

Keep Calm and Adjust Your Expectations

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So last Sunday
Before we got on to Zoom to worship together online
For the first time in our church's history
Our church which goes back to 1685—
Which, friends, think about that for a moment,
Our church has seen this community through every world event, every war, every economic
uncertainty, every pandemic—
Before we gathered for online worship for the *first time in our history*
I was distracted from getting ready to lead online worship
By a cat doing figure eights around my legs,
begging me to feed her.

Now, Sparrow is always the one to remind us that it is time that we feed her
And as I filled up her bowl,
I noticed that her brother, Phoenix,
Had not really touched his dinner from the night before.
And it dawned on me that while Sparrow seemed to be eating just fine,
Phoenix had been picking at his food all week.

So I went to the kitchen to get some coffee
And said to my partner, Ian, that I was worried
That Phoenix didn't seem to be eating,
And we realized that this week alone
Ian and I had had to do rocks paper scissors about who would clean up cat vomit
At least three times.

Now, a piece of cat context you non-cat people should know:
Which is that loss of appetite and vomiting can be signs of really, really serious health issues in cats.

And, a piece of personal context that you should know:
Which is that the last two cats I've had, I have lost very tragically, and very young,
And I can tend to be a worrier.

So before worship, I got myself a bit worked up.
I tried feeding him special wet food, to get him to eat (to no avail).
I looked up the vet's hours (they were closed).
I made a plan to call the vet at 9am the next morning.
I got tuna juice and put it on his food (nothing).
He just sniffed at his bowl, licked the special, enticing food, and walked away.

Here's the loop that was running in my brain:
Does my cat have cancer?

Has my cat eaten one of the plants that I have in the house and I've accidentally poisoned him?
Did he eat actual poison?
Did one of the previous inhabitants leave rat poison out that I haven't yet found but he has?
Does he have a rare but terminal genetic disease?
Will the vet still be open in the middle of a pandemic?
Can animals get medical attention if society is social distancing and non-essential services are closed?
What is considered "essential" anyway??

So, while I had more or less convinced myself
and was beginning to emotionally process the idea
that my one year old cat might actually be dying,
I pushed it out of my mind,
telling myself there was nothing I could do
until the vet's office opened the next morning,
and he would be fine for 24 hours, and I joined all of you.

Now, fast forward to early that afternoon,
When I was doing some housework,
And opened the cabinet to where the cat food is kept,
And I noticed that some of the cat food was spilled, on the floor,
And next to it was one of the cat food bags, with a tear in it.

I should mention that Ian and I had both bought extra cat food
In our social distancing preparations
without coordinating with each other first,
so we ended up with about 6 bags.

And as I pulled the first one out to tape the hole closed,
I noticed that the one behind it was also ripped,
And the one behind that,
and as I pulled the bags out one by one,
I discovered that ALL SIX OF THEM
were somewhere between bitten open and completely shredded.

And throughout the cabinet, I discovered that there were piles of food EVERYWHERE.
Unbeknownst to me, he had learned how to stand up on his hind legs,
Paw open the cabinet door,
And sneak in, letting the door shut behind him, hidden inside.
Phoenix has spent the previous week feasting to his heart's content.

He wasn't sick. He wasn't dying.
He was stuffed to the gills the whole time.

Friends, as funny as this whole story was,
This moment was a wake-up call for me,
Because it showed me just how primed my brain is, in the midst of all of this
For worst case scenarios—
How hypervigilant I was,
how tense, how much the fight or flight response

has been activated within me.

Many of us are in a state somewhat like this, yes?

And unlike my own personal lesson this past week,
My lesson of just how tense, just how worried, just how ready my brain was for tragedy
Unlike that experience
Where my cat was fine,
We know that there are many people right now who are not going to be fine.
There is going to be irreparable harm, and loss, and pain that comes out of this time—both the
disease and the secondary effects—
For many, many people.
And that is very, very real.
And that is very scary.

And I also want us to notice
The ways that our nervous systems and our brains
Might be especially amped up in these days, primed for the very worst case scenarios.

One big lesson I took
From my rushing to a conclusion
Is that my brain was getting ahead of itself—that I was already suffering
From things that had not yet happened.
I had some information in front of me,
but I added information and interpretations that caused me to suffer more.

Friends, the world we thought we lived in ten days ago
is no longer the world we live in
Every day this week, I have to re-remember that this is happening
Readjust my expectations, my predictions, my plans, my routines.
My life feels like it looks so different than it did two weeks ago,
And I've felt, at times, disoriented and on edge.
News and information is coming at me, somehow,
even more rapidly and more overwhelmingly than ever—
and I didn't think it could get much faster.
And I know that this has been a nearly universal experience
And we are living with so much uncertainty, collectively:
Of how long this will last
Of how bad this will be
Of who will be affected, and how
Of who will get sick
Of whether this will come into our own lives in a terrifying way
Of whether, as a society, we can effectively flatten the curve
Of whether we can care for those among us who are vulnerable in other ways.
It is a scary, scary time.

And here's what I want to say to you:
We are in a time of collective, heightened hypervigilance

Our bodies, our brains
Are primed right now
To jump to worst case scenarios
To conclusions
To “what ifs”
To fight or flight or freeze stances.

What your body and your brain are doing, when this happens, is
What my mentor Pippi Kessler calls
“An evolutionary perk of being a human.”
Which is to say: it is totally normal
And yet, may be causing us more suffering than it is offering us protection.

As much as we can,
I invite us to notice, this week,
When that evolutionary perk of being a human—
Our brains getting ahead of ourselves
Has crossed the line from protection
(Which, right now, looks like reasonable precautions and social distancing)
Into suffering, which will look different for each of us.

And when we’ve crossed the line
From protection into suffering, instead:
Breathe.
Close your eyes.
Put your feet on the ground,
Even if you feel like the ground is shifting underneath you.
Quiet your body and your mind until you can hear three new sounds you didn’t hear a moment ago.
Breathe again.
Go outside and check in on the crocus, the daylily, the daffodil in your neighborhood that is
stubbornly, resiliently pushing itself through the soil.
Slow down.
Turn off the news and turn on music.
Take a shower.
Put on clothes.
Light a candle.
Go for a walk.
Move your body.
Make tea.
Pray.
Meditate.
Pet an animal.
Ground yourself in the here and now.
Slow down.
Breathe.

The root of the word “comfort” is “to make strong”.
In the days ahead,

Get comfortable.
Take comfort.
Comfort one another.
Offer comfort.
To comfort yourself
To comfort one another
Is to give us the strength we need
To see each other through this.

I love you, my strong people,
And it is a comfort to be together with all of you.
Amen.