

“Close Call”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

January 24, 2021 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – January 24, 2021

“Blest be the Tie that Binds” #481 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1-5

Johann Hans Georg Nägeli / John Fawcett

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Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above

Before our Father's throne
We pour our ardent prayers
Our fears our hopes our aims are one
Our comforts and our cares

We share each other's woes
Our mutual burdens bear
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear

When we asunder part
It gives us inward pain
But we shall still be joined in heart
And hope to meet again

This glorious hope revives
Our courage by the way
While each in expectation lives
And longs to see the day

“Will you Come and Follow Me” #634 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1, 2, 4, 5

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Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown;
Will you let my name be known;
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should you life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you love the “you” you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you’ve found
to reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I’ll go
where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I’ll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

“O Jesus I have Promised” #569 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1-4

Alison Procter / John Ernest Bode

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O Jesus I have promised to serve Thee to the end
Be Thou forever near me
My Master and my friend
I shall not fear the battle
If Thou art by my side
Nor wander from the pathway
If Thou wilt be my Guide

O let me feel Thee near me, the world is ever near
I see the sights that dazzle
The tempting sounds I hear
My foes are ever near me
Around me and within
But Jesus draw Thou nearer
And shield my soul from sin

O let me hear Thee speaking in accents clear and still
Above the storms of passion
The murmurs of self will
O speak to reassure me
To hasten or control
O speak and make me listen
Thou guardian of my soul

O Jesus Thou hast promised to all who follow Thee
That where Thou art in glory
There shall Thy servant be
And Jesus I have promised
To serve Thee to the end
O give me grace to follow
My Master and my friend

Closing Chorus: "Walk with the Lord"

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Walk with the Lord
Go from this place
filled with his everlasting grace
Walk with the Lord
Go where he leads
blessed by his love and his peace
Each day you live in all you do
let the light of Christ be found in you
Walk with the Lord
Trust and obey
Go now and serve him in faith
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Scripture Texts: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Mark 1:16-20

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Coco, our 9-year old ShihTzu had a close call last week. The steps from the back deck to the yard were a bit icy, as was a small patch of the sidewalk at the bottom of the steps. A squirrel had the audacity to show up on the fence, and Coco, in usual fashion, stepped up to the task of putting the run on it, with reckless abandon. I say reckless because our little furball has a wonky leg and arthritis in his back, but he bolted down the steps and around the corner without a thought to his well-being, only thoughts of chasing that squirrel. He hit the bottom step, his weak leg slipped to the side, and when he hit the sidewalk ice his whole back half slid out from under him and he skidded into a less-than-graceful thump. I froze in place as I watched what he would do. I was afraid he had thrown a disk out again and we would be off to the vet for more anti-inflammatories and pain killers. However, he got himself up, shook off the misstep and carried on in pursuit of the offending rodent, happily barking all the way. I breathed a sigh of relief, because he usually hurts himself when he does that. He doesn't think about his own safety, just the protection of the yard from the nasty, bushy-tailed critter that likes to tease him. He will do it again, I will hold my breath again, and who knows whether he will shake it off so easily the next time.

We all have had close calls. Near misses in parking lots, missteps on the stairs, catching a dish knocked off a counter. Sometimes those close calls are more breath-catching: health scares, falls that could have been devastating, downsizing in workplaces that just miss us, investment risks. Sometimes we don't realize how close we've come until after the fact. Regardless, we all have close calls, at various levels of severity.

When our oldest son was diagnosed with Celiac Disease, we had a close call with him. He was only 4-years old when he finally received the diagnosis, but he had been getting weaker and more frail for about 18 months leading up to that day. By the time he was diagnosed, I was convinced he had a life-threatening illness and I was terrified. The diagnosis of Celiac, with which we were already living because Bruce has it, was a welcomed relief, and Corey began to gain weight and strength immediately upon being put on the right diet. Now, 16 years later, he's healthy and strong, but that was a little too close for my liking.

Close calls are a part of life, and sometimes they are a little close when it comes to matters of life and death. The people of Nineveh certainly could attest to that after the close call they had. Jonah gave them the message and their response would save their lives from destruction, but did they know how close they came? Did they know the story that led up to their receiving of the message?

In the story of Jonah, Nineveh was a sinful place, living in the opposite way to what God commands. They had turned away from God. God made a decision to destroy the city because it was so sinful. There was no righteousness throughout its vast size. But, God also wanted to warn them that this was how close they were to destruction, so he chose Jonah to go and give them the message. Jonah, however, being rather prejudiced toward the people of Nineveh, did not do what God told him to do, and actually tried to go in the opposite direction where he hoped he could

hide from God and God's instructions. That didn't go so well, so Jonah himself experienced a very close call. He was thrown from a ship in order to calm a vicious storm that had come up because of his disobedience, his unwillingness to go to a people he simply didn't like, but instead of drowning, God sent a giant fish to save him. Now, being swallowed by a fish could not have been the most pleasant of experiences. I can't imagine the smell! But within the belly of that sea creature Jonah prayed, desperately and earnestly, to be saved again. So, God chose to answer that prayer by having the fish deposit Jonah on land again – another experience I cannot imagine was very pleasant. Again God spoke to Jonah, telling him to go to Nineveh with God's message for the doomed city. Jonah did what he was told. He went in, gave the message, and got out. Because he obeyed this time, the people of the great city were prompted to recognize and repent of their unrighteous ways and turn back to God, seeking forgiveness and mercy. Again, God chose to answer those prayers by saving the city. Jonah still wasn't happy, he didn't get it, but a whole people was saved from destruction, regardless of how he felt about it.

There is a multitude of close calls in the story of Jonah and Nineveh: Jonah had more than one.

The sailors on the threatened ship had more than one as they not only survived the storm, but recognized the power of the God of Israel and worshipped.

The people of Nineveh had more than one as they were saved from earthly destruction, and then were saved from spiritual destruction as they turned back to God.

And on it goes. It's a great story that teaches us the value of faithfulness to God, and of the second chances we are given, no matter how close a call we experience.

Throughout the Bible there are stories of close calls, second chances, and being ready for that time when the time has arrived when all of those things will be behind us and Christ's kingdom will reign forever on earth. In that time there will be no further close calls, no need for second chances, for we will have been received by the Lord in his eternal kingdom of all times and places, with people of all times and places. The apostle Paul refers to this time as if it is going to come very soon, it may be imminent, and reminds people how to live as those who are ready to put all of that behind them.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

²⁹ I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Can you imagine? Paul is basically describing a life that is ready to be finished with material possessions, worries, grief and earthly commitments. The present world, with all of its challenges, distractions, anxiety and difficult choices will be transformed into the kingdom of

God, through Christ. We won't have to worry about those near misses and mess-ups that we deal with now. Life will be perfect. One day.

But until that perfection comes, we live in the imperfect world as the imperfect people that we are. That's not a bad thing, but it is more difficult to strive for perfection than to be perfect. Not that I would know this from personal experience – I've never been perfect to begin with. None of us has. But we do have the path to perfection before us. And we have numerous teachers and leaders to keep us on track and show us the way. And it started with some close calls, or rather, some calls to be close, closer to the Saviour.

The Gospel story we have shared today tells the story of Jesus calling Simon and Andrew, James and John to be among those beckoned into his inner circle of ministry and friends. It's a story that always catches my attention because of the immediacy with which these men follow Jesus. Have they heard him speak and therefore know who he is? The Spirit obviously prompted them to respond as they did, for why else would they leave their livelihoods and, in James and John's case, their father's fishing business, to follow a stranger? Why? Because they were not only called to follow Jesus, they were called to be closer to God. They were not only called, they were drawn closer to God. How could they resist? Well, they could have, but they didn't. They may have been a little apprehensive about going, but they went. It was the same with Philip and Nathaniel whose story we heard last week. Nathaniel needed a push, but it didn't take long for him to realize who was calling him to follow, to be closer to God, closer to the heart of Jesus' ministry and purpose. Wow, what an invitation. It was more than an invitation, but I'm not sure there is a word to describe it. It's a call... a God-issued call.

The writings of the legendary evangelist Billy Graham remind us that God "calls us to the Person of Jesus Christ: 'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the Lord, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow' (Isaiah 1:18). They can be made as white as snow because of the cross where He died to cleanse us and save us for eternity. This is not a church call, it's not a family call and it's not a national call. It's a call to Christ."¹

It's that call to be closer that changes our lives when we respond with a 'yes.' It's a close call, but not in the sense that we are threatened with something going wrong. It's a close call because God calls those close to him. It's a risky thing to respond to that call. It comes with the promise of difficulty and opposition, of hard decisions and hard situations. More significantly, it comes with the assurance of the Holy Spirit to keep us on the right track, give us the strength to stay on track, and give us courage to get back on track when we take a detour. In other words, this close call is God staying close to us as we serve within the mission and message of the Gospel. In doing so, like Jonah, we just make help someone with a close call of their own.

In closing, I'd like to share a poem I came across last week, written by Connie Campbell Bratcher, shared on the website faithpoetry.com. It is simply called, "Draw Me Closer."

¹ From billygraham.org. Answer to "What does it mean to receive a calling in life?"

Oh God, I pray You'd draw me closer...
Closer than ever before;
Help me walk so near to the Shepherd...
That I would be seen no more.

May others see only Christ in me...
Make me pure and sanctified;
Anoint me for Your sacred service...
In my life be glorified.

Those times when I would tend to wander...
Correct me, Lord, keep me true;
My heart's desire is to be faithful...
Lord, Draw Me Closer to You.²

Amen.

² <http://faithpoetry.com/faith8/drawmecloser.shtml>