

April 11, 2021– Dawna  
From Surviving to Thriving

John 16:33 “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

I recently spent some time (ALONE) in the church office going through emails from the past year. It was like unsealing a pandemic time capsule! In those early conversations, we were very focused on keeping everyone safe and establishing cleaning protocols. But, the message that really stood out to me said something like, “I don’t want to be an alarmist but this shutdown may go on for a couple of months!”

And as most of you all well aware, we have not opened since.

What these emails revealed to me was just how much this pandemic seemed to sneak up and pull the rug out from under us. When the stay at home order came in mid March, 2020, the world as we knew it stopped. We could practically hear the screeching gears of our collective busy and hectic lives grind to a halt. And then..... there was silence. Remember how quiet it was in those first days?? People actually wondered where all the birds had come from because they were hearing them for the first time. But, as the reality of what was happening began to settle in we began to witness a less idyllic reaction- panic buying. People were terrified about running out of toilet paper, food and other basic supplies so they visited multiple stores and stocked up. We were also terrified of potentially deadly germs hitching a ride into our homes on those groceries so we set up disinfectant stations and painstakingly wiped down every item in our bags before loading them into our filled-to-capacity refrigerators and pantry shelves. Next people began hoarding face masks, Clorox wipes and hand sanitizer like our lives depended on it. But, didn't it? Isn't that how it felt at the time? We were freaking out! What do we do? Who is going to help us? Are we going to survive this? Our world was turned upside down by the pandemic. We were thrown onto this anomalous road without a map, without any sense of direction or control. We were, and maybe some of us still are, in survival mode.

Before his death and resurrection, Jesus tried to prepare the disciples for what was coming. In the aftermath, he knew they would resort to survival mode but what he needed was for them to thrive. He had been traveling with this band of brothers for three years. They worshipped together, prayed together, ate together, laughed and cried together. Jesus crossed religious, political and social boundaries with them and showed them what caring for and loving God’s people looked like. He poured everything he had into teaching the disciples in order that they would do the same. But, the disciples were not just students of Jesus, they were family. A family like no other in that Jesus had cho-

sen THEM to be his presence in the world after he was gone. He wanted to make sure they understood what was coming so that they would be prepared and ready to continue.

Jesus said to them, "In a little while, you will no longer see me. But in a little while after that you will!" The disciples were absolutely befuddled. I can't say I blame them. "In a little while, we will no longer see you. But in a little while after that we will!?" They wondered out loud, "Why do you keep saying, 'In a little while, you will no longer see me?'" "What on earth is Jesus talking about?" The disciples are beginning to sense that the rug is going to be pulled up from under them. The more Jesus tried to explain, the sadder the disciples became. They could not grasp the big picture. They didn't want to. Jesus had collected this rag tag group of fishermen, tax collectors, zealots, and thieves made them into a family and called them brothers. They were on a journey, part of a revolution that would change the world! They had their lives mapped out with a plan for the future. A plan which featured Jesus at the center. To even entertain any other scenario caused them to freak out! "What's happening? What do we do now? How can we survive this?? To this line of questions and confusion Jesus pretty much says, "Well. Trouble is coming - but you'll be fine".

Now, I was raised by a woman who was and still is very straight forward. It began with a thought I had as a child. I was terrified of getting cancer and dying like my grandfather did. For years and years, every time I felt off or had an unusual body sensation, my first thought was, "IS IT CANCER??" Then one day, after, what I'm sure would have been thousands of conversations to process my fear, my Mother tenderly said to me, "You know none of us are getting out of this alive, don't you honey?" My Mother's a straight shooter. That's probably why I'm not any good at reading between the lines. I prefer straight talk. Say what you mean, mean what you say. Jesus is the master of straight talk. "In this world you will have troubles". He doesn't mince words saying, "You might encounter some rough patches", or "there could be trouble". It's a guarantee. Jesus knew that life will sometimes be rough! Health issues can arise, a loved one can die, jobs and opportunities can be lost, friends can fall away, a pandemic can hit. The disciples, like many of us, want tender words of comfort and assurance when it's about to hit the fan. Instead, it feels like Jesus is saying, "Something bad is about to happen. But, you're fiiiine." Has anyone ever said that to you when you've been scared or hurt? "You're fiiiine." Or maybe you're the one rushing others to be okay. A couple of years ago, Pastor Susan and I were on retreat together in Malibu for pastors. After a day traipsing through tide pools and sandy beaches she had come back to her room to deal with a huge painful blister that had developed on the ball of her right foot. I happened along at that moment and she asked me if I would be willing to help her drain the blister. I'm not queasy about touching people's feet, I'm Brethren for goodness sake! I happily

agreed. With acrobatic finesse, Susan hoisted her foot up onto the sink and then somehow twisted herself around so her leg and was behind her and the sole of her foot was facing up towards the ceiling.

I want you to know I have Susan's permission to tell you this story.

This blister was HUGE! It was like a giant snow globe on the bottom of her foot. Only instead of snow it was filled with murky saltwater and sand. The blister had broken open and I knew it was tender. But, I was also super anxious about hurting her. So when she sucked air through her teeth with my very first attempt to pull back the skin, I reacted by scolding her, "You're fiiiine!, I said." The truth is I was anxious and didn't want to be the cause of her pain. I needed her to be fine so I could feel fine.

As he relates to the disciples, Jesus doesn't need them to be fine. He needs them to be ready. He needs them to understand that everything he has said and done among them is to be continued in everything they will say and do moving forward. So, when they bring their wounded spirits to Jesus and twist themselves around hoping for some relief from the message that he would soon leave them, Jesus' response is not a scolding, it's a loving affirmation, "I am telling you these things, so that in me you may have peace. Yes, you will have trouble. But, I am leaving you with the Holy Spirit, a piece of me you carry within you always." This is a message of confidence, of calling and sending. To the disciples and to you and me, Jesus says: "In me you will have peace. No matter what the world throws at you, I am with you, within you."

We have just walked through some incredibly troubling times. The last 15 months have been really disappointing, challenging and stressful. And now that we are starting to see some light at the end of the tunnel, it is easy to understand why so many people are looking for some peace. Some of you are talking about traveling again - just to get away from the same four walls you've been staring at for over a year. You are looking for a retreat, in order to rest and reset - even if for just a little while. I get that. I long for that myself! Unfortunately, when we return all our troubles will be waiting for us. We can't avoid the trouble of our times indefinitely, nor should we! What is troubling for people of privilege, (which is most of us) is devastating and unjust for others. As the disciples continue to work for peace and justice, for the Kingdom of God here on Earth, Jesus knew they would have very difficult days ahead of them. When he informed the disciples that he would soon be leaving them, they went into survival mode. They retreated, deep into hiding. They sent Thomas out to stock up on groceries and necessities. They painstakingly unpacked and sanitized everything coming into their hiding place. Their world was turned upside down. They could see the troubles to come if Jesus left them. And to

these fearful men and to us Jesus says, "Take heart. I leave you with my peace. You've got everything you need."

That kind of peace - the kind of peace Jesus offers may be best described by the Hebrew word shalom. I like the way the United Methodist Bishop foundation describes it: "Shalom is positive peace: harmony, wholeness, health, and well-being in all human relationships, justice. It is the natural state of humanity that God birthed for us. It is harmony between humanity and all of God's good creation. Peace is interrelated. Every creature, every element, every force of nature participates in the whole of creation. When one person is denied shalom, shalom becomes diminished."

On our best days we are living in God's Kingdom. On our worst days we are living in God's Kingdom. Christ's peace comes from knowing that the Kingdom of God is within. Within me, within you, within each and everyone of us. We are not meant to simply survive. We are meant to thrive - even in the midst of the World's mess. Our troubles aren't over. We're still not sure where this road we're on leads. You may feel like we've just been surviving. But, when this pandemic shuttered our worship services you didn't conserve your resources. You doubled down! You invested in the staff and the ministries of this congregation and because you did we have continued to worship together, we have continued to speak in to racial justice issues and not only did we continue our ministry of feeding the homeless and hungry, we tripled it! Even in the midst of survival mode this community found a way to thrive.

When we place ourselves in the Kingdom of God we actively join in the prayer of Saint Francis. Together, we sow love where there is hatred, bring hope where there is despair, dispense pardon where there is injury, and cast light where there is darkness. Like the disciples, YOU have everything you need to be living instruments of peace in this world.

May it be so and may it be so. Amen