

Today, I have special treat for you. Our guest speaker today is Rev. Charla Sherbakoff. I went to seminary with Pastor Charla. She is such a special person, currently serving 2nd UMC in Knoxville, TN. When I heard her deliver this message, not only does it mesh so well with what I spoke about last week, it ministered to my heart. I now present to you Rev. Charla Sherbakoff.

One of my most treasured memories is walking my daughter to school in the mornings and hearing the sound of geese flying over. The geese were making their yearly journey south, and I sensed that the geese had a plan and knew where they were headed. There was something encouraging and reassuring about their sounds and just their formation. They just knew exactly where they were headed. It was encouraging, I was reassuring, and that's what Paul seeks to do with his letters to the churches. Paul wrote 13 of the New Testaments 27 books. Most of those were letters he wrote to churches he had planted. He wrote those letters to instruct and to teach and to settle disputes within the early church. He also wrote letters to encourage and to build up Christians.

Today, we're going to read a part of Paul's letter Thessalonians from chapter 5. The Thessalonians are in need of a good word from Paul. Perhaps you're in need of a good word today. The Thessalonians have a lot going on. They are anxious about knowing the time when Jesus will return. They're anxious about the future. How they make sure they are ready for Jesus when he returns. Then they're just anxious over the day-to-day struggle. We don't know the extent of their struggles except that they were experiencing some degree of persecution.

So hear God's word from Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians 5:1-11 (NRSV):

5:1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; 7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

The World of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

We all get discouraged from time to time. The presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, writes in his new book, *Love Is the Way* says sometimes it's hard to feel God's love in our everyday lives especially when chaos descends. We all have responsibilities and mundane routines and challenges and frustrations from aching feet to unpaid bills to broken relationships. We have old injuries and open wounds, fears about the future, and all those terrifying possibilities we can't control. We don't always have a chorus of angels in our ear. That's why we need to see the geese flying in formation and hear those honking sounds and stop us in our tracks and pulls our attention up to the sky.

During the fall more than 600,000 geese make their way from Canada and the northern United States southward to warmer climates. Bird experts call this the Atlantic Flyaway. Unlike humming birds who like to make their way to Mexico flying solo, geese need each other to reach the end of the journey. I have always been fascinated by these geese. I grew up with a small lake in front of my house, and there's always a couple times a year when we would have some Canadian geese visit us and spend some time there to rest. Then the geese that would fly over when I walk my daughter to school. I've always been fascinated. I'm just drawn about learning about the geese.

The geese fly in a V formation, synchronizing the flapping of their wings. As each goose flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the birds to follow. The whole flock adds an additional 71% of their flying range than if they flew alone, which they never do. They go further flying together. The V formation makes it easier for them to keep an eye out for each other. When you see geese fly over, you will notice there is always one goose at the tip of the V. The first goose in the V formation experiences the most resistance in wind. When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates out of the lead position, and goes to the very back of the formation where it is carried on the wing draft the geese in front. That way no one gets too tired to be a follower.

The geese all have their own recognizable sounds that they use to encourage stray geese to keep up their pace, to stay in formation, and to signal when to stop for food and rest. They can fly about 1500 miles a day. When a goose gets sick, two geese drop out of formation and fly it down to the ground to help and protect the sick goose. The sick goose never goes it alone. You won't find one by itself.

I think the geese have so much to teach us about giving and receiving of encouragement, of building each other up that Paul speaks of in Thessalonians 5:11. Hear this again he says, "Therefore encourage one another and build-up each other." We all grow tired at times, and we

are all prone to wander off at times. We get sick. We get discouraged and wounded at times. So, we need to give and receive encouragement.

The English word “encouragement” comes from the old French word that means “heart.” Jesus knows our hearts can get weighed down with stuff. You know, with hurt, with stress, and just life. So Jesus says in Luke 21:34, “Take care that your hearts aren’t weighed down but that by the anxieties of day-to-day life.”

When Bishop Curry says we don't always have a chorus of angels in our ears, he follows up with this good news. He says there is a simple way to connect to the divine any time you feel like it. If God's love, and love is action, you've only got to get out there and do it. You've got to get out there and receive it, and the easiest way to do that is to become part of a community of faith, a community of people who want to give and receive love. Every day provides an opportunity to do love so long as you're not living a life in isolation. If you have a loving community, you can rest in God's hands anytime you need to. We've had to be in isolation over this past year, but there are ways that you can break out of that isolation if not physically, then by reaching out.

A couple years ago I ran across a small green journal that belonged to my father-in-law. It was a journal that he kept while he was on board the USS Estes in China during World War II. Every entry was just a couple of sentences long. I found it interesting that almost every entry for a year or so mentioned mail.

Listen to some of his entries:

- January 1 “Didn't do too much today. Have liberty. Still no mail.”
- January 2 “I got a letter from Mother today. Golly I feel 100% better. It's been so long. Stood on watch and read Mother's letter over and over.”
- January 3 “Didn't get any mail today, but I expect some tomorrow.”
- January 4 “Today I was the captain's orderly. I didn't like the job very much especially when an enlisted man is almost a disease. I got 5 letters today from Mother and Mother May, two from Janie, and one from George Johnson. I feel like I own the world.”

In the middle of the vast China Sea during World War II, letters were a lifeline for my father-in-law. Knowing that people loved and cared for him and thought of him gave my father-in-law hope. Encouragement is a lifeline that we throw to others so they can rest in God's hands. Encouragement though is also a lifeline that we throw to ourselves.

Moses was called by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery. Moses led the people through the wilderness where he had to put up with a lot of complaining and whining from the Israelites. But God stopped Moses short from leading the people into the promise land. It's always bothered me some. Instead God gave Moses a glimpse of the land. Maybe that was enough for Moses. Maybe

he was tired. He was right a drop back to the rear of the formation, but I wonder if he was bitter or hurt or jealous that Joshua was the one who got the lead the people to the promised land. But then, this week I read ... I don't know how I missed it but ... I read this in Deuteronomy 3:27-28.

Go up to the top of [the mountain] and look around you to the west, to the north, to the south, and to the east. Look well, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, because it is he who shall cross over at the head of this people and who shall secure their possession of the land that you will see.

Moses was called to encourage and strengthen Joshua. That was his next call. So his energy wasn't spent on what coulda been or shoulda been. His energy was directed outside of himself to encourage Joshua. Encouraging Joshua was Moses' lifeline.

I can remember times when my heart was weighed down. I didn't feel like going to church to worship. Now, this was before I was a pastor when I had no choice but to show up. But on those Sundays when I didn't feel like going, I went anyway, and I rested in God's hands with the traditions and the liturgy of the Church. The Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, the singing of hymns, the prayers of the people, and the Scripture read and proclaimed. On those Sundays when I could not recite the Creed, or I could not sing the hymns because my heart was so heavy, I just allowed others to recite and to pray and to sing and to believe for me. I rested in their love of God and their presence and their voices and their faithfulness helped bind my weary and broken heart.

Next time you hear the sounds of geese flying over, look up, look up and let the geese remind you that you weren't meant to go it alone. God's desire is for all people to know and to live in God's love, to live in community. That we are headed deeper into God's life and a life with each other. We can get weighed down. We can be tempted to go it alone. But, a faith community stands by to other and ministers to the brokenhearted and the injured. God gives us the power. God gives us the power to encourage others just as he gave Moses. Our hard hits are never greater than God's power and love to heal.

When people look at our life together as the body of Christ, as the Church, as the faith community, may they see people who encourage each other, listen to one another, and bind up each other's hurts, and put themselves out there for one another. So who can you encourage this week? Who needs a lifeline thrown to them? And the lifeline you throw may be yours as well. Then, let's make room for others to join us, so they can rest in the hands of God through a loving faith community. Thanks be to God.

I invite you to pray with me. *Lord God, when we are overcome, when we sink into despair, and we are too hurt to love or reach out, send people to encourage us. Help us to receive and give encouragement. May we be the hands of Christ reaching out to encourage and build each other up for the sake of staying in love with You and each other. Amen!*