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St. John in the Wilderness
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The Straw That Broke the Camel's Back

The image that I have for you this morning comes from a saying that you know well, I'm sure. Imagine a beast of burden, could be a horse or a mule or an ox or even a camel. As the owner of this animal takes it for work, the owner adds weight to its back, adding straw to it's back so that the straw might be transported for other animals to eat. The way it continues to get added and added as stops are made and straw is thrown on the back of the beast, and eventually there's that one last straw, and the weight is too much for the animal to bear. That's the straw that breaks the camel's back, as we say. I read that this saying goes back at least to the 17th century. There was a debate between Thomas Hobbes and Bishop John Bramhall, and the saying that was used in that debate, a theological debate, was the feather that broke the horse's back, the feather that was too much for the horse to bear.

In 2020 we've had quite a year. In any typical year there are burdens that we carry which are challenging to bear as we move along. We hear about or experience natural disasters, weather events that make us anxious, that give us pause and cause us to have concern about our loved ones and about property as well. We experience illness

ourselves or illness through those whom we love. We say goodbye to people who move away or who pass on. We juggle things, appointments and occupational commitments, ministry opportunities, familial obligations, and so on. In any given year there are moments, there are times where those burdens are challenging. And then comes 2020! In 2020 the weight that we carry is heavier and more unusual. There's a pandemic which causes a burden, a blanket of anxiety across everyone as we think through logistically how to go about normal things, how to safely navigate life, how to thoughtfully engage with others, and to get done the things that we need to do, We have burdens that we are being carried at a national level, at a societal level, the level of divisiveness being unique, being unprecedented some say, moments of great conflict in the streets, blood being shed. We have political divisiveness which, of course, is the point of an election, where you have to take a stand. You have to pick a person and get in line with them. But the way in which that is happening seems to have created extra weight that we have to carry, more burdens that we have to bear.

And so the image that I have from this saying that you know, the straw that broke the camel's back, is one that allows us to pause and to think for a second on the anxieties that we're bearing this week, this year, and to wonder how much of these we can carry, how much we have to carry and how we might cope with it all. Of course, for

some, if you're already broken, that is, adding any additional weight is just not possible. So for some of our brothers and sisters who are already broken, in many ways this year is a turning point, and it's not in a good direction. Businesses close, mental health declining rapidly, families not sure what to do for their next meal or for their next rent payment.

I talked to one clergy colleague who said that 2020 has been like watching an entire country go through the AA 12-step program. First you have to admit that there's a problem. Second you admit that you are powerless over the problem, that you can't stop it, that you can't control it, that it seems to be in control of you, and that you're going to need help from a higher power in order to make sense of it all and to find yourself amidst the burdens that we carry. So what are we to do? What are we to do when this is our reality?

I think the first thing is we can acknowledge the nature of this weight that we feel personally, and yet that exists societally. We can say this has been challenging. This has been a challenging time. We often talk about anxiety as a personal issue, as a mental health issue that one individually struggles with and carries, but the way that experts understand anxiety is that it's systemic, that it travels through families from one person to another, through churches from one parishioner to another. It travels through neighborhoods and towns

and cities and states, and it travels through countries. Take a step back and just observe that. Just observe the way in which stress is contagious and how you take it on yourself, become a conductor of it, how you share it with others, and how you cope well or not so well. That's one thing we can do, just observe it and be honest that it is systemic, that it travels from one person to another, and that we're not immune to its impact.

From St. Paul this morning we have words for us that hit home during anxious times. Paul's letter to the Philippians is a jewel in itself, four chapters that you might pause and take time to read, spend 30 minutes reading all of Philippians, and I doubt you will regret it. At the end of the book, at the end of this Epistle, Paul writes to the church which knows difficulties, which knows challenges, which carries weights unique of that time and that place, and Paul tells that church in Philippi, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." Could it be that the medicine that we need for the weights we're carrying, the anxieties that we have, are right here? Finding time to rejoice in the Lord always, not just when things are good, not just when it's easy and the sun's shining, but rejoice in the Lord always. Again, Paul writes, rejoice. And when you find yourself closing in, when you find yourself feeling conflicted and anxious and afraid and angry, you might hear this short

recommendation, this medicine for the soul: let your gentleness be known to everyone. Why? How? The next sentence says, “The Lord is near.” The Lord is near you. The Lord is near. And then Paul continues, and he says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guide your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

The more we have to carry and the harder things get, we often buckle down and we lace up our shoes and we pick up the burdens that come our way and we think we can do this. We got this. We try to carry more, and yet here we’re reminded to spend time in prayer, to seek out God’s presence. The Lord is near. And to find those moments of peace which surpass all understanding that might guide our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Are you doing that? Are you seeking out God even when you’re overloaded, even when the burdens are real and hard to carry?

Paul continues saying that whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if anything is worthy of

praise, think about these things. Keep on doing those things that you have learned from me, Paul says, and received and heard in me, and the God of peace will be with you. And again, this thought, as practical as it is poetic, tells us to focus on those things which make us whole. Focus and spend time on things that are true and honorable and just and pure, whatever is pleasing and commendable. If there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think about these things, which also means to let go of those things which you don't have to carry. Let go of those sources of anxiety which are dragging you down. Turn off the television, for goodness' sake. What would it look like to finish October with the TV off, to get your news elsewhere, to stop being hooked by the fear and anxiety of those who want to capitalize on your attention and nervousness?

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you know make you whole, the things that allow you to lay burdens down and to feel rest and hope, and the God of peace will be with you in 2020. The God of peace will be with you now and forever. Amen.