

Message: A Season of Hope**What’s holding you back?**

Many of you may be familiar with the books of Philip Yancy, the pastor and author. Yancy recently told a story about his interview with an amazing, teenaged woman who was a candidate for the Olympics. Her life had changed dramatically after an accident paralyzed her from the neck down. She said to him, “Philip, you don’t realize how incredibly humiliating this is. I can’t go to the bathroom by myself. I can’t even cry by myself. Somebody has to wipe my eyes with Kleenex. I can’t get dressed. I can’t face the rest of my life like this!”¹

Clearly, this young woman was facing a life not of her choosing, filled with challenges, doubts and uncertainty. Her life wasn’t going the way she wanted or expected. Have any of you ever felt challenged by life? Ever had doubts about faith? Ever been uncertain about the future? Of course we have! Life is filled with things that have the power to take our focus from Jesus and put it on ourselves.

Today, many people have been blessed by the life and ministry of that inspiring woman, Joni Erickson Tada. She travels the world, sharing her life and faith with millions of people. Years later, Yancy and Joni had another chance to speak. She said to him, “Philip, I would have to say what happened when I dived into Chesapeake Bay and broke my neck was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. God used that experience to accomplish so much. The day I wanted erased from my life was the day that paved the way to so much good.”²

What an amazing story of faith and hope! It’s an example of the way God’s love and power can overcome all odds. Joni’s life is proof that a committed faith isn’t about living without doubt and uncertainty. Faithful commitment to God means putting aside whatever distracts us, embracing Jesus and following him in spite of our doubt and uncertainty. We’re called to a season of hope, not fear.

There’s no doubt, we live in challenging times. Internationally, we’re faced with the challenges of ISIS, the Zika virus, BREXIT and more.

¹ Source: www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/faithvalues/when-its-hard-to-believe.html

² *Ibid*

Nationally, we're in the throes of a contentious and confusing battle between ideologies, as evidenced in our presidential race. Our culture's battle with phobias and prejudice is playing out on the streets of our cities with increasing violence and intolerance. We see the failure of our institutions to be effective in helping us as a society. We feel helpless and powerless, and we're doubting God. After all, where's the good?

The challenges follow us home. That's where major life stresses hit us hardest. It's hard to know how to make ends meet, care for others - children and/or parents, and balance work and life. And there's always the unexpected: new or broken relationships, birth and death, illnesses, cancers, addictions and more. We're not sure how God really helps and so we've become uncertain about the relationship between faith and life.

There are challenges in our churches. This congregation has struggled with re-financing a large mortgage and the fear of failure and loss. There have been staff issues. There's an ongoing struggle to figure out how to pay the bills when our weekly offerings don't meet our minimum needs. We have important positions that remain unfilled. There are personality issues, some dating back ten years or more. There have been some leadership challenges. After a while, all you've heard about are problems when you came to church. Why would anyone want to attend if the focus is on problems? If the life of a believer is characterized by God's love, how are we showing it to one another?

What are we to do? The first place I start with challenges is to hold them up to the light of the Bible. Psalm 84 is one of the first places I found help and hope. The psalmist calls us to reflect through these words, “*How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.... Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.*”

The kingdom of God is a place of sanctuary. Jesus said, “*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*” (Matthew 11:28-20). It's a place where our spirit can rest and be safe. I have news: God's house isn't our house!

We don't own it. That's because it's not a building. The kingdom of God is people. Those who are God's children will always feel at home when they gather together, drawn by Jesus, wherever it may be. Young or old, firm or infirm, assured or filled with doubt, we're drawn to those who are filled with God's Spirit. You know what it feels like. So do I. If you've ever moved, what do you look for in a new church? It's the palpable presence of the Holy Spirit. We all want the same thing: we want to experience God. We want to feel the presence of God's Spirit filling us when we gather together. We can. All we need to do is trust God and make spiritual things our priority.

To me, the challenges of world, home and church boil down to this: we're struggling because we've been focused on our head - knowledge of God, rather than our heart - experience of God. And yet, are we not a people who, like John Wesley, have hearts “strangely warmed”?

1 John 3:16-18 speaks to this tension: *“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”*

The Greek word translated as “abide” also means remain, stay, wait, continue, stand, live and endure – all are important. The meaning is clear: if we remain connected to Jesus and stay in God's Word, we'll bear spiritual fruit. God will answer our prayers. Others will come to join with us. We'll grow together in Christ. There's no rush. The change is like planting seeds. Each seed will sprout and grow in time. All it needs is watering, care and the light of the Son of God. That's what happens in a sanctuary, a safe place where we can rest and find peace. Where we can be fed spiritually and cared for in our person by those who gather there. That's what we're called to be as a community of faith: a place of rest, hope and trust.

There is a warning: if we're consumed with the material life, with being popular, having power over others or demonstrating our wealth, then we're on the wrong path. Saying good words and being well-intentioned isn't the same thing as caring for others, spiritually and personally. Keep this in mind: in God's kingdom, the economy doesn't

run on money. In God’s kingdom, the economy runs on love. And *those who love* sacrifice their own interests and ambitions, putting others first. That’s what “*the last will be first, and the first will be last*” means (Matthew 20:16). Jesus calls us to serve others with radical acts love, not through selfish ambition.

In God’s house, there’s no fear of doubt and uncertainty, only peace. It’s a peace the world doesn’t understand, a spiritual peace. It’s a peace that guides and protects us, a peace that helps us to become spiritually whole. No matter what happens to our body, mind or soul, there’s nothing the external – the world, can do to overcome the internal – our spirit. That’s what happens when our spirit remains connected to God’s Spirit. When we gather together, acting in unity, our spirits resonate through their common bond, the Holy Spirit. That’s when the power of the Holy Spirit multiplies exponentially. It gives glory to God and fills us with joy and hope.

The spring is always an interesting time in the UMC. It’s when appointments are made. When our District Superintendent, Rev. Jan Wiley, called me about an appointment to Corona UMC, my initial reaction was, frankly, anxiety. I was aware of the problems this congregation was facing. I had seen the leadership team in action. I wasn’t overwhelmed, just concerned about what God expected me to do. I prayed a lot and spoke to a mentor. He told me my concern was healthy and good. It demonstrates what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:9, when “[Jesus] said, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’” We need to depend God’s strength and sufficiency, not our own. We can’t change the world, our nation, our church or even our family on our own. Only God can do that. What we can do is to say “yes” to God. And then follow in the steps of Jesus. I don’t know about you, but that gives me hope and courage. Today, I stand before you filled with gratitude. Being here is a blessing. I know God is at work in and through Corona UMC and I’m excited about what God has planned. I also know I can’t do it alone.

Why? I point to Mark 11:1-9, “*When they were approaching Jerusalem ... [Jesus] sent two of his disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a*

colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

Jesus needed it. God could have put the colt there, waiting at the road by divine appointment. God didn't. Jesus shows us the divine intent: God works through and with creation. Jesus needed his disciples to go, the colt's owners' to take a chance, and the bystanders to trust. Jesus needed them to help proclaim his message to the world, a message of salvation and hope.

God is doing the same thing here. To proclaim the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ in the greater Corona area and across the world, we need you!! I need you as pastor, to go as disciples of Christ. Our church leaders need you to take a chance and make a commitment. The people who are lost need to hear a message from someone they can trust. Each of us needs one another in order to grow and thrive spiritually. Our families need us to be spiritually healthy and to lead by example. We need you. We need each other. We need God. And, in our need, all things are possible when we depend on Jesus.

Don't hold back, jump in! The water's fine and the Spirit is refreshing. Share what Joni Erickson Tada experienced: the blessing of God's presence as she shared the good news of Jesus Christ, even when she doubted and was in need. Even when life is like a roller coaster, you'll want to shout with joy because you, too, will be used by God to accomplish much good. That's a life lived in love. Alleluia!

Let us pray:

Lord, thank you for loving us, your children, without bounds. Give us the boldness to speak in your name, to offer your love to a world that is lonely and in need of hope. Help us to follow you as disciples and be transformed by your love so we may bless others with that same love. Bless us with generous spirits, without fear. We devote our lives to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Psalm 84:1-4 (NRSV)

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. *Selah*

1 John 3:16-18 (NRSV)

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.