



Love is Lord of Heaven and Earth!

Just a few weeks ago I was on a Moderator visit to Quebec. Although the Coronavirus had already become a big concern in some parts of the world, it was a few days away from being named a pandemic. Early on that Sunday morning, I went for a walk around Thetford Mines before going to preach at St. Andrew's in Inverness. As I walked, I was singing a song I would share in worship that day: "How can I keep from singing?" by Robert Lowry.

*No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?*

At the same time, I was beginning to think about the 2020 General Assembly. I was highly aware of my responsibility to begin the Assembly with a word of hope and encouragement to a church that was anxious about the decisions we might make, worried about the future, and wondering how God might guide us through our conflicts and disagreements towards a common mission and purpose.

You may know that the recent General Assemblies in Waterloo have had worship themes rooted in God—the Holy Trinity. In 2018, the focus was Christ. In 2019, the Holy Spirit took centre stage. The intention for 2020 was to draw close to the First Person of the Trinity—the Creator of all things and Father of us all. The theme would have been based on Isaiah 43—"Do not fear; I am with you."

There are many places in the Bible where we receive the command "Do not fear." In the New Testament, "Do not fear" is spoken by the angels in the Christmas story. It's pronounced by Jesus to the disciples, and by the Risen Christ at Easter. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God says "Do not fear" to Abram, to Hagar, to Isaac, and to Jacob, among others. In each encounter, God self-identifies; God gives the command not to be afraid; and then God makes a promise to use that person (or that group of people) to do great things.

It would have been a good message for the 2020 General Assembly—inviting us to take courage and trust God to lead us through our difficulties and to use us to proclaim God's love in Jesus Christ to the world in word and deed. But I think it's an even more important message for the church at this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The cancellation of church events and meetings is disappointing, of course. For those who have been planning and organizing and for the participants who hoped to attend, it has been devastating to announce the cancellation of the National Presbyterian Women's Gathering, the postponement of Canada Youth 2020, and now the General Assembly as well. Add to that the cancellation of many conferences, retreats, youth groups, camps, Sunday Schools, Bible studies, church suppers, and even Sunday worship services.

We don't know what the impact of all of this will be on the viability of congregations and other ministries. We do know that it makes us feel anxious and uncertain about the future. But that's



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how all God's people were feeling when God, or an angel of God, or Jesus himself said to them, "Do not fear; I am with you." To the people of Israel in exile, God said:

*"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you." (Isaiah 43:1b-2)*

When Isaiah 43 comes up in the lectionary, it is paired with the story of Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan River, and his being sent by the Holy Spirit to begin his ministry. Like him, we are assured that we belong to God and we are God's beloved children. We are empowered by the Spirit that has been poured out on us. We need not be afraid, because God is going to do great things through us.

Remember the three things that always happen in those encounters with God? First, God self-identifies; then God gives the command not to be afraid; and finally, God assures the people that God is going to do great things through them.

Let's remember that the cancellation of events and programs and even worship is not the worst thing that is happening in our world. Our communities are already beginning to struggle with illness, isolation, economic issues, job lay-offs, and even deaths. Our concern should be for those who are most vulnerable including the elderly, the poor, and those without resources in reserve to carry them through difficult times.

But I don't have to tell you that, because I am already hearing many stories of Presbyterians acting faithfully and creatively to provide pastoral care and connection with their church members, and to reach out to their communities with love and practical help. You know your mission and your baptismal call to enact God's love in the world and to be the Body of Christ, healing and helping your neighbours in need.

That command to "not be afraid" does not always mean that we won't feel anxious or worried. But it means that we won't allow our fear to hold us back from our mission. We'll keep following Jesus, walking forward in faith, trusting in God's promise to be with us.

I'm afraid that you're going to have to live with having me as your Moderator for a little bit longer than planned, but I'll be honoured to continue to serve until we are able to meet again as a General Assembly to elect and install our next Moderator.

In the meantime, I have a feeling that God is going to take this awful thing that is happening in our world and use God's people (including the people of The Presbyterian Church in Canada) to do good. God is going to help us to find new, creative, and faithful ways to minister to one another. God is going to use us to bring compassion, care, and hope to our communities.



I will be privileged to walk with you through this difficult time and to witness what God will do through you and through us. Together, let us place our trust in God, and let us not be afraid.

*My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentation:  
I catch the real, though far off hymn that hails a new creation.  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?*

God bless you all today, and in the days ahead.

—The Rev. Amanda Currie, Moderator