

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 18, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

Getting To Cool Under Fire!

Old Testament:

“God is our refuge and strength, ever ready to help in time of trouble,
So, we shall not be afraid when the earth gives way,
When mountains tumble into the depths of the sea
And its waters roar and seethe.”

New Testament:

“Be like the man who when he built his house, dug, and dug deep, and laid the foundations on rock. When the river was in flood it bore down upon the house but could not shake it, it was so well built.”

There is no doubt that most often a bad shock is very hard to bear. But there are times when a shock can be therapeutic. Like the joke about the new doctor in town.

A woman went to the doctor's office where she was seen by a young new doctor. After about four minutes in the examination room, the doctor told her she was pregnant. She burst out screaming and ran down the hallway. An older doctor stopped her and asked what the problem was. She told him her story. After listening, he had her sit down and relax in another room. The doctor then marched down the hallway to the first doctor and demanded,

"What's the matter with you? Mrs. Smith is 59 years old, she has four grown children, seven grandchildren and you told her she was pregnant?!!

The new doctor continued writing on his clipboard and without looking up said, "Does she still have the hiccups?"

There are things in life that are a lot more difficult to handle than hiccups! I want to talk with you today about how to handle the day in your life when bad news comes.

When Canadian troops are at war or peacekeeping and Canadian families lose loved ones, have you ever thought what it would be like on the day that bad news comes to a war widow and her family?

A year before he went to Iraq, a private married his sweetheart, in 2002.

On a Thursday evening, relatives gathered at his mother's home.

Relatives tried to comfort the widow, who was alone at the private's mother's house, on that Thursday morning when uniformed Army officers arrived to tell her the news. She was so devastated she couldn't speak, when she called relatives to tell them what had happened. No one had the strength, to tell the couple's 4-year-old daughter, who asked almost every day, 'When's Daddy coming home? When's Daddy coming home?' " A family member said: "We haven't told her what happened yet. Not until her mom is strong enough to be mom again."

All of us at some time or another have had or will have to handle the day when bad news comes. It could be sudden unexpected news of the death of a loved one; you could be in the doctor's office when you are told that you have cancer; it could be the day when you are drawn into the boss's office and informed that you have half an hour to collect your things because you have been fired.

Judaism teaches in the Hebrew Scriptures that we are tested. And there is someone in charge of the testing according to the book of Job. The Satan has a role to play at times of difficulty. The Satan's job is to test us. That is the thrust of the Book of Job.

In the New Testament Jesus does not escape the test either. The Satan meets him and tempts him with the temptation of miraculous powers, the seduction of political power, and finally a death-defying stunt.

But it is interesting that Jesus, asks in his famous Lord's prayer that we not be put to the test "Lead us not into temptation (put us not to the test) but deliver us from evil" he says.

I bring these thoughts about testing forward because we will not hear of them elsewhere, and it is something to think about. Personally, I think that this world is a place for making our souls and I think that character often comes by way of adversity. Life tests us all the time and whether we believe in a Satan or not, we do get tested by life and those who survive the tests of life can become incredibly resilient.

We necessarily get tested on the day that unexpected bad news comes. We get shaken in spirit and sometimes it is so bad that we just want to die. Have you known that experience? "Where is God in all this we ask?"

Judaism, especially in the psalms, talks of the help of God in times of trouble. The psalmist asserts that God is our refuge and strength, ever ready to help in time of trouble. So, we do not need to be afraid at the time of the earthquake in our lives. The psalmist asks us to think of God's greatness and power and that God is on our side. The psalm says that we do not serve a malicious cruel Deity but one who helps and cares for us and is biased in our favor.

The historical Jesus is best known to us through his parables and Jesus tells us a brief parable that is right on our subject today. He talks of the fate of two houses on the day that the bad news comes. The torrential autumn rains come and test the foundations of the two houses. One survives and the other, which does not have a strong foundation, is swept away.

For Jesus everything depends upon taking actions ahead of the possible crisis in our lives. Shingle the roof before the rains come! Know your escape route if you live in front of a dam. How do we prepare for life's challenges when it rains trouble day after day?

Four major ways!

First, we prepare by having a relationship with God. Alcoholics anonymous always teaches its members to surrender their lives to a Higher Power as the first step. Prayer is that first step. You simply learn to talk to God as you would to a great Someone who could help you. You do not need fancy words. You don't even have to speak, just open your heart and if the words come either in silent prayer or aloud, speak them to God. God is always near.

St Paul says that the Christian is to pray without ceasing which is interpreted to be in a constant attitude of prayer at all times. Don't only pray when something bad happens. Talk to God everyday. Personally, I always talk to God at the beginning of a day, at any time during the day and always at its end and it does not feel right now for me now to go to sleep without talking to God. Sometimes I have a great deal on my mind. I talk it all out to God and I feel always so much better afterwards. I encourage you to do the same. This is shingling the roof before it rains because you already have a Great Friend you can talk to, on the day that bad news comes.

Secondly on the day that bad news comes you will find that friends are oh so important! Jesus taught his followers that we were to visit the sick and those in prison, the hungry, those who were thirsty and needed a cup of water. Why? Because when you are down and out you need friends.

How do you get friends? It is all about caring for other people, in a loving way. Friendships are often strengthened in times of adversity. When someone you love dies, friends can gather around to comfort you. If we get put in jail or are confined to a sick bed the visits of friends can be our lifeline!

When we lose a job friends can step up to the plate to help us to get another one if they can. They help us to write a good resume, help us make that all important phone call, rehearse with us an interview. In adversity friends are it!

Thirdly no matter what happens you always have a choice to make. Dan Baker tells the story of a woman who continually banged her head. She wore a helmet all the time and, in the psych-ward was known as an absolutely hopeless case. Dan carefully observed her and noticed that there were brief times when she stopped banging her head. It was useless to ask her to stop, to tranquilize her or to medicate her in any way and the doctors had all given up.

But Baker was a persistent man and he believed in choice. He decided one day to take Kate outside. In the times when she was not banging her head, he held her hand. Kate seemed calmer when he did this. Then one day he took her outside of the institution. She accompanied him banging her head against him as she walked all the way. When outside she saw a butterfly and the dazed blank look momentarily left her features as she focused on it. She stopped her head banging briefly. Baker would go to her room and stand at the door and ask her whether she would like to go outside. Sometimes it took over an hour for her to decide, but she would eventually go. Baker decided to teach her about how to assemble a bicycle brake. It was a 28-step process. He would show her a step at a time and then ask her to try. She would mechanically do it and when she had got it and he would try to show her, she would say “self do it.” Gradually she mastered the whole 28 steps by herself and was very proud of what she had done.

Baker saw her two years later going out the door to go bowling with her friends. He didn't know whether she would recognize him, but she joyfully came over to him and gave him a great big hug. Baker said that made all the hours spent with her worthwhile. What was the secret here? He gave Kate choice back and making choices saved her. All of us, no matter what happens to us, have the power of choice as to how we will handle the crisis.

The fourth is related very much to the motivation to hang on and be cool under fire. Why should you go on living when your husband has been killed in Iraq? Why should you keep on living when you have been diagnosed with terminal cancer? Why should you pound the pavement looking for a job when it is so hard?

Wise people learn that there is always something left to love. Victor Frankl is often cited as a man who survived a Nazi prison camp. Day after day, in the most appalling conditions, he found something to appreciate or love. One day it was a tiny flower in the prison yard. Another day it was a smile on a prisoner's face. He learned that no matter what, he could choose his attitude. That choice saved his life and he survived the camp when many others did not. He came out and started to teach Logo therapy which could be summed up, that no matter what happens to you, you can choose your attitude towards it. The solution is not to choose hate but love and appreciation, even for the smallest thing. All of us always have a choice to be loving, no matter what, to oneself and to others.

Chad was a popular 23-year-old who was known for his friendship to others. At a drop of a hat he would help out a friend. At 23 he had two jobs, a wide infectious smile and was ardently pursued by young women. His world could not have been better until he had a motorcycle accident and was hospitalized with a crushed leg. A drunk driver had ended his pleasant, prosperous life. For 7 agonizing months he lay in bed as they tried to save his leg from amputation. Finally, the doctors said that his leg had to come off and Chad went into utter despair. Now no woman would want him or marry him! The hospital bills were the price of that new three-bedroom house that he had dreamed of and expected to pay for over thirty years. Now what was he to do?

Nothing his family tried to do cheered up Chad. He didn't care if he survived the surgery.

One night one of Chad's friends brought in a visitor, a man called Gene.

Gene immediately began joking telling Chad that “he was on his last leg” and that “he didn't have a leg to stand on.” Chad was furious. “How dare you come into my room and talk like that when they are going to cut off my leg!?” he demanded to know.

Gene just shrugged, bent over, unbuckled his leg and threw the prosthesis on Chad's bed.

When the family returned an hour later Gene was gone and the light had come back into Chad's eyes. Chad said "You should have heard Gene's story. He was hit by a drunk driver. He has a wife and three children to support and the drunk had no insurance. Gene now manages the San Diego sports arena and is going to get me front row seats after I have learned to walk on my prosthesis! Gene says that people, who give to others, always get back more than they give. He said not to worry about my future. It will work out. He said the main thing was never to give up."

Four months later Chad was back at work with a vigorous exercise program of track, horseback riding and running slowly at night when no one could see him stagger around the track. He got blisters all the time on his tender stump.

Back at work he asked a pretty girl out and she said yes. He eventually married her. She didn't care that he had only one leg, just that he had a generous heart.

The hardest part for Chad was the enormous hospital bills. It would take him over 30 years to pay it off. He would never be able to own a car, or a home, but he remembered Gene's words and paid whatever he could afford to the Hospital every month.

Often Chad was called to go to the hospital to comfort someone who was facing amputation. No matter how tired out he was, no matter what time it was day or night Chad showed up at the hospital. But this call that night was different. It was the day that good news came.

"Chad," the doctor began, "because you underwent experimental procedures during the months that we tried to save your leg, many people became acquainted with your case. I am calling you to tell you that an anonymous stranger has just paid all of your hospital medical bills."

One of the best ways to shingle your roof for when it rains, is to give to others. Why? Because Gene was right. When the day that bad news comes, People who have given freely to others, always get back more than they receive; it is always enough and to spare! We just have to keep on choosing to give no matter what.

For as Martin Luther King Jnr said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." It is also, I believe, a long arc that bends towards kindness. And to participate and have a part in that long bend towards justice and kindness, is always a healing choice for us.

Thanks be to God!