

## Cashmere Presbyterian Church Worship for Sunday 19 April

### Call to worship

As we gather in our homes to worship this day ...  
We come to praise you for your steadfast love  
It is new every morning  
It sustains us in time of distress  
And strengthens us to stand firm.

### Prayer of Approach

Keep us, good Lord,  
under the shadow of your mercy  
in this time of uncertainty and distress.  
May this time of worship sustain and support the anxious and fearful,  
and lift up all who are brought low;  
Forgive us for our doubt and despair, and help us to rest in your comfort  
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### Hymn

The hymn I have chosen is the Boys Brigade hymn, that had a remarkable revival at Easter Camps in recent years as teenagers have bellowed out these great words:

#### *Will Your Anchor Hold*

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,  
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,  
Will your anchor drift or firm remain?

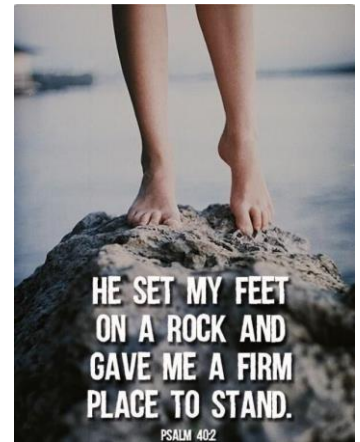
We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,  
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,  
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love.

We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,  
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,  
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love.

We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,  
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,  
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love.

### Psalm 31

In you, LORD, I have taken refuge;  
let me never be put to shame;  
deliver me in your righteousness.  
<sup>2</sup> Turn your ear to me,  
come quickly to my rescue;  
be my rock of refuge,  
a strong fortress to save me.  
<sup>3</sup> Since you are my rock and my fortress,  
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.  
<sup>4</sup> Keep me free from the trap that is set for me,



- for you are my refuge.
- <sup>5</sup> Into your hands I commit my spirit;  
deliver me, LORD, my faithful God.
- <sup>6</sup> I hate those who cling to worthless idols;  
as for me, I trust in the LORD.
- <sup>7</sup> I will be glad and rejoice in your love,  
for you saw my affliction  
and knew the anguish of my soul.
- <sup>8</sup> You have not given me into the hands of the enemy  
but have set my feet in a spacious place.

## **Sermon: Connecting with God in Times of Distress**

### **Introduction**

Today I want to deal with the importance of keeping connected to God through a time of social isolation. It is the first of a 3-part series designed to empower our prayer life at this time when many of our normal personal interactions have been compromised.

### **1. Distressed!**

Many people in the world right now are distressed!

Currently, an estimated 2.6 billion people – one-third of the world's population – is living under some kind of lockdown or quarantine. One commentator I read this week said '*this is arguably the largest psychological experiment ever conducted.*' For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused stress levels to spike. Already there are the results of studies coming out of China and Europe that have shown significant increases in what they diagnose as 'toxic levels of stress.' For many it is the result of struggling with feelings of isolation and loneliness as the necessity of social distancing keeps us physically apart.

Stress is interesting – there is certainly such a thing as good stress. Good stress has a technical name; eustress. It comes about when we are going through a situation that challenges us in a way that stretches our ability to cope but at the same time keeps us motivated and working towards goals. This kind of positive stress causes a chemical response in the body that helps us feel good about life. An example of that for me has been building new homes – twice in the last 6 years we have build a new home for ourselves. Each time it has been demanding, challenging and stressful in an exciting and life enhancing way. And for a few people, COVID 19 will be like this. Some people with meaningful frontline jobs have talked to me about the adrenaline rush of it all. One said to me 'I was born for a time like this!'

But for most of us COVID 19 is a time of negative stress. And for some of us it will be a time of toxic distress; a time when the stress gets too much and leads to a downward spiral of negative impacts like anxiety and depression.

Can you think of a time when you have been distressed! I can think of plenty. Sometimes it has been a particular incident. I remember one time when our children were teenagers and we were trying to leave our Christchurch home in time to get to Picton to catch a ferry sailing. Our teenage children were not very cooperative with the time frame we had to keep. It was stressful getting everything and everyone into the car are ready to go on time. When we eventually reached the stage of everyone in the car ready to go I realised that I had locked the keys the car and the house inside the house!

It was like the last straw. In a state of distress, I am ashamed to say I did not cope that well. In distressed panic I broke a thick window panel in the front door, got in, got the keys and found myself talking to the glass repairers on the way to Picton explaining what we needed them to do to fix the problem.

At other times distress is not just stressful episode, but is a state we find ourselves in because of ongoing distressing circumstances.

Pandemic is a time ripe for distress! It can provide stressful events like redundancy or a positive COVID test and it does provide us with an ongoing overlay of stressful circumstances.

How do we cope with times of distress! There are lots of good ideas about this. Good diet and exercise are things often promoted. And there are resources abounding that are designed to keep us well in a time of distress. For example, just this week a new app developed and promoted by John Kirwan has been in the news. It is called 'Mentemia' and is designed to give users practical tips and techniques to help them take control of their mental wellbeing. In addition to these kinds of ideas, near the top of the list in research around this is the power of prayer. That is certainly my experience.

Here is an analogy that helps me build a picture of how prayer can refresh us in times of distress. In January Anne and I had a holiday in Sydney. On one of the hot Sydney days we took the ferry to Manley and met friends who convinced us to do the Manley to Spit walk, about 9 kms along the cliff tops along the coast with the ocean down below us. It was a spectacular walk! But it was also really distressing in parts because it was very hot and we were not prepared. We did not have walking shoes and we had no water or food with us! At a point when we were getting quite distressed by the heat, we saw a side track that dropped down to a beach. We took that track and found ourselves on an idyllic beach and then soaking in the cool ocean! It refreshed us for the journey. Prayer is like that for me – getting off the stressful tracks I find myself on to take time out to refresh, bathing in the love and presence of God.

The Christian tradition is a rich resource when it comes to this prayer strategy for dealing with distress. I think it is a really important history for us to connect with at this time for at least 2 reasons:

- i. It is a proven antidote for distress
- ii. It builds a vital relational connection at a time of disconnection – that is it builds our connection with our creator God.

So let's look at some principles that help us to stay prayerfully connected with God in times of distress.

I want to do that by examining how it worked in the life of King David. He is a great resource for us here because he experienced ongoing and extreme stress during his life and he wrote about it in the context of his very lively and honest prayer relationship with God. Today I especially want to dig into Psalm 31.

He wrote it in a time of distress. He describes classic symptoms of toxic distress in verse 9-10:

Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress;  
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,  
my soul and body with grief.  
<sup>10</sup> My life is consumed by anguish  
and my years by groaning;  
my strength fails because of my affliction,  
and my bones grow weak.

The scholars are divided about the exact stressful circumstances in which David was writing this Psalm. They think it is either when he was being pursued by King Saul, in hiding and fearing for his life or it is when he was engaged in a civil war with his son Absalom after a total breakdown in relationship. Certainly both situations caused him extreme stress.

However, there are some fantastic principles that emerge out of the Psalms that give us a window into how David managed his extreme stress by prayerfully connecting with God.

There is a reoccurring theme in David's songs and prayers that I want to focus on – it is the theme of 'where do I stand' in times of distress

## **2. Where do I stand in times of distress**

### **Firm Footing**

Firstly, David describes a pattern where he looked for a good footing and then stood firm.

This trait is demonstrated early in his life when confronted by Goliath. Goliath was causing distress in the Israelite camp. Whenever he came out challenging and taunting them the reaction of the Israelite army was to 'run away'. This is an excellent example of the 'flight' reaction to stress. In contrast, David stood his ground and confronted the source of distress, saying to Goliath

"You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. (1 Samuel 17)

I think this was a formative experience for him that comes out time and again in the Psalms. He repeatedly talks about his faith in God as a rock upon which he can stand firm. The classic rendition of this is Psalm 40 where he says

I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he turned to me and heard my cry.  
<sup>2</sup> He lifted me out of the slimy pit,  
out of the mud and mire;  
he set my feet on a rock  
and gave me a firm place to stand.

Have you ever watched a tug of war where the ground on which one of the teams is muddy and they can't get a foothold. It is hopeless! The team with the firm footing will win every time!

In Psalm 31 David repeats this idea with a lovely turn of phrase:

<sup>7</sup> I will be glad and rejoice in your love,  
for you saw my affliction  
and knew the anguish of my soul.  
<sup>8</sup> You have not given me into the hands of the enemy  
but have set my feet in a spacious place.

For me the application here in terms of our prayer life is this –

At times we face giant stresses in our lives. At times like this we can find it hard to know where to turn. It is tempting to turn to the wrong sources for help – just as the Israelite soldiers somehow thought running away would help! So it is we can turn to worry and anxiety, or to denial, or to the self-medicating numbing impact of things like overindulgence in alcohol (something the health officials have been warning against at this time)

The biblical truth that was lived out by people like David is this – in times of distress turn increasingly to God in prayer saying something like this, 'in you o God do I put my trust in this time of distress. Others may turn to flaky strategies like worry or even self-destructive addictions, but I will turn to you.'

Placing our feet on this rock-solid foundation means maintaining and increasing our engagement with God – something I want to really dig into in next week's sermon. But today I would like to share just one story that illustrates the power of this, a story that has fed my soul in times of distress for many years. It comes from the early days of my ministry in Timaru. I was facing some pretty distressing circumstances and decided to retreat to the countryside for concentrated time of prayer. I found a spot beside a stream and set my harassed soul down to pray. As I prayed, I got a vision. I saw myself in the

middle of the river and piranha fish were ripping the flesh off my legs! Then Jesus appeared, gently carrying me from the river, he tended to and healed my wounds and set me down in green pastures, beside a quiet stream. Sound familiar! It was powerful and memorable for me. There are so many things in this world that ravage our soul. COVID 19 is just one of them. Jesus is the one who can come to us and restore our damaged soul.

### **Messy Footing**

Secondly, I want to discuss the times we find our feet in a slippery place by our own doing. King David often acknowledged that he sometimes ended up standing in the wrong place. Clearly, the big example of this for him was his affair with Bathsheba and all the terrible consequences that flowed on from that. There is a human tendency to make choices that disconnect us from God and from others.

There are hints of this in this Psalm 31 when he writes 'you have heard my cry for mercy'. It is absolutely crystal clear in Psalms like 51 where we read in v2-3

Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me.

As a child I remember being dared by a friend to stand in a cow pat in bare feet. I stupidly did it. And it was not that pleasant! By our own bad choices we can find ourselves standing in some pretty messy places in life. David demonstrates a posture that is prepared to confess that and ask for the merciful hand of God to reach out and get his feet back to the spacious place, to the rock on which he can stand. We, of course call this the prayer of confession. It is humbling, but it is a necessary part of reconnecting with God and others through prayer.

In times of distress, God invites us to reflect on whether there are things we have done that have caused or contributed to that distress. And to come to him with a humble and contrite heart. If we do that we will find a God who attends to this kind of distress with both mercy and a plan to get our feet back to solid ground.

### **Standing in Awe**

Thirdly, despite his distress David finds it in himself to praise God! To coin a phrase, he stands in awe of God.

Indeed, there is an overarching posture of awe, praise and worship that runs through the Psalms, regardless of his circumstance. Using image of 'where do I stand?', the answer is ultimately I stand in awe of God. The Psalm we are featuring today depicts David in great distress but still finishes with 3 stanzas of praise ...

Verse 19 begins 'How great is your goodness'

Verse 21 begins 'Praise be to the LORD,  
for he showed me the wonders of his love'

The final 2 verses are:

<sup>23</sup> Love the Lord, all his faithful people!  
The Lord preserves those who are true to him,  
but the proud he pays back in full.

<sup>24</sup> Be strong and take heart,  
all you who hope in the Lord.

I have struggled to bring myself to pray prayers of praise and thanksgiving to God in the midst of COVID 19. It is primarily a time for prayers of lament and intercession – they come quickly to our lips right now. But I am challenged by David's willingness to continue to praise God from the depths of despair. And I think of the same trait so evident in the

Apostle Paul – he had an amazing ability to keep thankful and praising in the toughest of circumstances so aptly summed up by his words in 1 Thessalonians 5

*<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

We certainly need to avoid a superficial and forced happiness when we actually are feeling sad and despairing. But if we find our footing in God's love there will always be a sense of deep joy in the love we experience from God in times of distress. It is this deep and authentic joy in God that can find a voice even in the most stressful times. And it has the ability to lift us above the present circumstances to a higher truth, that nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the love of God.

## **Conclusion**

Where do I stand in a time like this!

I need to stand firm rock that is my faith in God.

I acknowledge the times I stray from that place and work with God to get my feet back on that rock.

And ultimately, regardless of present circumstances, I stand in awe of God for his abiding love at all times and in all places.

Amen

Next week I want to continue this theme looking at ways to deepen and enrich this prayerful approach to prayer.

Let us pray to God, who alone gives us a place to stand in safety:

For all who are affected by coronavirus,  
through illness or isolation or anxiety,  
that they may find relief and recovery:

Lord, hear us,

**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For those who are guiding our nation at this time,  
and shaping national policies,  
that they may make wise decisions:

Lord, hear us,

**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For doctors, nurses and medical researchers,  
that through their skill and insights  
many will be restored to health:

Lord, hear us,

**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For the vulnerable and the fearful,  
for the gravely ill and the dying,  
that they may know your comfort and peace:

Lord, hear us,

**Lord, graciously hear us.**

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,  
to the mercy and protection of God.

Merciful Father,

accept these prayers

for the sake of your Son,

our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Church of England