

**Be Smart, Be Strong**  
**Isaiah 35**  
**Don Lincoln**

Yesterday was the anniversary of one of the most significant events in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. **78 years ago yesterday**, 33-year-old Anne Miller lay near death in the Yale-New Haven hospital in Connecticut, her body ravaged with a burning fever for weeks, her temperature spiking as high as 107. She had developed septicemia – blood poisoning – following a miscarriage. Doctors tried every known treatment, to no avail.

In a last ditch effort to try to save Anne's life, doctors gambled on a new, experimental drug. They convinced the government to release nearly half its entire supply of the drug – roughly a tablespoon. The government agreed, and the drug was administered. Anne Miller's hospital chart – now at the Smithsonian – shows her temperature dropped sharply overnight, and the next day she was no longer delirious and began eating full meals.

Anne Miller was the first American treated with penicillin – the wonder drug discovered by accident 14 years earlier when Sir Alexander Fleming was experimenting with the flu virus in a London hospital lab. A staphylococcus bacteria culture had inadvertently become contaminated with mold, and Fleming noticed the mold prevented the growth of the bacteria. It was years of testing before released for experimental trials – but Anne Miller got the first dose in the US. As they say, "...the rest is history."

Penicillin has saved the lives of millions. It is still saving untold lives every day. Anne Miller, a graduate of the Columbia Presbyterian School of Nursing, died in 1999 – after a full life – at the age of 90.

Stories are reminders for us – particularly in times of crisis, anxiety, fear and concern. Reminders of the possibilities of a new day arriving, whether it comes by the brilliant use of the minds God has given us, or the accidental discovery of what already exists in creation, by someone who is simply being attentive.

Stories can be a sign of hope for us in times when some are despairing; a flicker of light in the darkness. **We are a people of story** – and recorded in Scripture are the countless stories of God's redeeming, saving love, most fully exemplified for us in the promise of resurrection and new life.

It's why, as Christians, we tell and retell those stories, but most of all why we utter the biblical refrain that shows up over and over again in so many of them including in our text from Isaiah: **"Do not be afraid. The Lord is with us."** The stories we tell from Scripture remind us of this commendation - Be Not Afraid – and this promise that God is with you.

It's clear some people are very afraid these days. Even Bible-believing people. So frightened they've hoarded enough toilet paper to last until 2030. Life can be scary enough in ordinary times, but clearly, as shelves empty, markets go crazy, and the infection curve rises here and elsewhere, it's scarier now. To which the Bible exhorts you and me, "Do not be afraid; I am with you."

I personally am not paralyzed by fear; anxious and cowering in terror. I sincerely believe the vast, vast, vast majority of humanity will get through this. But I **AM FEARFUL** that if all people do not act appropriately, we increase the potential impact. So today and in the coming days, we practice social distance in this community of faith as in communities of faith and communities everywhere.

Social distancing is grounded in the science and math of epidemiology. Epidemiology teaches us that when a new virus enters the population — before we can build up an immunity to it or develop a vaccine — it poses great threat; usually the greatest threat to the most vulnerable: the very young, the elderly, and always those with compromised immune systems. For them, a new virus represents a serious danger.

New viruses tend to spread exponentially in human populations, and when they do two very bad things happen: 1) a large number of vulnerable people die; and 2) healthcare systems quickly become overwhelmed and struggle to treat not only those with the virus, but also those with other illnesses or injuries. Experts tell us we need to withhold from the virus what it craves most — opportunities to spread where human beings congregate.

I know social distancing feels antithetical to fostering Christian community. But it is in fact an act of Christian love for all of us to participate fully in social distancing in the context of a global pandemic. It is the best way for you and me to respond to Jesus' call to protect the "least of these."<sup>1</sup>

**LOVE is the reason we are changing our behavior.** It is not fear, or inordinate, irrational caution that led Westminster's leaders to join countless others in putting robust social distancing in place for our faith community. It is rather fidelity to Christ's charge to love our neighbors and care for the least of these that compels us to do so. Serving the common good often calls forth a sacrifice. We limit our participation in certain forms of community. Community which bring us so much encouragement, comfort, and life and joy — we limit that in order to preserve the lives of others.

Listen to the early reformer, Martin Luther, at the time of the Black Plague in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. He writes: "I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, He will surely find me, and I have done what He has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others.

If my neighbor needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely. It is this God-fearing faith that upholds me because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."<sup>2</sup>

Who would've thought when we chose our "Wilderness" theme for Lent, that we would find ourselves here? But as God's presence was in the very midst of the chaos at creation; as God's presence carried the people of Israel through the wilderness; as God's spirit ministered to Jesus in HIS time in the wilderness, so in remembering THOSE stories, you and I are confident God is with us. God has not abandoned us. There is a new day coming. Therefore we will not fear.

And if for a season we cannot be physically gathered together – you and I – we can, however, be gathered in spirit and in prayer, trusting that even while we are apart, we never leave God's presence.<sup>3</sup>

Let me leave you with this passage of scripture from Philippians 4: 4-7:

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*

Rejoice in the Lord always. It **doesn't** say rejoice in what's happening; it says **rejoice in the LORD**.

The crocuses have begun to bloom; the daffodils are coming up. They are signs for us in this hemisphere that the promise of resurrection is arriving after the death of winter. So too you and I remember our stories, and hold fast to the promise of God's new day; when we shall "return with singing; in joy and gladness, when sorrow and sighing have flown away." May it be so. AMEN.

1. Shane Berg, Executive Vice President, Princeton Theological Seminary, "*Social Distancing and Love of Neighbor*;" posted to Seminary community March 13, 2020.
2. Martin Luther, *The Annotated Luther*, Volume 4: Pastoral Writings, page 404.
3. Agnes Norfleet, Pastor, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, email March 13, 2020.