

Assembly sermon
 June 6, 2019
 Ordination of Heidi Link
 Joshua 1:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:3-7; John 14:8-27

Prayer...

What keeps you up at night? What causes you to toss and turn, unable to find a comfortable position because what is really uncomfortable is internal? What keeps you up at night? What images run through your head and what voices are on a re-play loop through the darkest hours when you hoped to be sleeping? What keeps you up at night?

As I listen to our scripture texts, I can only imagine what kept our forebears awake. We hear God speaking to Joshua following the death of Moses. In God's reassuring words, we can surmise there was a lot to keep Joshua awake as he prepared to lead God's people into the promised land of Canaan. For forty years, Moses had led the Israelites in the wilderness school. For forty years, the people complained as they journeyed into the unknown.

And now, the one whom Moses anointed to lead the faithful people of God across the Jordan River and into their promised destination, needs divine reassurance to take the next step.

Joshua hears the words of God urging him to go forward, move ahead, trusting only in the promise that has brought them this far by faith. God says: "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." With these words, Joshua puts a plan into action and leads this wilderness throng into the Promised Land – the rest of the story is no fairy tale of sunshine and butterflies – but it is a story of God's faithfulness.

To Timothy, called to lead a fragile young church, we hear these words of encouragement: "For this reason, I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and love and self-discipline."

We have a sense of the hardships Timothy was facing – false teachings being heard as truth, a small community being wooed by promises of better things apart from their faith, bad behavior towards each other. We can understand what may have kept Timothy up at night! It is in this circumstance that this leader is reminded of who and whose he is. Timothy is given words of courage to believe the promise of the One who called him in the first place.

And in our Gospel reading – the disciples are listening to Jesus describe a situation that is unimaginable to them – Jesus is preparing them for his departure and telling them they will continue with the mission to love and serve God's people. Jesus is painting the picture of the community these disciples will lead. Jesus is giving them final instructions in how to be his people in the world.

We can imagine all of the questions and worries and heartbreak that will keep them up at night in the days ahead. Knowing this, Jesus speaks these words: "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

What keeps you up at night? This is a question that was asked as part of a spiritual exercise in the Leadership for Faithful Innovation cohort. Sponsored by Luther Seminary with a grant from the Lily

Endowment, Leadership for Faithful Innovation (or LFI) seeks to strengthen congregations and their leaders by deepening faith practices and equipping disciples to live out their faith every day. One of the spiritual exercises has been to ask people this question – what keeps you up at night.

Our 6 participating congregations in NJ took up this exercise in different ways. Throughout Lent they asked this question in Bible studies, in prayers groups, and even at worship. To a person, the pastors reported that engaging this question revealed vulnerability and honesty in ways they had not seen before. Deep seated fears were named and prayed over. Anxieties about our country, personal health concerns, congregational issues, job security, and family stress – were all named as things that keep people up at night.

At St. Paul in Jersey City, Pastor Jessica Lambert put up a whiteboard in the sanctuary with this question. To her surprise, adults and children alike had no problem writing their answers -- which has informed her preaching and teaching. She now writes a new question each week for people to ponder and pray over and talk about together. Giving permission to name those things that keep you up at night breaks open a space where community forms. Into that space, words of promise and hope and love and mercy can dare to be heard.

What keeps you up at night? Is it the sound of gunfire in the streets of our cities and towns and schools and workplaces? We cannot go a day without hearing of another shooting, another death by gunshot, another life taken, another heartbeat stopped by a bullet. Does it keep you up at night knowing that nearly 40,000 people died by gunshots in the US last year? 1/3 of those by suicide.

If so, hear the words of Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I don’t give as the world gives. Don’t let your hearts be troubled and don’t let them be afraid.” These are words of hope and promise – spoken to you and me. These are words that we can trust and in that trusting, work to make our country and our world less violent.

What keeps you up at night? Is it knowing that children are being separated from their parents at our southern border? Or that in the first 7 months of this fiscal year 169,000 children, ½ under the age of 12, have lawfully surrendered to border agents because they were seeking asylum? We have congregations made up of immigrants and refugees who see their family members, friends, and neighbors deported or threatened with deportation on a regular basis. Our immigration system is broken and we have lost our moral footing when it comes to welcoming children of God.

If this keeps you up at night, hear the words of Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I don’t give as the world gives. Don’t let your hearts be troubled and don’t let them be afraid.” These are words of hope and promise – spoken to you and me. These are words we can trust and in that trusting, work to make our country more welcoming to those seeking a safe refuge.

What keeps you up at night? Is it being followed by police because of the color of your skin? Or denied a promotion because of your race? Or facing yet one more insult, racist joke, or harassing comment? The sin of racism is real – in our church and in our world. It tears at the very fabric of our claim that we are all God’s children. It tears up families and wears down even the strongest among us.

If this keeps you up, hear the words of Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I don’t give as the world gives. Don’t let your hearts be troubled and don’t let them be afraid.” These are words of hope and promise – spoken to you and me. These are words that we can trust and in that trusting, work to make our church and our world a celebrated tapestry of the diversity of God’s creation.

What keeps you at night? Is it waiting on medical test results? Watching your marriage come apart? Grieving the loss of a spouse? Watching your child spiral down the hole of addiction? Being beloved disciples of Jesus Christ doesn't mean we escape the realities of life which are hard and heartbreaking. God's people face disease and failure and loss and death – but we face them knowing that we are wrapped in the loving arms of our savior and drawn to God's very heart. In that drawing near to God, we are drawn nearer to one another as well.

If these personal circumstances keep you up at night, hear the words of Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I don't give as the world gives. Don't let your hearts be troubled and don't let them be afraid.” These are words of hope and promise – spoken to you and me. These are words that we can trust and in that trusting, work to be more compassionate to each other.

What keeps you up at night? Is it dwindling numbers of people at church? Diminished finances with which to carry on your ministry? An aging building? It is true that we have fewer people in our pews – it has been true since 1964 – the last time our membership grew. Pastors and lay leaders spend time worrying and wondering how best to proclaim Jesus Christ to a world that seems to have no interest in listening. What used to work doesn't get traction. Introducing people to Jesus seems scary! Stepping out of our cocoons to see the new life around us takes courage and boldness. But thankfully, we have a bold God who says to us: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I don't give as the world gives. Don't let your hearts be troubled and don't let them be afraid.” These are words of hope and promise – spoken to you and me. These are words that we can trust and in that trusting, dare to follow where the Spirit leads.

Heidi Link, (did you think I forgot about you), you are being called and ordained to step into the holy spaces and listen to the worries and fears and anxieties of God's people. You are being called to be pastor to a congregation that feels fragile and unsure of their future. You are being called into a church that some say is dying – but we are God's resurrection people and we know that death is never the last word! You are being commissioned to speak God's word of truth to a world filled with un-truth. Knowing and trusting who and whose you are – you are bold to say yes to this holy calling.

But you don't do it alone – you say yes because you have heard and trusted the words of Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I don't give as the world gives. Don't let your hearts be troubled and don't let them be afraid.” These are words of hope and promise – spoken to you. These are words that you can trust and in that trusting, dare to receive the stole of the office to which you are now called. We rejoice with you and the people of Reformation as you begin this mutual ministry.

So let me ask all of you one more time -- What keeps you up at night? Perhaps it is the stirring of the Holy Spirit – breathing new life into you, calling you to new journeys, reminding you of the promises of the one who claims you, and empowering you with a bold faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.