Boker Tov. What does that mean, Brian? Happy New Year. Maybe.

Let me ask you a question.

Do you ever panic?

Panic, you know, where and when you experience fear intensely and overwhelmingly. There are lots of things that can cause us to panic. It usually happens when our brain and we think that there is this threat. And a serious threat, whether it's real or not. I've been afraid a lot in my life, like a normal human being.

I don't think there have been too many times when I panicked, but I do recall one that's kind of embarrassing. It was several years ago, and it was during my very first triathlon. At age 52, I decided to become a triathlete. Triathlon's where you swim for a while, then you get out of the water, you ride your bike, and then you get off your bike and you run to the finish line. And I knew how to ride and I knew how to run, but there was one thing between me and triathlon, and that was swimming.

And there was a major problem here. I didn't know how to swim and I was afraid of water. Still, my desire to try was greater than my fear. And some of my friends are triathletes, and they said, we'll teach you how to swim. I said, okay.

So we went over to— hello?

Hi. So we went over to the B&L pool one night, and they said, get in the water and show us what you got, what we got to work with. So I got in the water and started dog paddling, and they said, Oh my.

And through their patience and my perseverance, I slowly learned how to swim slowly. My first triathlon was in Terre Haute, Thunder in the Valley. And when the swim began, I, I stayed at the back because everybody lines up on the beach and runs in. And I stood at the back because I didn't want to get too involved with anybody else. But that, that's not the way it works.

It's like swimming in a washing machine. So I got in there and somebody hit me and somebody kicked me and I panicked. I mean, I panicked.

There was no real reason for it. I knew how to swim. I knew I wasn't going to drown. I'd trained for this. But that's the thing about panic.

It's just not rational.

And I hadn't thought about that experience for a long time. I'm trying

to repress it. And it came up 2 or 3 weeks ago when I was preparing for this sermon on the church. And you may think, well, that, that's a, that's a weird combination, the church and panic.

But maybe not, maybe not. In Matthew 16, Jesus takes his disciples to a place called Caesarea Philippi, which is in northern Israel. It's right at the base of Mount Hermon, 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee.

Caesarea Philippi was the center of worship for the Greek god Pan, P-A-N. And Pan is usually depicted as a half-goat, half-man. And he's associated with shepherds and flocks, nature, wilderness, and he plays a flute, the pan flute. Who knew? Becky knew.

But, you know, it sounds very pleasant. It sounds like he's a really good god. But Pan has a real dark side to him. The ancients believed that Pan was responsible for sudden overwhelming irrational fear. It was called the Fright of Pan, and it's where we get our word panic— his name and the concept associated with his name.

In addition to Caesarea Philippi being the primary place of Pan worship, there's also a cave there And the people in the days of Jesus believed that that cave was the entrance to Hades, the scary realm of the dead. And so Jesus on purpose takes his closest followers to this scary, threatening place, a place of possible panic, and it's there that he makes this powerful promise. He says, I will build my church. And then he adds, probably pointing to the cave, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. There is no need to panic, no matter what.

In 2022, Tim and I, along with many others, stood there. We were there at that place. And we were looking at the remains of Pan's sanctuary, and we were staring into that cave. And it— I don't know, it was one of the most powerful experiences for me, because to realize Jesus stood right here somewhere, and he pointed to that cave, and he stood there in that once very scary setting, and he made this promise, a promise that we're still a part of, a promise that's still ongoing. He is still building his church.

So Matthew 16, verses 13 through first part of 19. When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah, one of the prophets.

But what about you?

Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Jesus replied, blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

So in my imagination, Jesus and these guys are sitting around a fire.

It's gotten pretty quiet. Conversations died down. And it's very unsettled because of the environment.

And Jesus looks up from the fire and he says, can you guys tell me what, what are people saying about me? Who do they say I am?

They say, well, some people think you're John the Baptist resurrected. Other people think you're Elijah who was to come to prepare the way and Some think you're Jeremiah and some other prophets. In other words, the people knew Jesus was something or someone special, but they didn't quite grasp who he was. So I think Jesus nods, okay, okay. But then he gets to the question he really wants the answer to.

What about you? Who do you say I am? Peter, you know, he's always impetuous, always speaking up. He answers for the group, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Peter is proclaiming that Jesus is God's promised Messiah, the one who will deliver Israel, but there's more.

Peter sees and says Jesus is not merely the Messiah, he is the divine Son of God. So surrounded by temples, to dead idols and false gods, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Son of the true and living God. Well, Jesus is pleased by Peter's response, and he reminds Peter, you didn't know that except by God telling you.

And then Jesus makes this great promise. He says, I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.

Now we miss something in English. We miss the wordplay of Jesus, and it creates confusion in the minds of some people. What Jesus is saying is, you are Peter, Petros. You are a little rock. You're just a tiny little rock.

But on this Petra, this large, large ledge of rock— probably pointing to the big ledge of rock where the cave is— he says, on this rock, this confession that you just made, I will build my church.

Jesus uses wordplay, and he also says Peter's going to play a key role in that church, but the church is built upon Jesus. I will build build my church, he says. And that little word my matters. The church belongs to Jesus. It doesn't belong to the preacher.

It doesn't belong to the elders. It doesn't belong to a denomination. It doesn't belong to the oldest members in the crowd. It, it belongs to Jesus. Jesus loves his church.

He dies for his church. He's committed to his church. He is not finished with his church. And you can see that 2,000 years later, people are still gathering. New people are coming and being a part of what Jesus is building.

Why? Because Jesus keeps his promises. He is still building his church. And then Jesus adds this— to me, it's really a stunning thing. He says, the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

He said even death, even death itself will not stop what I'm building. Nothing will stop the church that I'm building. The Roman Empire can't stop it. Persecution can't stop it. False teachers won't stop it.

Death can't stop it. So in a place associated with fear and darkness, death and panic, Jesus makes this astonishing promise: I am building something that cannot and will not be stopped.

That's important to remember today in a world where the church is confusing to a lot of people.

If you ask 100 people what the word church means, you probably get 100 different answers or variations. To some, church is just the building. That's not— that's not church. To some, it's just a dead institution. That's not right.

Others see it as a source of pain and a picture of hypocrisy, while others— I hope that's us— we experience church as God intended, and that is a community of diverse people of peace, joy, and confidence. When Jesus promised to build his church, what do you think he had in mind? The word he uses is a common ordinary word. It's ecclesia, and ecclesia just means a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place. It's an assembly.

It was a common word in the first century. And so what Jesus is saying, I'm calling people out who believe in me, the thing that Peter confessed, who believe in me as the Son of the Living God, to be a community of peaceful people. I want my people to be a non-anxious presence in a world of panic. I want my people to be at peace and I want them to be peacemakers providing a non-anxious way to live in this world. I want you to represent me.

That's what he's saying. You know, Jesus is still calling people out. He's still building his church. The church is a community. It's a collection of individuals who have been called out of the world to be built together, to be distinctly different in the way we live in the world.

Based on the love of Christ, we, we love each other and we position ourselves in this world to be built into a community of peace in a world of panic. We are the body of Christ. We are his body. We reflect

Jesus. We are built upon his promises.

And to me, one of the, the most relevant promises is found in John chapter 16. There's a lot of places we could look at, but John chapter 16, Jesus is talking about how he'll go away, but he's not going to leave us alone. He says, I promise you my presence, my support, my encouragement, my comfort through the Holy Spirit. And then he sums it up with these words, John 16:33, I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.

You may want to panic, but take heart because I've overcome the world. So as the body of Christ, as his church, we realize— we make real— we realize these words and we live it out. So The church is a place of peace in a world of panic. We are called out and placed together to support each other, to build each other up. We need each other.

When I panic, I need you to come alongside me and remind me of the peace that Jesus provides. And when you panic, I need to do the same thing for you. People often say in times of trouble, I don't know what I would do without the church, meaning they find support, encouragement, love from brothers and sisters. The promises of God's peace come in different ways, but they're usually just in the form of simple presence of other people. The New Testament says, you know, there are going to be moments when your faith is going to be challenged.

Your faith may be weak, your perspective may be clouded. There's going to be moments where the fear gets so loud, maybe louder than truth. And, and it says that's why we're to encourage each other daily, and we're to carry one another's burdens, and we're to pray for one another, and we're to remind one another of God's promises. The peaceful ways of God are sometimes mysterious. Philippians 4, we'll see that in a minute, beyond our understanding.

We don't understand how it comes, but a lot of times God's peace is provided in such a simple way, and that's the simple presence of another person who comes alongside. And, and so to each other, we are reminders that Jesus has overcome the world. There's no need to panic. When my faith is weak, I'll borrow some of yours. When you can't see God's goodness, I'll remind you.

When I receive the diagnosis, you sit beside me and say, I know you're scared. God is with us. When your marriage is hurting, we don't let you walk alone. I know the future looks uncertain. But Jesus is still Lord.

When someone dies, the church surrounds the family and prayerfully whispers, you're not alone, you're not alone. When somebody loses a job, we help carry the load. We're not going to let you go hungry.

When the culture seems scary and crazy and out of control, we remind each other Jesus is still Lord. When the future seems uncertain, we remind each other the future belongs to God.

I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds it, and I know that the gates of Hades will not prevail. So the church is a place of peace in a world of panic. If Jesus is still building his church and nothing can overcome it, then what kind of people should we be?

What kind of people should we be?

Lots of places we could look at, but Philippians 4 is a pretty good one. When Paul writes this, he's not in some luxury resort. He's not in a nice hotel.

He's in prison, and he's literally chained to Roman soldiers, and yet he writes this. In Philippians 4, rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Don't panic. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God, and the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. So we pray instead of panic. We practice gratitude instead of fear. We pray some more, and we let the God of peace infuse us with the peace of God.

So this week, I want to challenge all of us If you feel anxiety rising, if you feel panic coming, don't feed it. Don't feed it. Just stop and pray. Remember what is true. And also reach out to somebody and say, you know, I, I just feel really— I just want you to pray for me today.

Do that. And maybe be proactive to someone you know is going through something. Say, I'm praying for you. That you may experience the peace of God. You know, the church isn't merely a peaceful community for ourselves.

We become a peaceful presence in the world. We're called out of the world to be a different presence in the world, a light shining on a hill, a place of peace in a world of panic. We don't live in denial. We don't pretend everything is fine. But we do know Jesus has overcome the world.

People who have lost loved ones still worship. People who have been through cancer still trust God. People whose children have wandered still pray. People who don't know what tomorrow holds know who holds tomorrow.

We are people who can talk about difficult cultural issues and not get angry. We can sit with hurting people without feeling like we have to fix everything. We're people who can say, yes, there is trouble, but Jesus has overcome the world.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts the church can offer to an anxious world is a community that's not afraid. Not because we're tougher, not because we're smarter, not because we have things all figured out and nothing bad happens to us, but simply because we know Jesus has overcome the world. I want to go back to where we started, that first triathlon and that swim. I panicked.

And it was humiliating. It still is a little bit.

So I'm in that lake panicking, and at that moment I didn't need more training, I didn't need greater strength, I didn't need more knowledge. What I needed was someone to come alongside me and calm me down.

To remind me that I was going to be okay.

In triathlons, there are people in the swim portion, there are people on kayaks everywhere watching for people like me. And I'm not alone.

But they quickly see you and they quickly come over. And the first thing they'll do is they'll extend their paddle Hold on, grab, grab it. And then they'll pull you and let you rest on the kayak. And they don't say, you're such an idiot, what's wrong with you? They say, hey, it's okay, it's okay, you're going to be fine.

And so someone came and calmed me down, and I did calm down. And in a world that produces panic. Sometimes you just need to grab the kayak, and sometimes you might need to be the kayak for somebody else that's panicking. We just need to be the church.

We need to remind each other who Jesus is, remind each other that Jesus is still on his throne and that he has overcome the world. The world may panic, Nations may panic, markets may panic, the culture may panic, but Jesus is building his church.

After I calmed down, I finished the swim and I rode pretty well and I ran pretty well and I finished.

My panic was part of the experience, but it was not the end of the story. It did not define the outcome. The church is a place of peace in a world of panic. Jesus is alive. He's overcome the world.

He's building his church, and because he is, we can have peace. Now, as we come to communion, we come back to the source of our peace.

I want you to go back in your mind and think about, think about that night that Jesus first gave his disciples the bread and the cup.

Everything around them was about to fall apart. Jesus knew it. Jesus knew that Judas was going to betray him. He knew that he would be arrested. He knew that Peter would deny him.

He knew that all of them would scatter. Jesus knew within hours he'd be hanging on a Roman cross. If there was ever a moment for panic, this was it.

And yet Jesus calmly takes bread and he gives thanks and he breaks it.

He gives it to his guys and he says, this is my body given for you. Then he takes the cup and he says, this is my blood poured out for you. Jesus knows what's coming, but he's, he's at peace, still at peace, because he knows his Father is at work.

And that's what the bread and the cup are for us today. They remind us of this. The cross looked like defeat, but it wasn't. The tomb looked like the end, but it wasn't.

And whatever trouble we are facing today isn't the end of the story either. It's just not the end. Jesus is alive. He has overcome the world, and because he is and has, we can have peace. So as you take the bread and you take the cup, remember our peace is not found in the absence of trouble.

Our peace is found in Jesus. Let me pray. Father, thank you for, uh, such a good reminder that we do not need to panic in a world that often does. We thank you that we can have peace. You are a God of peace who gives us your peace.

Sometimes it's beyond our understanding about how it happens, but other times it's so clear because it's just the person sitting beside us, standing in front of us, looking at us, telling us they love us, reminding us that you love us as well. Help us to be the church. As we commune, we commune together. We receive this from you. We're reminded of our commonality, the things that we share, and the importance of being your body, being connected, being present for one another.

So as we take this bread and drink this cup, bring all those things powerfully to mind. It's in Jesus' name we pray.

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