

“What in the World is God Up To?”
The 7th Sunday of Easter – May 24, 2020 – John 17:1-11

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There’s something special about having someone pray for you. It is humbling; it is soothing; it is emotional; it is precious. But, unfortunately, it rarely happens in your hearing. So, can you imagine what it might be like, to hear Jesus pray for you in person? This one who knit you together in your mother’s womb? Who holds you like a shepherd holds a lamb in his arms? Who forgives your prideful actions over and over again? On this final night at supper with his friends, Jesus and his Father were enjoying catching up – checking in with each other. We are eavesdropping on the yearning of God to be back in touch with loved ones – just as we are yearning for many things that we miss these days.

You know, we Lutherans like to joke about how we hate change. But kudos to you, Advent Lutheran Church! You have been flexible and resilient and continue to be the Church even in the midst of the ongoing, daily, even hourly **changes**: don’t need to wear a mask; wear a mask; you have a right not to wear a mask; hair and nail salons and tattoo parlors may open. and gyms. No, gyms can’t open yet; restaurants can open, unless they are bars; We have to stay at home. No, we have to go out and spend money. Churches are not essential businesses, until they are. We can meet in person, but only 10, no 15 or less. Next week it will be 45 or less. We are now in a soft Phase 2, which is really Phase 1.5, which won’t even begin until we’ve experienced 14 days of decline in new cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

But don’t worry, everyone on tv is telling us “we’re all in this together...” Well, no. We’re not. The pandemic is the only thing we have in common with “all of us,” but each of us is responding differently. Unfortunately, many of us are discovering the huge fault lines and inequities that are deeply etched into our human community. Most of our extended families have merely been inconvenienced by the Stay at Home order – we have homes to stay in. We have jobs that can stay at home with us and the equipment to do those jobs. We have access to the internet, and food in our pantry and freezer and apparently none of us have had to actually purchase toilet paper since the beginning of March. ;-) We can also walk into any open business wearing a mask, and not be mistaken for a robber or a thug.

No, we are not “all in this together.” We are not what Jesus longed for when he let the disciples overhear some of his final prayers to the Father before he went to die. “Holy Father, **protect them** in your name that you have given me, **so that** they may be one, as we are one.” Jesus is calling on God to protect us and bring us into unity. The world outside this upper room has always been poised to rip us to shreds, which is the fruit of our own sinfulness and the source of our need for protection. At the same time that same world is out there trying to get our attention, “Hey Church! – C’mon, show us what you got!” So we reach out to serve the least and the lost and carry out our faith and mission, not because of the power but because of the love. So, no, we are NOT all in this together. People have LARGE questions – which need large, deep and sometimes painful answers. But the people of God have been here before: enslaved in Egypt, and yearning for freedom; held captive in Babylon and yearning for home; enduring oppression and wars, plagues and famine, and natural disasters beyond comprehension. So, how do we move ahead for today, and begin to envision a future that will not look the same as our past?

I have been intrigued by the writing of Indian author Arundhati Roy, whose ***The Pandemic is a Portal*** offers this: *"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."*

I also wonder if the God we love, the one revealed through Jesus and the testimony of Scripture – ever tires of waiting for us to embrace Creation’s dream for us. What if God is revealing a whole new format to us in these days? Pay Attention, Church! Because Jesus just loves to show up in our fear, our darkness, our frustration and our stress. If someone was sick, Jesus was called, and he showed up with healing. If demons possessed or bound someone, Jesus knew how to confront the evil spirits and beat them at their own game. When there was blindness or deafness, stubbornness or hardness of heart – Jesus loved to be right there to bring sight or sound, to open eyes and hearts of those who were living in the land of the lost. Just like - whenever we find ourselves alone and afraid, divisive or lost – Jesus comes **alongside** to companion us, to calm us, to take us home or raise us up.

That’s what Easter means. Jesus/God just loves to CREATE SOMETHING NEW. Unfortunately, for that to happen it seems we have to be at our wit’s end, at the end of our rope, in a place of darkness where there is no hope. Until we are on our knees – until we are as good as dead to ourselves – only then does Resurrection come. God protects us through changes and night terrors and political partisanship and philosophical battles. God protects us from our hatred and our bleeding hearts and our certainty that we are the only ones who see clearly. And why does God come to find us wherever we are? Why does God protect us at all?

So that we may be one. It will take all of us – truly all of us together with the Holy Spirit to step through the Portal that is this Pandemic. And if we have the strength – the courage to trust God and love one another – we will be one. We cannot do this work alone. And we can’t do it with our old tools and our old ways.

Next Sunday we will celebrate Pentecost. And on that day, we will cross through the symbolic portal provided by our church year: We have been side by side with Jesus from the promise of his arrival to his birth, his baptism and his ministry. We heard his teaching words and watched him work miracles. We ate with him and wondered with him and on the night before he died, we let him wash our feet. And when he was taken from us, we ran and hid ourselves while **he** suffered the shame of death by crucifixion.

Yes, we have been through times of trial before – and we know how to be afraid. But we also know how to rejoice in miraculous new life – new insights into our Father God received from a Resurrected Christ – and our invitation to put on our Easter outfits and wait to be clothed with power from on high.

Now, Jesus is home with God once more – he and the Father are one. But - the Holy Spirit is on her way – poised to be poured out abundantly on all of us, so that we, too, may be one. The church already knows how to be afraid...now let’s show the rest of the world how God’s people live Resurrected life. Maybe we’ll take after our Father – and just love to CREATE SOMETHING NEW. In the meantime, Rejoice. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia! Amen.

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Resources: William Willimon, Lecture, Festival of Homiletics 2020; Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic is a Portal"