

## Sermon Archive 294

Sunday 17 May, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: 1 Peter 3: 13-22

John 14: 15-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Over the lockdown, a wee group of friends (four of us - less than ten!) have been having a weekly ZOOM meeting - which we've called "meeting for coffee". Following Monday's announcement, that later in the week we'd be moving into Level 2, and so be able to go to a café, the suggestion was made that we should shelve our ZOOM meeting, planned for Thursday, and meet live, instead, at Vic's Café. Immediately, my mind filled up with fears about coffee cups and table surfaces and people coughing in my face. I voiced some of this, and it was decided that we would conduct Thursday's coffee by ZOOM.

Also in light of our new freedom, the idea was floated that next week's meeting of the Human Resources Committee of Alpine Presbytery could happen, as usual, at the church out in Hornby - nine people, face to face, all in the same room. We also elected to do the meeting by ZOOM. I may have been the second person of the nine to express a preference for not meeting physically.

I hope that I'm motivated by a sense of social responsibility and appropriate caution - because I don't like the alternative explanation that I have become someone who fears the company of others. It would be sad if experience had turned me into a frightened little person who hides away.

-ooOoo-

Joy Jordan is a made-up character in a movie from 1998. I don't recommend the movie at all, so won't tell you what it's called. Joy is a softly spoken, kind of slightly hippy-ish woman, trying to find a man. She's the sister of two other women - one of whom is a successful author of erotic murder mystery books, and the other of whom is the wife of a successful psychiatrist. She's rich enough not to have to leave her opulent house in a top suburb to go to work. Both sisters just want Joy to be happy, like **they** are happy. We, unlike Joy,

because we're watching the movie from the audience, can see that neither of the sisters really is happy. They're equally unhappy, perhaps even more so, than Joy - just better at modeling fake happiness in a culture that seeks all the wrong things. Joy, at least, is living truthfully - she is who she is and who she appears to be.

In the opening scene, Joy has just broken up with Andy, with whom she has enjoyed no spark, no sign of any compatibility. Their fleeting togetherness has always been awkward. She's let Andy down as gently as possible, because she's a kind person. Andy responds initially with tears. He then blows his nose loudly, and tells Joy (obviously out of his pain) that he is *champagne*, and she is not. "Until the day you die", says Andy, "you'll be \*expletive\* - the expletive meaning not only not champagne, but below the par of "less than beer".

In another scene, Joy is introducing herself to a classroom of immigrants, who are at a community college to learn how to speak English. She is being her usual brave but frightened self. Maybe she can find happiness, and be more like her sisters, if she can do well in a work setting. It's early days, but it's not looking too encouraging for Joy. While she's bringing a nervous hope and good will to the students, they are staring back at her with a look of complete hostility. They're silent, until one of them shouts out "you're a scab". Another shouts "where's Marcia?" Indeed, Marcia, the old teacher, is on strike, and Joy, desperate for work, has been hired to teach during the strike. Joy gets as far as saying "well, Marcia . . ." when the students start chanting "we want Marcia, we want Marcia!" Poor Joy can't give them Marcia. She can't help not being Marcia. When the chanting finally stops, she says "I am not a scab; I am a strike-breaker", but we're left feeling that now she feels like she's a scab.

In another scene, Joy is walking down a footpath, past houses with small gardens fenced off out front. She's just going from here to there, none of the houses are on her radar or of any interest to her. Thank God for the fences. A large dog races out from one of the houses and barks and snarls at her. Totally unprovoked by Joy (unprovoked by joy), the dog just snarls and bears its teeth. It's a primitive display of aggression and unfriendliness - keep out of my way, or I will eat you. The dog seems almost to sum up how the whole

world is responding to Joy, to joy, as she tries to find fulfilment in who she is. The world ain't all that friendly. Poor Joy.

Partly because of my initial response to my friends' invitation that we should gather for coffee, and because I'm wondering about who I've become within the context of an unfriendly disease, I've been thinking about the hostility of the environment within which we become who we are. I'm not the first Christian thinker to do this. There's a wonderful quote from John Calvin, thinking about living in the unfriendly world of the Sixteenth Century.

*Now, wherever you turn, all things around you not only are hardly to be trusted, but almost openly menace, and seem to threaten immediate death. Embark upon a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperilled. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. ...If you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens you in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse upon you. ...I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence. ...*

Cheery old Calvin! Easy to make fun of! But here's the thing! In our city, over just the last eight years, we've had multiple earthquakes, wildfires, our very own massacre, and now a pandemic that's kept us locked up away from one another. It could be argued that we've been living in a hostile environment. And the statistics would suggest it's had a huge toll on our wellness. How can our joy be expected to live?

Peter paints a picture of a hostile world, in his letter to the early Christians. In his world, the innocent are persecuted, and people are pretty scared. In Peter's world, conscience is something for sale, and Jesus is crucified. How's that for hostility? But Peter then offers a wee image, from the early Jewish story, of the world being swamped, people being overwhelmed in a flood that takes away their ground - except for eight little people who are kept safe in an ark. In the safe place given by God, nobody drowns. I need to tell you that I'm not interested in looking for fragments of the ark. I don't think there are any, or were any. In the story of the flood, the ark is whatever it is that God gives to the faithful few, so that they may be safe amid the world's drowning hostility.

John's Jesus speaks of a similar provision. Jesus promises the disciples that they won't be orphaned. Even though Jesus himself will appear to have been taken away, and the world will say "he's gone", God will provide an advocate, good company, the Spirit of truth. O, the world won't recognise him, won't even be able to see him. But the people who have known Jesus, will find themselves abiding in him, and he in them, and it will become for them an ark - a place where they find themselves surrounded by faithfulness and works of love. God provides for the world, a way of keeping joy alive.

I wonder what that provision might look like for us. If I have become frightened to go out and drink coffee with my friends, what is God's provision for me? If I'm wearied by years of quake and bullets and plague, what is God's provision for me? If a dog barks and snarls and bares its teeth through the palings of a fence, and it seems like a metaphor, what is God's provision for me?

Could the provision come in the form of a minister in a video telling you that it will be all right? Could the provision come in the form of him assuring you that you won't drown? Could it come in the form of a community wrapping around those who are feeling fragile - helping to keep things normal? I'm pretty sure it won't come in the form of a big boat literally present in my garden - but you know what the big boat is saying - and you know what Jesus, assuring his people that they won't ever be alone, is saying: what is being said is that in the vine, God would keep us safe.

In the forty-eight hours notice before we went into lockdown, Daniel, Francine and Jeni spent hours recording hymns for us to use while we couldn't gather physically. Among the ones they recorded was "Eternal Father, strong to save". I appreciated all the hymns they recorded, but I must say I harboured a doubt as to whether we'd ever need a hymn about those in peril on the sea. But what is the sea? A poetic echoing of the flood? That which would take away our safety? That which quells our joy, and makes us scared? Well, God provides, it seems, for those who are drowning, being scared, feeling the hostility of the world - for those who are in peril on the sea. A serendipitous reading, perhaps.

So, before we pray for those in peril, I reckon we might as well sing!