

---

## *Panic*

**An article for *The Cathedral Times*  
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral***

On retreat last weekend, I delivered a homily using a very short parable titled, "Panic," written by a therapist and rabbi named Edwin Friedman. I am a deep fan of Friedman's work, as some of you know already. Friedman specialized in "family systems" therapy, by which he meant not just nuclear families as we know them. He spent time with community organizations like synagogues and churches, too, and with various other associations and their leaders.

It is good, these days, to remember some of Friedman's work. As a therapist and guide, he realized that people (and systems) do not always respond to logic and argument when it comes to change. Logic and argument do not always change people. Instead, Friedman took to heart the practice of one of his own favorite rabbis, Jesus of Nazareth. Much of Jesus's most persuasive work, Friedman noted, was delivered in stories, or "parables" as we know them. Thus, Friedman determined to write some "parables" to make his points. He titled his own stories as "fables," in a lovely little book titled, *Friedman's Fables*.

In the fable titled, "Panic," Friedman tells of a long assembly of dominoes, standing upright. One day, something happens for some reason or another, and the dominoes begin to fall, collapsing upon each other in a string of despair. Friedman describes the process like this:

*"But one day it happened. It was number 10101. Number 10101 teetered, shook, pivoted on its corner, righted itself, and then fell flat against its neighbor.*

*Its neighbor, 10100, was taken so unawares that it immediately fell against its neighbor, and that sequence repeated itself at least several hundred times before all the dominoes recognized the malignant state of their condition. As the process continued, some gave in without a fight. Others pretended it wasn't happening. A few became so anxious that they fell over before it was their time, so that, here and there, the tipping was being replicated in more than one place along the line."*

*"...The attitude of those that remained standing was pretty uniform. Each asked itself what it could do to fight the plague-like process proceeding inexorably toward them. Some tried to calculate the power in ergs of energy as against the rest mass of their own weight. Others wondered if perhaps some aerodynamic innovation could be conceived to drag this juggernaut to a halt. Still others considered the possibility that they could help their neighbors stem the tide if they could bring their own strength to greater, hitherto unimagined, peaks. And several thought of sacrificing themselves for the greater good by falling before their turn, in the misguided hope that by such action they could in effect create a "fire-line" whose gap the coming conflagration could not bridge" (Edwin Friedman, *Friedman's Fables*, Guilford Press, New York: 1990. pp. 175-177).*

I will not spoil the story for you by revealing the conclusion. But I will say this: it is not a surprise ending! And, it is positive! And, it represents the truth, that what we will in life, matters in life!

I thought of this parable when I read the assigned lesson for this past Sunday, from the prophet Jeremiah, who said, "Blessed be those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17: 7-10).

Our church, the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, can be part of that tree of life. Sometimes, the world and the people around us are anxious. Sometimes, there is panic all around us. The tree of life, however, "does not fear when heat comes...in the year of drought it is not anxious." It is amazing what can happen when we stand for

non-anxious presence, and not for panic. We are not meant to be those who increase panic, or those who thrive on panic, or (God forbid) those who actually produce panic. Our leadership and presence produce peace, and non-anxiety. Members of the tree of life can do things like stop falling dominoes, or even help each other walk away from crashed airplanes. We can bring salvation to our own families, to our churches, to our communities, and even to our countries.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip