

2020.05.24_How We Get Through This

May 24, 2020 – 7th Sunday in Eastertide, Year A

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11 | St. Columba's (via Zoom) | The Rev. Ari Wolfe

Sitting down to write a sermon never goes quite as planned. This week's defining example was how long it took me to *get around to* sitting down to write... it was hard to focus on the readings, though I suspect they were percolating around in my mind all week, even when I wasn't directly paying attention. But in the *9th week* of the coronavirus quarantine, spring weather arrived, and I felt called by the warmth, then the rain, then the renewed heat to go outside and work in the garden and the yard. I haven't been a gardener before... I always wanted to but I've pretty much had a brown thumb with plants all my life. But in the past few weeks, I have found a new calling to care for a small patch of earth alongside my husband, which has brought me both peacefulness and joy. I have also been learning how to make gluten-free breads and pastries that don't suck! In other words, I have joined so many others across our country and the globe who are discovering what we can *do*, how we can *be*, as we shelter in place. In the midst of crisis, we find ways to cope.

Our Easter season is coming to a close as the world continues to suffer through a pandemic that has claimed more than 344,000 lives... over 97,000 souls in the United States alone. I don't need to add any anecdotes here about individual lives lost or altered by the novel coronavirus - we have all been touched by this in one way or another, and I feel it's equally

important for each of us to honor and see to our own sense of peace and compassion, while helping others in their time of need.

So my theme for this week has been facing adversity and uncertainty with *compassion* and *self-care*, reminding myself and others to take care especially of our emotional and spiritual wellbeing and being compassionate with *our own* shortcomings, anxieties and imperfections as well as those of others. This is also a good time to remember that “thoughts and prayers” is not just a phrase we use, something to say to make people feel better. There is power and powerful healing in taking the time to truly stop and *think about* someone, to focus your attention only on them for even a moment, imagine them wrapped in warmth and love, and pray for their well-being. And in so doing, we can find moments and even days where we feel God’s grace.

(4)I receive a newsletter from the Church of the Good Shepherd in Berkeley, where I did a year of internship as a deacon-in-training. This week their supply priest, Molly, wrote a beautiful piece on experiencing Eastertide in the midst of a global pandemic. In part of her missive, she said,

“We are in Week Six of the Great Fifty Days Of Easter, a time when we celebrate the Resurrection so hard that we allot seven weeks of rejoicing just to take the edge off...

As we rejoice in the Resurrection, this world we share is also—in the very same moments—going through a global Holy Week that has

stretched out to Two Months. Like Jesus' disciples in Palestine 2000 years ago, we do not know exactly what happens next, exactly how and when it will end, and what the world will look like once we're finally on the other side of it. Grief and celebration, fear and confidence, Good Friday and Easter Feast, both happening, both present, both real."

Echoing throughout that "God is good," no matter our circumstance, the Rev. Molly added that this situation we find ourselves in is, "as close to a perfect model of the "already/not yet" nature of our common tradition that (she's) ever personally experienced."

And here we are, celebrating Church online, each in our own space while holding sacred space together. *Already* creating *new ways* of being a beloved community, waiting to see where we might land, and *not yet* knowing what that will look like.

The reading that called to me this morning as defining this already/not yet reality that Molly spoke of was the epistle called "First Peter." It was that first line, the "fiery ordeal... taking place to test (us)." The letter was believed to have been sent out to several late 1st century church communities where people who chose to follow Jesus' teachings were being menaced, persecuted and abused by their fellow Jews and more violently, by Rome... that was the trial *they* faced. But as I read it, I felt like the author could as easily be talking to us here in the present day about *our* current crisis. Listen again to some of Peter's 1st letter:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

Covid-19 certainly seems to qualify as a "fiery ordeal" to me, as one of those "times of trial" which we would rather do anything to avoid - but we don't have that choice. And I found the wording in this interesting, even odd; the author says, "do not be surprised... as though something strange were happening." In other words, the ordeal the recipients of the letter were going through may have been difficult, unfair, and life-threatening... but Peter says don't be surprised that you are being tested in such a way. I'll condense a bit more of our reading:

Humble yourselves under the hand of God... Cast all your anxiety on God... Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist, steadfast in your faith... for you know that **your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.**

Indeed, our siblings in all countries and on all continents are suffering. Our brothers and sisters here at home, in our congregation, in our counties, in our state, are uneasy and distressed. The chaos, fear, economic impact, human toll and future implications of the current pandemic is horrific and by the end, I don't think anyone will be left who hasn't been impacted by it;

we are in the midst of an historical global event. But perhaps we should not be surprised by it; perhaps it is not as strange as it seems that this is happening.

I read an article recently by Dr. Jeff Salz, about the correlation between what we have done to the environment, especially the animal kingdom, and the rise of super-viruses.¹ I **was** surprised - but perhaps I shouldn't have been. Dr. Salz says that "according to the United States Agency for International Development, about 75% of all emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic - meaning they come from animals." 75 percent. He cites avian flu, SARS, H1N1, and Covid-19 as belonging to this list and goes into 20-years of research by Peter Daszak (who is known as "The Virus Hunter"), who with his nonprofit organization that researches infectious diseases, found that these "emerge in places where human populations are very dense and growing" and cites "land-use change, people moving into new areas, encroachment into wildlife habitat..." He says, "we shake viruses loose from their natural host; when that happens, they need a new host... (and) often, we are it."

To quote Dr. Salz, "the current pandemic is not something that *just happened*. Nor is this something we *did*. This is something we are *doing*." In other words, we need to make better choices moving forward, to start being better stewards to the earth, so that it will sustain our race for generations to come. But we CAN do this.

¹ Dr. Jeff Salz, Across Worlds. "Revenge of the Pangolin" <https://www.facebook.com/acrossworlds/>

I saw something last week that gave me hope. It was a televised, online high school graduation for seniors across the nation (with the hashtag #GraduateTogether). I watched as they celebrated and *were celebrated* in a new and creative way. For what must be the first time in our history, high school seniors were honored as ONE graduating class ~ a class exemplified by innovation, resilience and hope. Speaking on that theme, former President Barack Obama gave the commencement speech, and for the first time in many weeks I did feel hopeful about the future and I admire the young adults who will be its stewards.

Alone together, they shared the rite of passage that is high school graduation, lifting each other up, giving each other encouragement and strength. A choral group sang the national anthem together... each alone in their own space, shown in separate Zoom windows, brought together by their director in beautiful, blended harmonies... the sum result is far greater than each of its parts. I suspect that in years to come, we will look back on this as a defining moment.

Human beings can be remarkably resilient. Finding ourselves in a situation of crisis, we learn that we can face adversity and uncertainty with creativity and love; with video calls, gardening, poetry, art; music, cooking, baking, handcrafts... so many creative ways to face the unknown and discover hidden strengths.

When I was in seminary, I learned a fascinating & empowering process called “redactive writing,” a way to delve deeper into a reading or

sometimes to work through difficult passages. You start with a chunk of writing and highlight words that jump out at you or that speak to you in a deeper way, while lining through or erasing others. This creates a new piece, which can be a distillation of the reading, a core message you found, or something entirely, even contextually different. I don't usually do this when I'm preparing a sermon, but for some reason my initial highlighting and study led to it this time, so I decided to go with it. (If you want to see what the mark-up in my preaching notebook looks like, I can post it on my website along with the transcript, for viewing).

Here is where this passage from Peter's epistle led me:

Beloved,
do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place,
as though something strange
were happening to you.
Rejoice!

Cast all your anxiety on God.
Discipline yourselves, keep alert.
Like a roaring lion your adversary prowls around,
looking for someone to devour.
Resist it!

The God of all grace
will restore, support, strengthen and establish you.
the Spirit of God
is resting on you.

Through this crisis, as my husband pointed out to me, we have all been and are *alone together*. Outside our house this week, we cut, pruned and cleared, put in a garden path and gate, planted and transplanted... and discovered a “volunteer” peach tree sapling growing on the edge of our front yard! It felt so good to get my hands in the dirt and *make new spaces*, to be outside instead of sitting at my desk or overloading myself with news or social media. I have spent days canning and baking while working from home, spent evenings knitting, and gotten back in touch with people I hadn't seen in too long.

We have each developed survival skills of one kind or another to fit the situation and get us through the time of trial. So... what have *you* found that is bringing you through this? What keeps you engaged, grounded, active, creative; what connects us to God and each other? What points of focus have you renewed or discovered? Could they be helpful to someone else?

Share these insights. Learn more. Help each other. Be kind and compassionate to others and to yourself. Breathe. Because we are resilient beings, living through a time of crisis, reaching towards understanding and God's grace - and *this* is how we get through this.

Add to website version:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him (God), because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist (it) him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.