

*God is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? God is the stronghold of my life; of whom should I be afraid?*

*At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."*

*God is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? God is the stronghold of my life; of whom should I be afraid?*

In this world, in this place, especially in this week, I get the sense that we are all torn, sometimes within seconds, between fear and trust. We all feel the challenge of a national landscape turned upside down, and the immediate erosion of structures that have been solid throughout many of our entire lives, spanning generations. When we add some of the very local, very human challenges many of our community have been facing over the past week, it's natural to feel overwhelmed, and more importantly, to feel like "God's got it...God's got you" falls on us like a barely helpful platitude. Indeed, even if God is our light and our salvation, I would imagine that we all have immediate, numerous and forceful answers to "whom should I fear", and that those answers are all completely valid. "Of whom should I be afraid?" I'm sure most of us could respond...well...let me tell you.

If we are to push through our fear, and lean into who God calls us to be, we have to pause, reflect, and look inward. In the words of the Reverend Dr. Lindsay Armstrong, "Vigorous faith and animated doubt both insist that we take God seriously, ask God real questions, and depend on God in tangible ways. Examined doubts refine our understanding and illuminate our experience of God as we filter our beliefs, sifting wishful thinking about the God we want from the challenging wisdom of the God who is."

This is why I believe the way we observe Lent in this church is so important. Far beyond simply withholding what we might usually find enjoyable, Lent requires us to put away our praise in favor of hard, truthful self-reflection about what keeps us away from the God who is, and what we might need to bring us closer.

Put another way, Lent demands that we lean into our convictions, gather our team, and then push forward, honoring Jesus' selfless path toward Jerusalem through our own self-improvement.

Whenever I hear "lean into it", my mind automatically jumps to learning how to whitewater kayak. My instructors were Earl and Glenna, a married couple who provided just the right

combination of tough love, and the more nurturing, not so tough form of love. Their program made it clear that kayaking, in addition to being phenomenally fun was a metaphor for life, and the first rule, no matter what, was “lean into it”. We frequently practiced leaning into all types of obstacles, with the idea being that the oncoming water would hit the bottom of our boat, keeping us upright as we scooted ourselves to safety. Lean away from the obstacle, and you would flip, possibly underneath whatever was in your way, creating a terribly unsafe situation. Always, always lean into whatever comes your way, reminded Glenna again and again, punctuated only by Earl’s reminder that you also could just not hit things to begin with...on or off the river.

One of our frequent rivers was the Farmington, located just a few miles from Bradley Airport in Hartford, CT. The last feature on the section we ran was a blown-out dam that has since been removed. The blown out section was just below the dam, easy enough to miss, but deadly if you didn’t. The ledge was undercut, evident by the calm water in front of it. If you went underneath it, you weren’t coming out. The very simple way to avoid it was to head right, over a choppy section of water, ignoring the beautiful smooth tongue of water headed right for it. I hit it. I thought I had plenty of room to spare, flipped over right in the middle of the rapid, and rolled back up, only to hear “lean into it” being screamed as loudly as possible. Unbeknownst to me, Earl and Glenna were both already out of their boats, on top of the ledge, setting up all kinds of safety. Lean into it was all I needed to hear, and I leaned toward the long section of concrete, very smoothly pushing myself off of the obstacle, and continuing on. It was perhaps the easiest part of the day for me, although if I had leaned away, I probably would not be here.

Earl and Glenna caught up with me at the take out. Glenna offered encouragement and praise for how I handled the situation, and as Earl paddled past both of us, he looked over his shoulder and said “That was stupid. Don’t do it again”.

While another outdoor story might not seem to have relevance here, it means everything. It’s in our nature to avoid the challenges...leaning away...trying to escape, when sometimes the best thing to do is look right at it, lean into it hard, and work our way to a better place. In today’s reading, for unknown motivation but clearly up to no good, the Pharisees recommend Jesus lean away. He does the precise opposite.

It also would not have been the same experience without trusted and dedicated people encouraging self-rescue, yet setting themselves up to do whatever they could. What was made so, so clear in today’s prayer concerns was the extent to which we may be on individual Lenten journeys, but need each other. If the point of coming to church was simply to be inspired from

the pulpit, I wouldn't be up here much. There is certainly a deep well of inspired thinkers, speakers, authors and activists in this region, and we could form one amazing academic society.

If the point of coming to church was only to invest our resources into supporting a more just world, the time, talent and dedication in this room would create the most phenomenal service and social organization I could imagine. It wouldn't be hard, even, to be a service club who sings, if someone just brings a guitar along each time.

But we're not an academic society. We are not a service club. We are a dynamic, living, breathing community who prays together, stumbles over our own mistakes, sings together, shares in each other's suffering and triumph, and reminds us to lean in to it... lean in. Jesus says *I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one...Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

We are here to love each other, in the name of the one unconditional love of the world, and there is plenty good room in that kingdom.

Jesus knew his people were, and knew who his people weren't. We can only speculate at the motivation of the Pharisees, trying to turn him away from Jerusalem, but he didn't believe them for a second. He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' His goal was speaking truth to power, even if it meant his demise, and the place to do that was Jerusalem. So on he went, still with love in his heart. Knowing the seat of power may be a place of scorn and rage, knowing that it's the city that kills the prophets, or in the worlds of author Rodney Clapp, "a place, like most national capitals, where dreams of a new and more just world die", he does not return that rage. He instead offers a far more motherly outlook, lamenting that he could not bring more people under the umbrella of justice.

The Pharisees, acting to deceive him were not his people in that moment, but they could be, if only they were guided by truth and light. In turn, while we do not need to tolerate deceptive, immoral and unjust behavior, Jesus calls us to look past situations, to see where the good of humanity might still be hiding. To quote a much more minor prophet, Robert Hunter of the Grateful Dead, "once in a while you get shown the light, In the strangest of places if you look at it right."

Consider this quote:

Days like today are made possible only when people choose to do the harder right over the easier wrong. Build relationships, choose cooperation, and believe in the inherent goodness of all people across the world. Explore boldly, and live gracefully.

Those are the words of Army Colonel and NASA SpaceX Commander Anne McLain, upon arriving in Earth's orbit just last Friday night. Please note that she did not thank any presidents, kings, wannabe kings, oligarchs or brologarchs. Even those who might be considered her bosses. Commander McLain instead expressed gratitude for and belief in the good of humanity.

Spaceflight is tough, she said, but humans are tougher.

I want to end today with honoring the love in this room, and our commitment to each other. In a moment, I will ask that we all stand, bulletin insert in hand, and greet each other with a quiet and simple sign of peace and love. If you are more comfortable remaining where you are, that's just fine, too. This isn't yet coffee hour, and not time for conversation, nor is it time to ask "how are you doing", it's simply time to express that we are here for each other, and to reaffirm our belief in the strength of the community around us. Go ahead.

(peace)

Surrounded by new and old faces, please join together in our closing song, Lean on Me, as printed in your insert. There's no need to head back to your original pew, unless you want to. Let's sing together.