

“A New Song,” by Jan Karon

Father Tim's sermon on the occasion of the first service after repairs from the storm at St. John's in Whitecap.

“When trees and power lines crashed around you, when the very roof gave way above you, when light turned to darkness and water turned to dust, did you call on Him?”

“When you called on Him, was He somewhere up there, or was He as near as your very breath?”

He stood in front of the pulpit this morning, looking into the faces of those whom God had given into his hand for this fleeting moment in time.

“What some believers still can't believe is that it is God's passion to be as near to us as our very breath. Far more than I want us to have a bigger crowd or a larger parish hall or a more ambitious budget...more than anything as your priest, I pray for each and every one of you to sense and know God's presence...as near as your breath.”

“In short, it has been my prayer since we came here for you to have a personal, one-on-one, day-to-day relationship with Christ. I'm talking about something that goes beyond every Sunday service ever created or ever to be created, something you can depend on for the rest of your life, and then forever.”

“I'm talking about the times you cry out in the storm that prevails against you, times when your heart and your flesh fail and you see no way out and no way in, when any prayer you utter to a God you may view as distant and disinterested seems to vanish into thin air.”

“There are legions who believe in the existence of a cold and distant God, and on the occasions when they cry out to Him in utter despair and hear nothing in reply, must get up and stumble on, alone.”

“Then there are those who know Him personally, who have found that when they cry out, there He is, as near as their breath--one-on-one, heart-to-heart, savior, Lord, partner, friend.”

“Some have been in church all their lives and have never known this mighty, marvelous, and yet simple personal relationship. Others believe that while such a relationship may be possible, it's not for them--why would God want to bother with them, except from a very great distance? In reality, it is no bother to God at all. He wants this relationship far, far more than you and I want it, and I pray you will ponder that marvelous truth.”

“But who among us could ever deserve to have such a wondrous and altogether unimaginable thing as a close, personal, day-to-day relationship with Almighty God, creator of the universe? It seems unthinkable, and so...we are afraid to think it.”

“For this fragile time in history, this tender and fleeting moment of our lives, I am your priest; God has called me to lead this flock. As I look out this morning, my heart has a wish list for you. For healed marriages, good jobs, the well-being and safety of your children; for Eleanor, knees that work; for Toby, ears that hear; for Jessie, good news from her son; for Phillip, good news from his doctor. On and on, there are fervent desires upon my heart for you.

But chief among the hopes, the prayers, the petitions is this: *Lord...let my people know*. Let them know that the unthinkable is not only real, but available and possible and can be entered into, now, today--though we are, indeed, completely undeserving.”

“It can be entered into today, with only a simple prayer that some think not sophisticated enough to bring them into the presence of God, not fancy enough to turn His face to theirs, not long enough, not high enough, not deep enough....”

“Yet, this simple prayer makes it possible for you to know Him not only as Savior and Lord, but as a friend. ‘No longer do I call you servants,’ He said to His followers in the Gospel of John, ‘but friends.’”

“In the storms of your life, do you long for the consolation of His nearness and His friendship? You can’t imagine how He longs for the consolation of yours. It is unimaginable, isn’t it, that He would want to be near us--frail as we are, weak as we are, and hopeless as we so often feel. God wants to be *with us*. That, in fact, is His name: Immanuel, God with us.”

“And why is that so hard to imagine, when indeed, He made us for Himself? Please hear that this morning. The One who made us...made us for Himself.”

“We’re reminded in the Book of Revelation that He created all things--for His pleasure. Many of us believe that He created all things, but we forget the very best part--that He created us...*for His pleasure*.”

“There are some of you who want to be done with seeking Him once a week, and crave, instead, to be with Him day after day, telling him everything, letting it all hang out, just thankful to have such a blessing in your life as a friend who will never, under any circumstances, leave you, and never remove His love from you. Amazing? Yes, it is. It is amazing.”

“God knows who is longing to utter that simple prayer this morning. It is a matter between you and Him, and it is a prayer which will usher you into His presence, into life everlasting, and into the intimacy of a friendship in which He is as near...as your breath.”

“Here’s the way this wondrous prayer works--as you ask Him into your heart, He receives you into His. The heart of God! What a place to be, to reside for all eternity.”

“As we bow our heads to pray under this new roof and inside these new walls, I ask that He graciously bless each and every one of us today...with new hearts.”

He bowed his head and clasped his hands together and heard the beating of the blood in his temples. Ella Bridgewater, sitting next to the aisle with her walker handy, looked on approvingly. Captain Larkin, seated to her right, bowed his head in his hands.

“Sense, feel God’s presence among us this morning...” He waited. “...as those of you who are moved to do so, silently repeat this simple prayer —Thank You, God, for loving me...and for sending Your Son to die for my sins. I sincerely repent of my sins... and receive Jesus Christ as my personal savior. Now, as Your child...I turn my entire life over to You. Amen.”

He raised his head, but didn’t hurry on. Such a prayer was mighty, and, as in music, a rest stop was needed.

The recitation of the Nicene Creed was next in the order of service, and he opened his mouth to say so, but closed it again.

He looked to the epistle side and saw Mamie and Noah; Mamie was smiling and nodding her head. Behind them were Junior Bryson and Misty Summers; he thought junior’s grin was appreciably wider than his tie.

“If you prayed that prayer and would join me at the altar, please come.” He hadn’t known he would say this; he had utterly surprised himself.

Some would be too shy to come, but that was God’s business; he hoped he wouldn’t forget and leave out the Creed altogether.

“If you’d like to renew your baptism vows in your heart, please come. If you’d like to express thanksgiving for all that God has fulfilled in your life, please come. If you’d like to make a new beginning, to surrender your life utterly into His care, please come.”