

Forward Without Fear  
II Timothy 1.1-9a; Psalm 46; Matthew 17.1-9  
Sunday, February 26, 2017  
23rd Annual Jazz Worship  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

It is good to be back with you, my Carnival congregation! We look forward to this gathering every year, and it marks the beginning of my very favorite day of the season. While I fully recognize that this dapper, talented band before us is the primary reason we've gathered today, I have been eager to welcome you this morning as I sense a growing need for us to gather as neighbors and friends. I am sure you sense the same. We need to walk this life journey together in more purposeful ways after months and months of cultural division, speaking past one another, and even abrupt schisms between friends and families over differences that have come to the surface. None of that feels good. Whoever you are and wherever you are in your story right now, I suspect you carry some degree of anxiety right now in an increasingly confusing and unpredictable world. We are living in times of tension and unease, and we need each other. For that reason, I am so glad each one of you is part of this morning's jazz worship service.

In the year since we last met, we at St. Charles have been talking candidly about what it means to be a people (not just individuals, but a collective whole made up of many) who are called to live in the world in a certain way. In those conversations we have focused particularly on giving our time, thoughts, resources, and energy to working for peace and justice in the world, in our nation, and in our city. And I don't mean a comfortable, slightly sweet keeping of peace but making it; even waging it when necessary. Advocating and pushing and bending that moral arc of the universe toward justice. These are not always easy dialogues, and so the beloved words of Clarissa Pinkola Estes have been passed around over the past several weeks as she speaks into the anxiety uncertain times as we know all too well. I'd like to share them with you, our friends and neighbors, today.

She begins, "My friends, do not lose heart. We were made for these times. I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in our world now. Ours is a time of almost daily astonishment and often righteous rage over the latest degradations of what matters most to civilized, visionary people..."

Yet, I urge you, ask you, gentle you, to please not spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times. Especially do not lose hope. Most particularly because, the fact is that we were made for these times. Yes. For years, we have been learning, practicing, been in training for and just waiting to meet on this exact plain of engagement.

I grew up on the Great Lakes," she writes, "and recognize a seaworthy vessel when I see one. Regarding awakened souls, there have never been more able vessels in the waters than there are right now across the world. And they are fully provisioned and able to signal one another as never before in the history of humankind.

Look out over the prow; there are millions of boats of righteous souls on the waters with you. Even though your veneers may shiver from every wave in this stormy roil, I assure you that the long timbers composing your prow and rudder come from a greater forest. That long-grained lumber is known to withstand storms, to hold together, to hold its own, and to advance, regardless.

In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus on that. There is a tendency, too, to fall into being weakened by dwelling on what is outside your reach, by what cannot yet be. Do not focus there. That is spending the wind without raising the sails.

We are needed, that is all we can know. And though we meet resistance, we more so will meet great souls who will hail us, love us and guide us, and we will know them when they appear. Didn't you say you were a believer? Didn't you say you pledged to listen to a voice greater? Didn't you ask for grace? Don't you remember that to be in grace means to submit to the voice greater?

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good.

What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.

One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. Soul on deck shines like gold in dark times.

The light of the soul throws sparks, can send up flares, builds signal fires, causes proper matters to catch fire. To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these - to be fierce and to show mercy toward others; both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity.

Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it. If you would help to calm the tumult, this is one of the strongest things you can do. There will always be times when you feel discouraged. I too have felt despair many times in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it. I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate.

The reason is this: In my uttermost bones I know something, as do you. It is that there can be no despair when you remember why you came to Earth, who you serve, and who sent you here. The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours. They are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for."<sup>1</sup>

We humans do crave safety, and yet we also sense something almost like a vibration in the culture right now that is calling us away from keeping peace and personal safety into new territory that transforms individuals into a called and active people. The idea of such vulnerable acts can be terrifying, and we carry enough fear already. We know fear, and we don't like it. Fear of running out of money, our marriage falling apart, the test results that may come in next week. Fear of losing control, the kids growing up, the job running out. Fear of suffering and injustice spiraling faster than we can work to slow the down the tangle. Fear of rulers and powers and threats of wars. We hold at least some if not all of this in us, and I'm here this morning to give you permission to let it go and then invite you forward into something better. Estes says Despair doesn't get to eat from her plate. Elizabeth Gilbert says Fear doesn't get to drive the car and it certainly doesn't get to pick the music. We need to put these emotions in their place if we are to move forward and beyond them.

Scripture invites us to move beyond fear to our true stories. From the words of the apostle Paul, "The Lord has not given us a spirit of fear," to the Psalmist, "though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, we will not fear," to the words of Jesus to his closest friends, "Get up and do not be afraid," the scriptures speak into our shadows and shine light

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<sup>1</sup> Full essay available at [http://www.grahameb.com/pinkola\\_estes.htm](http://www.grahameb.com/pinkola_estes.htm) or complete works found at <http://www.clarissapinkolaestes.com>.

where we find only darkness. The words call us to remember who we really are at our best and fullest when Fear takes a back seat and the notes of the music change.

The epistle text before us today invites us to remember our best story because the soul work of returning to our truest selves is not just for our sakes but for the world's. "I know who you are," Paul says to Timothy. "Maybe you've presently forgotten, maybe you're trapped in a cycle of anxiety and self-doubt right now, but I know who you are. Because I know you, and I knew your mother, and I knew your grandmother. I knew their faith and their strength. I knew their dedication to living out the ways of God in their lives, and I see them in you. Their eyes, their smile, the way they dug their heels in when someone tried to slow them down. Their fierce loyalty and commitment to doing what is right.

You are timid right now, you're turning in on yourself and shying away from the world, but that's not who you are. You see, God hasn't given us a spirit of fear, God has given us a spirit of power and of love and of sound mind. I remember the legacy of faith in you, and I want you to remember it, too. Remember the hands that cared for you from your childhood and the hands that blessed and ordained you for the life you're called to lead. The very breath of God is within you, my friend. Remember!"

God has not given us a spirit of fear. Though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, we will not fear. I remind myself of these words often when I feel myself shrinking and freezing like we tend to do when the swirl of external input and internal life becomes too much. At their very best, when we read them rightly, the stories of our faith traditions are here to tell our own story back to us.

When we are hiding, when we enshroud ourselves with darkness, when we are overcome by a spirit of fear, that is not God's best for us. Do not listen to the voices that encourage your hiding and your self-preservation. That is not God's gift to us. That is not God's power and love at work. God is at work through those stories of spiritual ancestors who loved and feared and acted and hid and followed and forgot—just like us. Hear them now speaking into your own.

In the ancient story of the first man and first woman who ate what God told them not to eat, they hid from God when they heard God walking in the cool of the day. And like shining light in dark, God asked, "Why are you hiding?" When Elijah ran from his calling to the darkness of the cave, God passed by and said, "Elijah, come out." To the countless prophets and exiles and shepherds and parents-to-be, to the disciples seeing

a flash of light and unexplainable images of men dead long ago, the word repeats, "Do not be afraid."

We come back to this Transfiguration story each year on the final Sunday of the season of Epiphany, also the final Sunday before Lent. Somehow these human men encounter the brilliant light of God, likely something they'd begged and prayed to see. And when they finally glimpse the power of the living God, it's too much. They see things that don't make sense and they sense a way forward that feels impossible for ordinary men and women. They fall to the ground and cover their eyes so they don't have to see anymore. But when you've glimpsed the light of God that shines in darkness, you really cannot unsee. And when you sense the call on your life to live as a fully awake person, transformed for work in the world beyond your own comfort and convenience, well, there's no turning back. And so Jesus reaches out with kindness and compassion, as he is wont to do. He lifts them up with words of love: Don't be afraid. Get up. And then everything is back to how it was before except everything has changed, too. They get up as people who know a way forward and cannot deny it any longer even if their knees shake as they walk back down that mountain.

In those times when nothing makes sense and everyone seems to have gone off script, listen for the voice of God in your story. Listen for the one calling you to release the freezing powers of fear and get up to return to your work in the world. Get up and do the work that the world most desperately needs for you, distinctly you, to do.

Get up and reach out to your neighbor. Get up and do your best work. Get up and take a chance on something new. Get up and follow that nudging within you calling you to make a change. Get up and chase after that good thing that you can't fully see yet can't fully stop thinking about. Get up to mend the part of the world that is within your reach. Do not be afraid. Remember who you have been shaped for the world's great good. Get up and go be your very best and truest self today. Get up and make peace. Get up and get into good trouble, as Rep. John Lewis says. Get up and work alongside your neighbors even when they're strangers. Get up and choose the ways of love and grace and kindness and compassion. Do not be afraid. Because we will get up and go forward together. Amen? Amen.