

**Palm Harbor United Methodist Church**

**October 4, 2020**

**Rev. Sharon Patch**

**WALKING IN THE DARK**

**Psalm 119:105-112**

(LIGHTS ARE TURNED OFF).

If you are walking, please stop. Walking in the dark is scary and could be dangerous. You can't see where you are going. No one likes being in the dark, so let's see if we can get some lights on. Hey, Jeremy, please turn on the lights. (Lights are turned on). That's better.

Today we start a series of sermons asking, "What are you doing?" Today's question is what are you doing walking in the dark?

I don't know about you but I feel as though I have been walking in the dark a lot lately. I've never pastored a church during a pandemic before...and you've never been through a pandemic before, so it is like we are all walking in the dark.

Anytime a pastor comes into a new church, they feel like they are walking in the dark. There's so much to learn about the people and the way they do things. I used to tell new pastors, don't change anything for at least a year. The congregation has to learn to love you before you can lead them. Well, that idea was useless in this situation. COVID arrived right after I did and everything changed for all of us. We didn't even have time to get to know each other, let alone become friends.

Speaking of friends, I have to tell you what happened last week during the Robin's Nest chapel service. The children were getting a little restless and one of the teachers looked at this adorable little 3 year old and said, "Friend"... "Friend"... "Friend"... trying to get the little girl's attention. The child looked at her and said, "That's not my name. My name is Hazel."

The teacher couldn't argue with logic like that, so she turned to the little girl next to Hazel who was also squirming and said, "Friend." Well, Hazel's patience had been exhausted, so, she looked at the teacher and said, "That's not her name either."

Well, as I said, you hardly had time to learn my name, and I certainly didn't have time to learn your names before it was crisis time.

None of us had experienced a pandemic before and there was no guidebook to tell us what to do and what not to do. We called upon God and the CDC and did what we felt we needed to do in order to keep our congregation, our staff, and the children in our schools safe. We closed our schools and our church buildings. We continued to worship online and we continued as many ministries as we could while following CDC guidelines.

This was a traumatic experience for all of us. Yet, we continued to worship online and to do what we could to support one another and to assist our community by holding drive-thru food drives.

I think we all thought we were seeing the light at the end of the tunnel in May because Pastor Dave was scheduled to return. Maybe things could get back to normal then. Unfortunately, Dave felt it necessary to take Medical Disability and COVID was showing no signs of being eradicated.

You know the joke about seeing the light at the end of the tunnel and feeling relief only to discover that it's a train coming at you. Well, that was kind of how we all felt. What were we going to do?

Those first three months had not been easy. Yet, I felt I was where God wanted me to be. So, since I've always enjoyed a challenge and had come to love and appreciate the staff and our church leaders, it was not a terribly difficult decision to say "yes" when I was asked to stay on until a new pastor could be appointed to arrive in January.

The months of only being able to tape worship services were unsettling. Preaching to an empty sanctuary was just...weird. And, I know it was just as weird for you to be watching the worship service on your tablet or laptop in your pajamas.

Then finally, we were able to reopen. Yes, there were guidelines we had to follow and not all our congregation is ready to return. Yet, I felt more confident that the light at the end of the tunnel this time was not a train, but was daylight. Today feels more natural but we are still operating in uncharted territory and with little light to show us the way. Who knows, the road in front of us may be filled with potholes, boulders, and roadblocks. But, I am confident we will find a way over them, through them, or around them. We have no roadmap and no GPS to tell us what is around the next bend. We just have to move forward in faith knowing God will lead us.

Several years ago, my children and I traveled from Florida to West Virginia to attend my father's funeral. When it was time to head home, it was difficult to get away from family and friends. We got a bit of a late start and that meant that by the time we left the West Virginia Turnpike, it was beginning to get dark. We were on I-77 traveling through the mountains of Virginia when it began to rain. Unfortunately, when I turned on my windshield wipers nothing happened. By this time it was pitch dark outside and the rain was coming down in torrents and we were on a road with rocky hillside on one side and a guardrail and abysses on the other. There was no place to pull off and wait out the storm. My headlights were not much help at all. We could not see what lay ahead on this twisty, crooked road. Fortunately, we came up behind a tractor trailer with lots of lights on the back. Due to the storm, he was traveling slowly and we were able to stay behind that truck and get all the way to the bottom of the mountain. It was a harrowing experience but when we got to the bottom, we could not help but believe that God and the Hunt Trucking Company had provided the light to lead us safely down.

In our scripture lesson this morning from the book of Psalms, we are reminded that even when we are in the dark, and can't see what lies ahead, God is with us and will show us the way.

(PICTURE OF ERIK WEIHENMAYER)

Erik Weihenmayer is an amazing athlete and adventurer. He's kayaked all 277 miles of the Colorado River and through the Grand Canyon, believed to be "one of the most formidable whitewater venues in the world." He has climbed the highest mountain peak on all seven continents.

(PICTURE OF EL CAPITAN)

He tells of a descent off the face of El Capitan, in Yosemite National Park. He was with several other climbers. They had already spent one night, sleeping in slings in a camp on the face of the mountain and were trying to get off the mountain before nightfall. They failed. Night descended on them before they were able to finish their descent. They were all in the dark. So, they turned to the one man who had the most experience climbing in the dark: Erik. He led them down the mountain. Erik was able to do what he did because he had learned how to navigate without sight. You see, Erik has been blind since age 13. He had experience navigating in the dark and it gave him the confidence to lead the team to the bottom.

None of us can see what lies ahead these days. We are all blind. We're in uncharted territory without lights, landmarks, a flashlight, infrared night-vision goggles, or a smartphone. Even Siri or Alexis can't tell us what is just around the bend.

Yet, we are all experienced. We have all navigated some pretty rough terrain in the past. We have trusted God to lead us through the dark and because of that we can have the confidence to face the future unafraid.

In spite of the difficulties we have endured during these last six months, we have been blessed. We received the Payroll Protection Grant. That enabled us to pay our staff during the shutdown. We reduced our expenses as much as we possibly could. And, with the faithful giving of so many of you, we have weathered the storm. We anticipate ending the year with enough reserves to see us through whatever dark days we may encounter in 2021. So, if you hear a rumor that the church is failing and going to close, please assure one and all that this is simply not true. Encourage them to come see me or Michelle Premuto, our Finance Manager, and we will show them our financial reports. We are a strong church and we will continue to be a strong and healthy church for many years into the future. God has work for us to do. We have a mission to transform lives through faith in Jesus Christ and as

long as we are faithful to that mission, God will shine his light on our path and bring us safely through this storm and any future storms we might encounter

The psalmist says that he has suffered much, he has endured persecution and he knows that he will face persecution in the future. He says he constantly takes his life in his own hands, yet he will continue to go forward trusting in God's word, God's promises, and God's law to guide him. He will not stray. He will continue to praise God.

We will continue to go forward trusting in God's word, relying on God's promises and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We, too, will continue to praise God.

This morning we praise God as we celebrate World Communion Sunday. We are joining with 2.3 billion Christians around the world who will partake of this holy meal today. Did you know that over 30% of the world's population professes to be Christian? There are 30,000 different Christian organizations in the world and 1200 in the United States. We may worship in different ways and with different languages, yet, we all proclaim Jesus as our savior. Some of these Christians are like the psalmist, they suffer persecution, and they risk their lives to worship God. Did you know that eight Christians are killed for their faith every single day? And every week 182 churches or buildings are attacked and 309 Christians are unjustly imprisoned...and yet, they find ways to praise God. Please, remember these brothers and sisters as we share in this holy meal this morning.

(CAN WE GET CLOSE UP OF THE ALTER)

I want to call your attention to the altar this morning. The globe reminds us that we have brothers and sisters in virtually every place on earth. This small black plaque depicts Jesus' last supper with his disciples. This plaque was brought back from Afghanistan by one of our members who was serving in the military there. Christians in Afghanistan are among the most persecuted. Yet, one of them risked his or her life to create this beautiful plaque in praise of our savior. Perhaps like the Psalmist taking his life in his hands to do so.

The different types of bread represent the many different nationalities, and races, who are our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. This bread will be blessed as part of our communion ritual and following the service, it will be delivered to Feast to feed those in need in our community. We pray that those who receive it will be blessed both physically and spiritually by receiving this gift of the body of Christ.

We are blessed that we can freely come to worship, we can partake of this sacred and holy meal without fear of persecution. We are blessed that we can lift our voices in praise of God.

Yes, we have faced difficulties during these past months, but they pale in comparison to the darkness that threatens believers in other parts of the world. We pray for them and ask God to protect and guide them.

God has guided us safely to the bottom of the mountain and I know he will guide us safely through any storms that lie ahead and I believe God will bring us safely home.

Sometimes when we think about the future we are so afraid of this virus that we feel immobilized. For many of us, life has come to a standstill and we are afraid life will never return to the way it was before COVID came to visit and decided to stay. Yet, the Psalmist tells us that God's word is a lamp showing the way. God's word provides guidance and hope to lead us through whatever difficult times we may encounter.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that he is the light of the world. Whoever follows him will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

We may stumble and fall from time to time as we try to navigate these unfamiliar paths, but we have Jesus, the light of the world to lead us and to make the dark disappear. He has brought us safe thus

far and we can trust him to guide us for the rest of the journey. Life may not get back to what we would consider normal in the next few months, but we can be confident that whatever we face, we will not face it alone. Jesus will be with us and will shine his light on our path so that we will know what to do and which way to go.

We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future.