

March 22, 2019
4 Lent Year A
The Rev. Mark Pendleton
Christ Church, Exeter

Hold On to the One Who Holds Us

I had mapped out my first Sunday back with you after my months-long sabbatical leave: I was looking forward jumping back in and greeting you all on Palm Sunday. I would have reported back about our five weeks in Mexico (it was wonderful) and my extended time away of reading and reflection, and how meaningful it was to see the Holy Land: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, Nazareth, Galilee and the River Jordan (that was the itinerary at least).

That clearly is not going to happen today. I cannot see in you in person, nor can you greet me. No “safe church” embraces via the internet, let alone in our new social distancing universe. My trip to Israel was almost over before it began, with three short days on the ground in Jerusalem before I raced home before the borders closed.

Bishop Rob has called us to a Lenten fast from public worship for these next two weeks. Who ever thought that we all would be asked to give up public worship for Lent? As the news unfolds of the impact of Covid-19 this fast will probably extend into the Easter season.

We have all stepped into the whirlwind, the wilderness and the unknown. Words cannot fully describe the global reality or our individual feelings. But let’s throw some out there: unreal, unprecedented, frightening, disastrous.

Yet for people who believe in the God of creation, God made known in the person of Jesus Christ, and God who breathes life into us each day, we have a foundation and a toolkit at our disposal to support and guide us. We are not abandoned and we are not without hope.

At times like these, in moments like these, we should pay attention to the kinds of prayers we are praying. What is it that we asking? For whom do our thoughts first turn? With so much unknown, what is it that we can know, believe and trust?

We are in the wilderness. Now deep into the Lenten journey, we know that wilderness is a dominant theme as we count the days until Holy Week and Easter. It was in the wilderness where Jesus experienced thirst, hunger, exhaustion, cold and heat, and temptation. In the wilderness, he was tested – as each one of us is being tested. His opponent was Satan, that persistent force throughout time that opposes God’s will for us for faith, joy, abundance, love and life. It is that darkness that always threatens the light. It is the negative that tries downs out what is good and positive.

Temptation is in heavy supply in this moment in history. The temptation to hoard rather than give. Temptation to tune out when we, for the sake of the greater community, must stay engaged and active.

Who are we to believe? What are we to believe? Is all of this as bad as we hear or are we to believe in what the outliers and bad actors peddle and promote? Is our fear overblown and our preparations too much -- or not enough? For those of who believe in miracles: what form might miracle take? Will the virus miraculously pass over us, allowing us to escape ruin like the Israelites before the great Exodus? Will a miracle be a cure, or an act of kindness to a stranger?

If it is in the wilderness we must be for a time, let us resist -- being grounded in our faith -- to think first and only of ourselves and those we love, and not in equal amount for the stranger or the most vulnerable. Everyone is saying it because it is true: "We are all in this together!" Borders may be closing around the world but this virus care nothing of human made boundaries or partitions. May we resist any impulse to turn inward in the belief that we alone can defeat this pandemic.

What the scientists and medical professionals are telling us also makes for good spiritual wisdom: we need one another to get through this. No one is an island. The young are not invincible should be concerned about the elderly and vulnerable. We will all be touched and impacted in some way, so let us be open to this historic moment and accept what our God has always known: all of humanity is created in God's image. All life is valued. The love that gives meaning to our lives is given and made known by what we read in 1 John: God is love.

Let us lead with compassion. May our first prayer be for someone else. The lonely. The sick. The caregivers. The protectors. Our leaders. The refugee even more forgotten as the world convulses. The immigrant detained or trapped in dangerous places where gangs and narcos have not embraced any halt in violence. The homeless. Those stranded far away from home. The dying. We are reminded in Deuteronomy 15:10-11: Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

The Church is being reminded that we are the Church even when we cannot worship together and celebrate the sacraments. We will try to worship online. We will form phone trees and prayer chains to try to keep us connected. The Church is the Body of Christ whether when we gather and when we are apart. This I know: on the first Sunday when we can gather at 43 Pine Street, it will be an Easter Sunday. We will sing hymns and proclaim the promise of Resurrection and new birth.

Let us remember that Jesus said: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8)

In this time of great distress and confusion, do not be afraid to ask God to calm our fears. God has the bandwidth, the attention span, the capacity to meet us where we are. God meets us when we are most open and vulnerable and honest. It is O.K. to cry out: "God I'm panicking right now! - "I'm about ready to freak out!" Our deepest concerns or worries or prayers will not be dismissed or downplayed or rationalized. As a preacher I heard this past summer say: "God may not answer our prayers: God listens to them."

That is probably enough for today.

Take a deep breath and breathe in God's life-giving Spirit. Hold on to the One to holds on to us during good times and trying times. In adversity and prosperity. In sickness and health. Call a friend. Reach out to a neighbor. Do those things you do not need to be told to do.

Let me know close with one of the many wonderful prayers are being shared via the internet. Among them is this prayer by Cameron Wiggins Bellm that is guiding many of us.

A Prayer for a Pandemic

May we who are merely inconvenienced
remember those whose lives are at stake.
May we who have no risk factors
remember those most vulnerable.
May we who have the luxury of working from home
remember those who must choose
between preserving their health or making their rent.
May we who have the flexibility to care for our children
when their schools close
remember those children who will go hungry with no school meals.
May we who have to cancel our trips
remember those with no place to go.
May we who are losing our margin money
in the tumult of the economic market
remember those who have no margin at all.
May we who settle in for quarantine at home
remember those who have no home.
As fear grips our country
let us choose love.
During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other
let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God
to our neighbor.
Through Jesus Christ our Saviour,
whose arms of love embrace us all. Amen.

(Written by Cameron Wiggins Bellm)

