

Turning Trouble Into Power

Ephesians 6:10-20 Philippians 1:1-14

Let's turn trouble Into Power!

How many people today require this interior spiritual transformation!

In order to create the changes we need in the circumstances of our daily living—

—each of us must build the walking bridge which will enable us to traverse the troubled waters of our own lives.

Today's message is directed at both our personal and common circumstances.

On the one hand, we are all beset, to one degree or another, by the Covid-19 pandemic, which still has the upper hand in our nation.

The virus continues to claim lives at a devastating, dismaying pace!—

—claims future prospects in the way of employment, education, and simple household stability.

Claims our collective well being every day.

We are not locked down for the moment, but we are physically hemmed in, and we must struggle constantly not to be hemmed in by adverse inner, mental health conditions.

As if all that weren't perilous enough, decisions by inept and self-serving politicians at the very top—prevent persistent progress—harm social welfare—and erode your personal peace of mind!!!!

And so my message is also completely personal!

—and is directed to any one of you who feels fate has turned the tables on you in your personal life, in whatever circumstances you find yourself.

To you, setbacks are common!

You are well acquainted with defeat.

Too often, you awaken to skies filled with inner clouds of despair which confuse direction and create a barrier to clear sight and sunlit thinking!

The first word I have for you today is that you are not alone.

You have company!

People who bleed and breathe today are with you!

—and people who have walked this thorny path before show us ways to make a way out of seeming no way— today.

Let me share with you two stories—one from science!—one from the Bible!— which will provide us with **sufficient light, spiritual companionship** and **a way we can take** to turn our present troubles into power.

His name— was Isaac Newton!

His most recent biographer, James Gleick, reports, “It was Christmas Day 1664 that the first single plague death was reported in London. Another came in February, then another. ‘Great fears of sickness here in the City,’ the legendary diarist Samuel Pepys was writing by April. **“God preserve us all.”** ‘

Absent a basic scientific understanding of biology and epidemiology, the deaths grew and, soon, became so many— that funeral services ceased.

The infected were ordered not to leave their homes.

Plays, spectator sports, concerts and other crowd gatherings were banned.

Street vendors were banned from selling their wares.

Newsboys ceased crying and retreated indoors.

The universities closed.

But when Cambridge University sent **its** students home, a young man obsessed with—**mathematics, motion, and light**—whose non reading father had died three months before his birth—and who worshipped a “*God of order and not of confusion,*” bundled his prized books and headed back to his mother’s farm.

There, he built bookshelves and made a small study for himself.

He set his mind against problems.

He considered them obsessively—calculated answers, which led to entirely new questions.

There—in solitude and isolation—as the plague continued its deadly assault—**Isaac Newton**—who lived to be eighty-five—imagined the narrow path that would liberate humanity from the ignorance of the Middle Ages.

There, the apple — real or metaphorical — fell on **and** into his brain!

And from its genesis, there arose the revolutionary idea of gravity, which—when Newton determined he would learn a way to compute its force—also led him to invent calculus.

Solitary and nearly incommunicado, he became the world’s leading mathematician.

The plague year was his transformation.”(James Gleick, *Isaac Newton*)

Of his experience, Newton later interpreted: ***“Truth is the offspring of silence and meditation.”***

Truth is the offspring of silence and meditation!

Let’s turn trouble into power!

Despite our confinement, our minds and hearts may not be contained.

In fact it may be because of our confinement, we are more able to see and grasp—and use the truth—as our transportation to spiritual liberation.

Now turn to Paul of the Bible.

It is a few years after Jesus’ was killed.

Paul has been tried and convicted of what we would call today, political subversion.

Under military escort, he is taken to Rome by ship, there handed over to the captain of the Praetorian Guard—an elite military unit of the Imperial Roman Army.

Each day, one of these guards takes a length of iron chain—the “bonds” Paul referred to in his letter—and the guard attaches one end to his wrist, the other to Paul’s wrist.

This makes escape impossible, and tragically guarantees that Paul will remain a prisoner until the end of his life.

But this penal measure also makes something else possible!

The guard is regularly rotated!—so that one by one, day after day, more and more of Caesar’s elite soldiers spend every waking and sleeping hour with Paul.

They hear him as he speaks with visitors.

They hear him preach to small gatherings.

They observe him praying alone.

They see the courage and faith he sustains in trying, perilous circumstances—with the result that many guards are touched by this living illustration of the gospel of Jesus Christ with whom they are living day and night.

And what’s more, this experience also encourages Jesus followers in the city of Philippi in Greece—populous Ephesus in Turkey—and other places where Jesus followers hear about it—and all the visitors who come to visit Paul.

It was in the custody of these imperial troops that Paul wrote the letters from which today's key passages comes.

“I want you to know,” he wrote the Philippian church, “that what has happened to me has resulted rather in the advancement of the gospel, because it has been demonstrated to the whole Praetorian Guard and to all the others that my imprisonment is borne for Christ’s sake and in Christ’s strength; and the result is that through my bonds more of the brothers have found confidence in the Lord the more exceedingly to dare fearlessly to speak the word of God.” (Philippians 1:1-4)

Then!— to the Ephesians in Turkey, he fearlessly declares to followers who hear his message read in their churches, words which are evidence of his personal observations of his guards’ equipment—“

“Therefore put on the whole armor of God, the helmet of salvation, the shield of faith, and the breastplate of righteousness, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

Paul concludes by calling himself “An ambassador in chains.”

Now ambassadors don’t typically arrive in chains!

Being separated from one’s fellows and confined is not typically conducive to spreading one’s message.

But that is Paul’s confident statement!

What we see in both these people is that they turned their troubles into power by finding a way to make use of their troubles.

That’s what you have been given, trouble.

That’s the raw material you have.

So make use of it. How?

Set your troubles against the background of a larger, deeper goal.

See, in the limiting, confining, handicapping circumstance you face—a greater purpose.

Rather than a wall impeding you, a bridge you create to cross the river of your own life.

This purpose may be as common as providing comfort and security to someone else you care about and love.

It may be your acceptance of a burden or responsibility someone else can't possibly carry by themselves.

It may be going deeper into your art! Your passion! Your reading!

Use the isolation to remain—with persistence—on the creative edge of what you need now to learn.

We can turn our troubles into power on a societal level as well.

Recently I was listening to and reading about Dr Scott Galloway, a professor in the Business School at NYU in New York City—who calls the idea of in person learning at universities this fall “a consensual hallucination”—and that people are going to quickly realize that just as Netflix isn't worth a \$2,000 a month subscription, online university education isn't worth the \$79,000 that NYU currently costs—or the cost of other schools which have driven recent generations of students into unconscionable debt.

But a crisis is a terrible thing to waste!

And online university education contains the possibility of far, far less expensive—multi-channel education—meaning in person **and** online

experiences that could result not only in student satisfaction—but doubling the number of people who can afford to attend a university—and effectively break the back of expensive, exclusive higher education.

Isn't a plague a terrible trouble NOT to turn into power?

Let me close with a simple thought!

We've all heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Many of us have experienced PTSD.

Many of us are experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder right now.

It's a form of depression.

It's a form of chaos—the disorder.

It's an uncomfortable place to be.

It's sad. It's bad. It makes you mad.

But on the other side—if you keep building your bridge, stone by stone plank by plank—is something I call—

Post—Traumatic—Joy—Reorder.

It's like the time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Three days. A metaphor?

Post Traumatic Joy Reorder.

The first day, you die—to your troubles. It hurts.

Jesus descended into hell, as one of our confessions says.

You are driven into the underground where nothing seems to be alive.

The second day—you silently pray—for a new way!

Will the Kingdom of Heaven please come and surround me today?

The third day—you wake up—to whatever makes you come alive.

You are ready for a new life.

You are now ready to turn all your troubles into power! Amen!

Rev Scott Myers, Westport Presbyterian Church

July 12, 2020 Covid Message #7