

Stand Firm

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on August 22nd, 2021 1 Kings 8:41-43& Ephesians 6:10-20)

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I don't know about you, but I have found this week very difficult. The images that have been splashed across our TV screens and newspapers have been disturbing.

Images of destruction after an earthquake in Haiti where thousands have died and thousands more have no shelter is hard to look at.

Images of people trying to save their homes as fires rush through their villages and towns in Europe, in Turkey, in Greece and in Israel, a situation we know all too well.

Images of people without masks protesting lockdowns in Victoria and Sydney with seemingly little concern for their fellow citizens, is more than disturbing.

Images of utter desperation of people on the tarmac in Kabul attempting to flee a new regimen is most distressing.

These images have been unsettling, distressing and desparately sad. I have felt overwhelmed and helpless. I have found myself weeping uncontollably. I have asked where is the hope, where is God.

I have also found myself getting angry. Angry that people should march and think that their right to do that is more imporant than the rights of the community to be kept safe and well. I don't understand what I think is stupidity.

I have found myself getting angry about the situation in Afghanistan and have asked myself why. I have asked what we have achieved in the last twenty years of being involved there. I have asked why we hadn't ensured the safe removal of people who worked with us and whose lives were always going to be in danger should the Taliban take control. I have asked why we simply can't increase our refugee intake limit for people who need to flee.

So why so angry? Much of this could be seen – I signed an online protest months ago, asking that Australia ensure that Afghanis who have supported us and worked with us in the last twenty years be given safe passage to Australia.

The other reason I think goes back about twenty years ago, one of the first asylum seekers I ever met was an Afghani man. He shared much of his painful story about how he was detained at Woomera for five years. He spoke of never being called by name, only a number – such were the attempts to dehumanise. He spoke of having to line up for meals and then return to the end of the queue again in time to line up for his next meal, so many were incarcerated there. Months later this gentle man encountered me again. I was standing on the street outside Collins St Baptist after a gathering of some kind (back when we could gather on the streets). This man walked up the street and sort my out, he had recognised me from that earlier meeting and asked for help, help for his community. I couldn't believe he recognised me, ironic given the treatment he had received in Woomera. As I saw the images from this week, again I saw his face in my mind.

So where is God? Where is my hope? Is it okay to be so angry?

I looked to the scripture readings to see what insights they might offer.

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Solomon is in his newly completed temple, and they are celebrating the placing of the Ark of the Covenant (that which contained the commandments given to Moses) in the temple. And Solomon is praying. It is what and how he is praying that gives me some hope.

First, he reminds the people of who God is. God is the one who keeps his promises. God is the one whose love is sure, is steadfast. He then makes a plea to God about the prayers of the people. He asks God to heed, to hear and respond to the prayers and the cries of the people. However, there is more, later in the text he speaks of foreigners and I find this both quite extraordinary and uplifting. Solomon then asks God to respond to the cries and prayers of foreigners. Listen, he asks God, to the people of other places, other cultures and other faiths and respond to them. Amazing.

So here is the beginning of hope – God is faithful and responds to people everywhere. So let's join our prayers with those all over the world.

I then looked to the reading from the passage in Ephesians. Ironically we have a military image from which to find hope. I would like to reframe that image later, but let's see what we learn initially.

A helmet and breastplate protects the wearer's vital organs. Boots enable the wearer to traverse difficult terrain. A sword means the wearer can be on the offensive. A shield protects the wearer, but, when a group of people with shields stand together, with their shields in front of them they become a wall, a wall that is harder to penetrate than people standing alone.

Put on the armour of God, or maybe we can reframe this by saying be clothed in God.

- Let God's truth cloak you – Jesus said he is the way, the truth and the life, knowing what is real at the very core of our being
- Let God's righteousness surround you – in the bible righteousness and justice go together, you can't have one without the other, let's work and pray for justice in this world
- Let God's peace reign – Jesus great gift was peace and at the heart of his message was reconciliation, let's carry that message into the world
- Let faith in God restore your hope – faith is about hoping for that which we cannot see, that which is not yet
- Let God's saving grace sustain you – grace that reminds you that you, we, are loved
- Let the word of God guide you – both the words in Scripture and the life of Jesus (the Word made flesh) show us a way to live, a way of peace, a way of justice, a way of truth.

God has equipped us to deal with these difficult times. Together we can get through.

Standing firm in the face of difficulties is possible if we allow ourselves to be clothed in God. Standing firm in the face of difficulties is possible when we remember that God remains constant and will respond to our cries.

The writer to Ephesians, linking up with Solomon and his wisdom reminds us to keep on praying, to constantly offer to God our prayers and requests, so keep alert and pray.

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So stand firm. Stand clothed in the love of God. Stand in love, stand in hope. Pray without ceasing. Amen.