

Lent 5 March 29 2020

We have all heard, of course, about the lack of protective medical gear due to the strain on our healthcare system from the corona virus. One item that is particularly needed is surgical masks, relatively simple and cheap to manufacture, but now with supply at a critical shortage, a call has gone out far and wide for more masks. On a personal note, Elizabeth and I heard from our younger daughter, a surgeon at a hospital in Boston, that she is using the same mask for several days in a row, taking it home at night to clean it for use the next day, and that before the virus outbreak and the mask shortage, she might have used half a dozen masks a day without a second thought. I'm glad, though, to see that the call has gone out for anyone with a sewing machine to put it to work making these needed masks. If you are interested, please let me know and I can put you in touch with people who have patterns and materials here in Barre. But I heard another interesting story over the week about how some of this shortage is being overcome. At the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., one of their stone masons remembered that there were a few boxes stashed away in a crypt off the undercroft, so he went down to see what was in the boxes. It turned out that during an earlier deadly flu outbreak in 2009, the staff of the Cathedral thought it would be a good idea to stockpile some masks for use in the next pandemic. Of course, it was a great plan, but with one little flaw: someone had to remember the masks were there. Well, anyway, they retrieved 5000 desperately needed masks which were promptly taken over to two local Washington Hospitals. The radio newscaster who reported on this got a chuckle over this story, because he could use some of Jesus's words, when he introduced the story with, "Seek and ye shall find!"

Prayer: Most merciful God, in these most uncertain times, your Word gives us hope and peace. Grant that your Word may open up our souls to put our trust in your love. This we ask in the name of Jesus our Savior and friend. Amen.

On Friday, there was an opinion article written by Rev. David Platt of the McClean Bible Church in Virginia. The title of the article is, "These days I preach to an empty room. But I see my Church clearer than ever." Well, following Bishop Shannon's good advice, for the service this morning, Elizabeth and I are at our place in Corinth. Last week we had international guests attending our service, but it strikes me as even more extraordinary to have a service of Episcopal Morning Prayer that originates in Corinth! The room is not empty, we've tried to make it

feel a little bit more like Church and Elizabeth and Zadie are here with me. But like Pastor Platt, I know that the closed and empty building, as much as we love it, is not the Church, of course, the Church is those of us praying for the medical personnel and the sick and anxious during this outbreak, the Church is those who helped to get our homeless neighbors sheltered safely in this perilous time and miraculously put together 300 meals with almost no notice; the Church is those who maintain our physical distance and practice good measures to stay healthy so we don't overwhelm the healthcare system. But also, the Church is the young man who was furloughed from his job and not sure what the future holds for his employment, the Church is those who have relatives and friends who have tested positive for the corona virus, the Church is those who are concerned for the health and safety of loved ones who are on the front lines of the struggle against this disease. Yes, the Church might be empty, but that doesn't mean there's no Church, no, no my sisters and brothers, we are called this Lent to be the Church in a new way, to gather online, to express our prayers and concerns digitally, but no matter what the form, to have the purpose and intent to put our trust in God and to seek in Jesus the way to new and everlasting life.

In so many ways this Lenten season, it seems that we have faced such a new and unprecedented situation, learning to be physically isolated, learn to use our technology to stay connected, seeing the hard knocks on our economic life, and especially knowing that these shocks are mostly rattling our smaller, local businesses and our working neighbors, especially those in lower paying jobs, putting most of the burden of the economic downturn on them. And one quick note, although our church employees are not able to come to work since the church is closed for operations, we are going to keep paying our staff members because not being able to work due to the virus outbreak is not their fault. This Lent has been so topsy-turvy, it seems like everything is new and unexpected, yet at the same time the anxiety, the fear, the utter exasperation is not really all that new nor unprecedented: from ancient days the uncertainty of life has stalked humanity, and our spiritual ancestors were not strangers to the fragility and earth-shattering changes that could rage so furiously around them. The Psalmist gives voice to this sentiment, "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice; let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication." Indeed, the Psalmist gives voice to our human concern for the dangers that swirl about us, but even more profoundly, the dangers

that come just as surely from within us: our temptations to deny the love of God in Christ Jesus and how it encircles us even when we are blind to it; the danger of leaving God's way, to pursue our own pleasure and private gain. But the Psalmist knows as well, that even if this is our condition, God has what we need, because with God is forgiveness, mercy and redemption, indeed God's word is our hope. During Lent, the time when we've been reeling from the daily assault of news about the virus outbreak, the Psalmist of old reminds us of God's never failing love, of God's care for us in the midst of struggles, both those we've seen before and those that seem to come upon us anew.

In both the lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel lesson, the ancient yearning for a safe harbor in a raging storm is heard again: Ezekiel as a prophet saw deeply into the Word of God, a Word which brings new life into a place where only death has prevailed, a Word that breathes life into dry bones, lying in the valley and very dry, but the Word of God makes these dry bones live; it is God's Spirit that brings the dry bones to life, and through Ezekiel this Word is given to all: "O my people, I will put my spirit within you and you shall live...you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord. And Jesus brings this lesson to an even deeper place: when all hope seems lost, when even Jesus weeps, when there seems to be only despair defeat, once again we are given an insight into new life given by God: Jesus summons Lazarus from the dead, overcoming that ultimate divide in human existence, but even deeper, I believe, giving us a glimpse in our faith of God's love extending throughout all, that glory of God shining forth and breaking down the barriers of this world. Jesus brings Lazarus new life, but just as importantly, Jesus frees Lazarus, "Unbind him and let him go," freeing Lazarus to serve as a lesson to all of the power of God's love to do something new, to bring new life into our lives and to give us the strength, grace and courage to be the Church in new ways, even this morning in the midst of this global pandemic.

Yes, these strange times are new to us, yes my sisters and brothers, such social and economic disruption, such anxiety about what the next fews weeks and days will bring, yes, these are indeed fraught with fear and forbidding. But we travel down this road in Lent, as this season comes to a close, knowing that our spiritual ancestors also faced the uncertainties of their times, uncertainties of illness without the comfort of modern medical techniques, uncertainties of disease

without the advances in science and medicine to give a fighting chance, but still trusting God to bring divine forgiveness, mercy and redemption into the world, in short being a hope that there is a Word beyond fear and anxiety unleashed by pandemic. There is a Word of hope that brings new life as well in to these unexpected and unlooked for times...that despite the difficulties we face, still Jesus beckons us to follow, to follow in the steps that draw us into service for all, seeking justice for the downtrodden and the oppressed, seeking God's mercy in overcoming the inequalities of our present society, making sure especially that the most vulnerable communities, the homeless and low income workers, the immigrant communities whether here with documents or not, to ensure the well-being of these communities and others as well. This is the Word of Hope Jesus brings, even in the midst of deep despair, fear and tragedy, a despair that causes Jesus to weep, this Word of hope Jesus brings is to set Lazarus free, free from the death that binds him, to set us free, to set us free from the fears and anxieties, that we might find the joy of serving in the Name of love, serving in the Name of the Risen Jesus.

Even as we seek to follow Jesus and to be the Church in a new way, Even as we are forced to practice physical distance from one another, even exiled from our sanctuary, this Lenten season still comes to an end and we see Holy Week rising on the horizon. In the strange times we are undergoing now, in the grief over death, and in the forbidding we all face, we are now called to walk with Jesus to the culmination of his ministry and to the confrontation with the powers of his day. Next Sunday, Palm Sunday is known as the "Sunday of the Passion." We will hear the story of Jesus's death and we will once more look for Hope even in the midst of the pain and injustice that will be visited upon him. In the enforced isolation we are undergoing now, spend some time in the coming week to ask God in prayer for hope in our lives, for hope to deepen that we might prepare for the coming Holy Week and prepare for the coming weeks ahead as we have become the Church in a new way during the Lent, and serve in the Name of the Risen Christ in a new and deeply hopeful fashion in the days and weeks to come. Thanks be to God for the grace and the love of Christ in our lives to set us firmly upon this path, and thanks be to God for the Spirit of love to deepen our trust in God's everlasting goodness. Amen.