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With all the different events over the past week, the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the impending fight over her Supreme Court seat, the failure of the Kentucky Attorney General to secure murder charges against the Louisville Police officers who killed Breonna Taylor in her bed while she slept, and some of the continuing natural disasters, forest fires in the west and hurricanes in the Atlantic coastal communities, it was easy to not hear that as a nation we reached the grim milestone of over 200,000 deaths from the Coronavirus and that worldwide the death toll now exceeds 1,000,000. Unfortunately, this grim mark is also in line with the predictions by some of our most prestigious public health officials made back in early May before we even had 100,000 deaths. I remember thinking back at that time there is no way those predictions could be possible: it just seemed to be too high and it meant that we would have close to 1,000 deaths every day, along with somewhere in the vicinity of 50,000 infections each day as well. However, now it turns out those predictions were just about completely accurate. Unbelievable, and how sad and frightening. Each of these lives, of course, is precious to their loved ones and precious in God's sight. For so many, there is no way to adequately mourn their loss. Like I said, unbelievable and heartbreakingly sad. This makes me doubly thankful for all the efforts and caution that so many of our neighbors here in Vermont, and each one of you, have taken in order to keep others safe, especially those who are most vulnerable. I have noticed, however, that there is now a slight slackening of the things we must do, keeping distance, wearing masks, limiting our gatherings and that makes me a little nervous. I understand the way in which it is easy to become a little less vigilant, but we have to do all we can to prevent any further deaths. As we have heard, but it bears repeating even more in some ways than advice about wearing masks and washing hands: "we will get through this, and we will get through this together." It is that "together," taking care for the most vulnerable, caring and loving the other, that is so central to our faith and now absolutely central to our daily life each and every day now.

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, you bring us the Word of your love and power today: may our ears and hearts be opened to your Word; this we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

It is no wonder that with all that is going on, when the uncertainties of the pandemic have now reached a previously unimaginable magnitude in death and attendant economic disarray, it is no wonder that there are so many people who are feeling a great deal of stress in their lives. When we see on television and in the newspapers the images of racial strife, the political polarization and the lack of caring response from our national leaders to the depth of the crisis so many of our people face, the times seem dire to say the least. Also, we know that even on the much more everyday scale of our own lives, these sorts of tragedies are never far away: we all have friends, family members or neighbors who are battling illnesses, whether physical or emotional and for probably more than a few of us, those illnesses are something that have touched our own lives as well. Throw

in financial worries and just the regular insecurities of life, there are very few who can claim to lead a worry free life.

As much as all these worries and global issues seem to dominate our world and our lives, we are certainly not unique in this regard: although perhaps through the proliferation so so much media and channels of communication it may be that we are bombarded incessantly by these disturbing and stressful images, still throughout history our ancestors felt these same concerns and stress, indeed, death and illness were ever more present in their lives than in our own. At the same time, though, our spiritual ancestors scanned the horizon for Good News beyond the death, destruction and disease that must have seemed so readily present to them. That Good News for these spiritual ancestors sustained them in their lives and I believe that it can hold that same promise for us, for you and me, as well.

We hear in the lesson from Exodus in the Hebrew Scriptures this morning that God provides for the people in their need. During the past month or so we have listened to readings from the Book of Exodus each Sunday at worship: this is the record of God almighty hearing the cries of God's people in their slavery and bondage in Egypt, God hears this cry and acts in power to deliver this rag tag band of runaway slaves from their oppression. More than this, God continues to provide for the people in the Wilderness as they learn to follow God in their newly granted freedom: last week we heard how these former slaves looked back to the fleshpots of Egypt, refusing to see the harsh and brutal aspects of their captivity, but God intervenes by providing them the meat and bread they crave. Today we hear how the people of Israel thirst as they journey the rough the desert, again complaining that their deliverance by God is a cruel joke, once again putting Moses to the test. Yet once again God provides for the people of Israel, once again their needs are met by God's loving providence. This story in Exodus is the formative testimony for Israel: it provides the context of God's action: recounted over and again in the Psalms, such as we hear today, in Psalm 78: verses 15 and 16; that God, "split the hard rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink as from the great deep; He brought streams out of the cliff, and the waters gushed out like rivers." Here is a testimony of Good News for the people that they will be delivered by God gracious act and that their needs will be provided for by God's loving kindness.

During this past week our Jewish sisters and brothers celebrated their High Holy Days. This solemn time of deep religious observance begins with the Jewish New Year festival, Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Rachel Timoner in Brooklyn, New York preached that these acts of God providing bread and water for the people show that God loves before God commands: and that this is the lesson for us in Exodus: to know that we are loved fully and completely by God. This love, a love supreme from God almighty even for the most lowly among God's people, this is the revolutionary and unique claim on us from the Holy scriptures.

In our Christian writings as well, if we look with open hearts, we can also see this Good News: in Matthew's account of Jesus, we hear today of the question of where Jesus' authority comes from: is it through human origin or does it come directly from God? Although Jesus does not answer this question directly, Jesus' story about the two sons leaves no doubt that Jesus is following and doing God's will, carrying out the divine mission of bringing God's to all, even the ones we might find the least likely, those who are outcast in the view of our society, but God's love comes freely for all, even those who seem to be least deserving in our judgment. And this is indeed the Good News, that God judges differently than our human standards, providing and accepting all who open their hearts to God's love and act in care and compassion to do God's work, to engage in God's mission to care for the lowly, to give to those in need, to bind up the brokenhearted and reach out in love to all as God has reached out to you and me, reached out to all.

In one of the most inspiring passages of all Scripture; Paul quotes what was possibly one of the first Christian hymns in his letter to the church gathered in Philippi, that consolation of love, which would complete his joy, that Christ Jesus yes, brings that love from God, breaking through into our human life, fully embodying that divine love that we all might be lifted into the very fullness of that love. That is Paul's joy: to know of God's love for him fully and complete in Jesus and to then share that testimony with his sisters and brothers in the Church. This is the Good News that yes, yes, God loves us and bids us to live fully in Jesus as the One who brings us completely into this divine love and amazing grace. Paul believes that this Good News should move us to sing out in God's glory, that we should indeed take a knee and sound forth in joy the Good News that God has freed us in Jesus. So as Paul says, we all must work out this liberating word in fear and trembling, but doing so fully aware that God's grace and mercy and is working in us, taking the lead in our lives and giving us the strength and will to reach out in love as God loves us.

Yes, these are difficult and stressful times we live in: some of the most vulnerable in our nation are under attack, and the values of care, concern and decency seem to be forgotten more and more, practiced less and less. But that stress, the injustice, indifference and callous actions we see so prevalent in our land are not the last Word for us: no we are the people of God's Word: those whose ancestors heard the call of God's resistance to Pharaoh's brutality, we also have been given the fullness of God's love in Jesus, loving us that we might be freed to love others; to seek to end the brutality and violence, to seek to bring the provision of food and drink to the hungry, shelter to the homeless and ultimately helping to ensure that the needs of all are met. This is the Good News we are given to today, the Good News that meets us each Sunday as we gather here in the presence of God to be sustained, nourished and strengthened for service. My sisters and brothers: this Good News, this Good News that God loves us in Jesus and that God call us into service in the Name of Jesus to share that love with others, this is the Good News we share together this day, and in the days yet to come, gathering to give thanks to God

for this great and amazing grace, giving God thanks for this Good News of God's love for us in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.