But because no bug exists that can separate us from the love of God. "For I'm convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor VIRUS nor anything else in all creation...will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

