

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Keeping Faith in Tough Times”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 7, 2010

Isa. 6:1–13; Ps. 138; 1 Cor. 15:1–11; Lk. 5:1–11

Holy God, life so often seems so uncertain: random happenings, earthquakes, winter storms, disappointments. We come today seeking some understanding of what it means to live faithfully in this kind of world. We are so full of things to do and places to go and people to see from morning until night. We need you to settle us down, quiet our spirits, to startle us with your truth. Surprise us with your gracious presence in the world and in our lives through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Last year, Stuart Manley, a used-book seller in Northumberland, England, was rummaging around in a box of old books. A colorful piece of folded paper at the bottom of the box caught his eye. It was a poster, bright red, with the crown of King George VI at the top and bold, bright letters that read:

**Keep Calm
And
Carry On**

Manley liked the poster, framed it, and hung it in the window of his bookshop. Looking into the poster’s origins, he discovered that it was created in 1939 by the British Ministry of Information, just prior to the Blitz, when German planes flew over Great Britain every night bombing London, Coventry, Liverpool, industrial centers and civilian populations. There was much devastation. The world had never seen anything quite like it: the air raid sirens every night, citizens hiding in

basements and subway stations, the unbelievable noise and explosions, fires and destruction, the nightly death toll was increasing. The British people were understandably terrified. To make matters much, much worse, everyone in the world, including the British government, expected Nazi Germany to invade Great Britain at any moment. It may have been the most frightening time in history for the British people.

This was the time when the Ministry of Information created the posters, 2.5 million of them, to be distributed and posted when the German invasion began. The invasion didn't happen. The posters were never distributed. After the war they were destroyed, all but two of them, one of which Stuart Manley found at the bottom of a box of used books. People began to ask about the eye-catching poster in his shop window. So he had it reproduced and so far has sold 40,000 copies.

Manley's wife, Mary, said, "Its message is so simple, so clear, so without spin—'Keep Calm and Carry On' has turned out to have meaning, not just for a single people in a time of trouble, but for all of us, wherever we live, whatever our troubles" (*Chicago Tribune* 21 March 2009).

"Keep calm and carry on."

When I read this story this week, I thought about my dear friend, Al Carr, Katherine's beloved husband, who was a faithful member of this church throughout his life. Al had some characteristic remarks. Whenever you called to him on the phone, he would answer by asking, "Are you there?" That would be followed with an "At ease," and then he would close the conversation with, "Carry on."

I do not want to trivialize the Blitz in England in the Second World War. It must have been a terrifying experience. To a lesser degree, all of us at times feel that our lives are under siege. Do you feel like things are coming at you at a rapid pace? Think about our nation. The economy remains very uncertain; unemployment is high even though it dropped some this week; we have a broken health care system that no one seems to want to come together and fix because our government seems to be paralyzed. They keep coming at us. Sometimes it seems the same thing happens on a personal level. Trials and tribulations meet us at every turn.

I don't have that sign, but I should at least make a copy and put it on the bulletin board here at the church. Sometimes we need it here. Last Friday was a good example. I came down to the church in the morning to help a homeless woman,

who was staying at the shelter, get a bus ticket back home to California. All of her belongings were in the lobby. As I came in and saw her, a man was bringing in equipment for this afternoon's concert. Right in the middle of that, the fire alarm went off because someone working upstairs on a radiator set off the fire alarm, so we had to get all the children from the Day School out of the building. And there was a wintry mix outside. Do you get the picture? We were under siege.

“Keep calm and carry on.”

At the same time, a group of women were meeting upstairs in the Education Building having Bible study. They were being led by Marilyn and were studying *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* by Barbara Brown Taylor. They took the time to try to understand, with Scripture and other readings, how to experience God's presence when we're under siege in our daily lives. They have heard the encouragement that comes from the Psalm: “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Ps. 46:10)

The reading from Isaiah reminds us that the world we live in is a turbulent and unsettling place. It was so in Isaiah's time; he was not immune. “In the year that King Uzziah died”—this time was one of great national grief and uncertainty—“I saw the Lord...” (Isa. 6:1) and he retreats to the temple to try and recover a sense of perspective, a sense of direction, and peace of mind. Although the passage does not tell us whether he is alone or in the midst of a worshiping congregation, Isaiah discovers firsthand the wisdom of Annie Dillard's counsel: when we go to church, “we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares: they should lash us to [the] pews” in case God should show up.¹ Isaiah experienced such a theophany, or encounter with the Holy One. He sees God's presence, and his world is turned upside-down. He catches a glimpse of that deeper reality, that yes, indeed, the whole world is full of God's glory.

To use the words of Rudolf Otto, Isaiah experienced the Holy One in terms of mystery, awe and fascination. Filled with awe at God's grandeur, Isaiah confesses his sinfulness, receives forgiveness, and a call; his life is transformed for God's presence has the power to transform us. He receives a call and the inspiration he needs to fulfill his vocation. He discovers that God is more than imagined and that his life work will exceed even his greatest imaginations and expectations. In spite of his imperfections, Isaiah is full of God's glory and has received divine

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 40.

inspiration. His sinfulness did not disqualify him from being an instrument of divine revelation.

A similar dynamic is at work in that great fishing story about Peter and the disciples. They had been fishing all night, and they had caught nothing. Jesus told them to go back out, and Peter said, “We will if you tell us, but it won’t make any difference.” Jesus told Peter to go deeper, not only into the lake waters but also into his experience of God's abundant and caring presence. Jesus presents Peter with the vision of a deeper reality that embraces his failed efforts as well as God's surprising and infinite steadfast love, which knows no limits.

Isaiah and Peter were both awakened by a larger vision of a God who cannot be contained, a God whose presence is present with us despite our sinfulness and inadequacies, our lack of belief that there is anything beyond what we could taste, see, and smell. The issue is not simply about our behavior or morality, but it’s about our willingness to be open to the awe and wonder of living in the presence of God.

In the State of the Union address last month, President Barack Obama said we as a nation are suffering from “a deficit of trust.” I think he is right. I also believe it is a faith problem for us, a deficit of trust, because we do not trust that God is capable of guiding us through turbulent times. Perhaps, as J.B. Philips said in a book, *Your God is Too Small*, we expect too little from God, and that prevents us from being able to keep faith in troubled times.²

Like Peter, we need to hear our Lord encourage us to go deeper. Sometimes, I get the feeling that I have exhausted all of my resources—I’ve done the best I can, and I don’t know from where the energy is going to come to do what needs to be done. And then I am reminded, sometimes in small ways, sometimes in larger ways, and in all kinds of ways, that God’s love is steadfast and limitless, and that God’s grace is sufficient and abundant. We are afraid that if we step out to do something that we feel we are called to do, we might be abandoned. This leads to deep fear.

Remember what Jesus said to Peter? “Do not be afraid.” (Lk. 5:10) Fear paralyzes. Fear of falling prevents you from climbing higher. Fear of failure prevents you from venturing. Fear of rejection prevents you from living and loving

² John Bertram Philips, *Your God is Too Small: A Guide for Believers and Skeptics Alike* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

unconditionally. Fear of intimacy prevents you from being vulnerable. Fear of death can prevent us from living.

Fear runs rampant in our society, psychologist Murray Bowen says, and is responsible for terrorism, fundamentalism, and toxic policies.³

The final fear is the great darkness, the shadow over all of our life, the fear of that last enemy, death.

What if, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said so well, “Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance”?⁴ That’s the good news on which we stand, that death has no power over us. God has raised Christ from the dead and has overcome death and our fears.

William Sloane Coffin says about the story of Peter and the fishing, “The miraculous catch was not the haddock and shad and whatever else Peter and the rest of them caught that day, but the fact that Peter and the rest were caught up, even as we are, in the net of Christ’s love.”⁵ It is a love that will never let us go, a love that can cure our deficit of trust, for in life and in death, we belong to God.

Anne Lamott is a Presbyterian lay person who has had a tough life. She fought through addiction, she was a single mom, she had lots of ups and downs. One day, she wandered into a little Presbyterian church made up mostly of African-American women in Marin County near San Francisco. She listened to them singing gospel music, and she saw how they loved and cared for each other and cared for her. She got caught up in that community and has become a very valuable voice for the Christian faith as she shared her experience of the presence and glory of God in the world.

In one of her books, she writes that she has two prayers she prays every day. In the morning when she gets up, her prayer is simply, “Help me, help me, help me.” And

³ Roger J. Gench, “Luke 1:68–79: Pastoral Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 34.

⁴ Andrew Young, “Introduction,” in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Eds. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Intellectual Properties Management, Inc., 2001), p. viii

⁵ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 25.

then at night, as she is going to bed, her prayer is always, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” But now, she says, “I’ve learned another one. It’s ‘Wow! Wow! Wow!’”

“In life and in death, we belong to God—Wow!”

“Keep calm and carry on.”

Amen.