

Sermon – “With Gentleness and Reverence”
Sunday, May 17, 2020
Scripture Readings: 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21
Trajan McGill
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading visits, as we did last week, the first epistle of Peter. First Peter is not written, as some epistles are, to a specific local church, but to a wide audience of Christians dispersed by geographical distance. Let us hear what God has to say to us in 1 Peter chapter 3, verses 13 through 22.

¹³Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you — not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

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Our second reading comes from John’s lengthy report of the Last Supper, in which Christ reassures his disciples of God’s continuing presence with them even after Jesus has gone on from this world. Hear God’s word to you in John 14, verses 15 through 21.

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

To begin, allow me to briefly give a rough descriptive overview of what we have before us. What is the context, broadly speaking? Let me set the scene:

A world which has been made more prosperous and connected, by widespread international trade. A world which also has been made dangerous by the same, for ships and other vessels do not carry only goods, but also people, and people sometimes carry disease. But disease is not an unfamiliar thing, unknown to science. Public health authorities have been in place for a long time, with regulatory powers and careful scrutiny of the travel history of those arriving from foreign lands. Yet public health, of course, is not the only motive or goal in town—the needs of commerce are held in the balance, too. Goods must flow, or jobs vanish, and hunger follows. Other concerns intrude as well. Everyone is left to contend with the fact that there is no imaginable way for any people to erect perfect, impermeable barriers against disease which outweigh every other human need or withstand the interference of politics. And so, an infection has slipped in, and a health catastrophe has resulted.

People have grown sick and died, and authorities have struggled to stop the outbreak with quarantine and travel restrictions. That has then led to a secondary struggle between those trying to enforce the rules and those trying to end or evade them. Hospitals overwhelmed, uncertainty and loss the order of the day...so went the Great Plague of Marseille, in the Year of our Lord 1720.

Perhaps you thought I was talking about a different moment. That would be forgivable. One of the things which has intrigued me about the way our present culture has carried on its conversation about what is happening today is the language used. In particular, one phrase I hear again and again, in news reporting, in blogs, press conferences, and personal conversation, is the expression “unprecedented times.” What I find so intriguing about it is that, from the perspective of something as long-lived as the church—or even as short-lived as our own nation—this is not really unprecedented at all. This is not, in fact, even the first time *this very building* has been closed to worship gatherings by public health order in the midst of worldwide pandemic.¹

In fact, there is so much precedent for the world’s situation right now that I heard it described recently, by Professor Phillip Jenkins of Baylor University, as something more accurately termed a “return to normal.”²

He did not mean of course that every moment is an epidemic, but that we have been in an unusual moment having gone so long without one, and more broadly, that we’ve gotten a bit more accustomed than most people in history to the idea that we are safe, and in control,

¹ Exploration of our archives not long ago revealed at least one newspaper account of Westminster having re-opened for public worship just in time to celebrate the armistice ending combat in World War I, after not having held services for some period of time during a public shutdown brought on by the influenza pandemic of that year, a terrible event which remains one of the worst pandemics in history.

² Jenkins’s interesting presentation on the subject, titled “Epidemics: How the Church Has Responded Throughout History”, can be found in video form at <https://vimeo.com/400340768>

and less accustomed than most of our forebears to the idea that we are at the mercy of the forces of nature, and not really in control at all.

It is good to us to avoid the temptation to give such disproportionate weight to the little flash of time in which we live that we think nothing like it has ever come before, and fail to consider the teaching that the past can give us. The politics of the moment, of course, are full of pronouncements that this, or that, or perhaps everything, is “unprecedented”, but if we ever take a moment to recall our high school American history textbooks, we are forced to take a step back from that kind of talk. The church has access, if we look for it, even to a much a longer memory. The preacher of the book of Ecclesiastes lived at least 2,200 years ago, and already he knew enough to say, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.”³

It is when we remember such truths as this that we recall the practical lessons of the past and can bring them to bear on today’s concerns. But it goes further than that: it is only when we remember the great scope of things in which we live, that we grow wiser to the basic fact that as tiny creatures who are here one moment and gone the next, swept away by forces over which our most powerful efforts only exert the most microscopic influence, we face the same human condition as all those who came before us and who come after: we are born into a world of beauty and pain, joy and suffering, living in response to these things, rarely in control of them, and exiting the world abruptly without ever mastering it. It is a reminder, in other words, that we are reliant creatures, in need of our Lord, thankfully one who told us, “I will not leave you orphaned,”⁴ and in whose renewed life we too live.

I think it means something different to live as a Christian in this framework than to live otherwise. “Do not fear what they fear,” the reader is told in 1 Peter.⁵ Psalm 91 reminds us that when your refuge is the Lord, “You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.”⁶ We have a greater hope, one which bears us right through and beyond even if our earthly life is taken by any disease.⁷

The way people with such hope respond to crisis has long been a matter of discussion in the church. One of the things Professor Jenkins pointed out in the talk of his I recently heard is how great a witness of love it has been, the simple fact of giving mercy, comfort, and care to others, again and again in epidemic after epidemic, for centuries, the church taking a bold, fearless role in meeting the needs of strangers at times when everyone else was afraid to do so.

³ Ecclesiastes 1:9 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

⁴ John 14:18a (*NRSV*).

⁵ From 1 Peter 3:14 (*NRSV*).

⁶ Psalm 91:5-6 (*NRSV*).

⁷ A Gospel hope which is spoken of many times. One particular passage which comes to mind is 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10.

It was of course known that contact with the ill was costly. Many lost their lives tending to those around them. And they knew they likely would—there was no effective personal protective equipment in older times. But something greater compelled them, and they were willing to “suffer for doing good,” and in so doing provide a gentle and reverent witness to the hope that was in their hearts.⁸

Sometimes the church was so central to people’s lives, in a way hard to imagine in today’s cultural climate, that theological considerations were truly front and center. Martin Luther, during the plagues of his day, found himself writing in answer to inquiries about whether it was okay for faithful Christians to flee from deadly pandemic.⁹ The question amounted to 1) what role we have, and 2) whether perhaps we should regard illness as God’s punishment and stay and take it.

His take on this is a very interesting read. He isn’t so convinced by the argument that plague presented a special punishment that we were meant to willingly receive; rather, he argues that Christians, like everyone else, in nearly every circumstance readily take action to avoid the daily dangers to our lives. Sudden, widespread disease does not so much differ from anything else in this regard. But he does note that Christians have duties to their neighbors which are heightened, not lessened, in times of danger. He therefore concludes it is entirely permissible for Christians to avoid danger—but only to the extent that they can while seeing to it that the Christian ministry which is our duty is fully carried out—“If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” Jesus does say, after all.¹⁰ Luther’s position then amounts to the opinion that some are given the role of staying and accepting the danger, and others the role of carrying on safely for another day.

The specific shape of today’s Christian response is governed by the specific shape of today’s environment, but our overall identity, followers of Christ seeking to be faithful disciples in the midst of yet another pandemic, is unchanged. Even some of the questions that might sound odd in our day really still apply, as they always have. The faithful of an earlier day in material catastrophe and natural disaster may have seen battles playing out in the spiritual realm. Punishment from God? Attack by demonic forces?

Those may be slightly more alien thoughts to people of our time, but at second glance, we might note that there are really still spiritual struggles here. Times of peril always set up battles between our better selves and our lesser selves, between the self who draws back from the stranger and the self who reaches out in Christian love and witness. For the believer, the spiritual struggle for supremacy of the right and faithful self over the temptations to selfishness, fear, and disregard for neighbor is more important than the physical struggle to keep our short lives going a few seconds longer.

⁸ See 1 Peter 3:14-16.

⁹ “Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague,” written by Martin Luther in 1527, can be found in English translation at <https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf>

¹⁰ John 14:15 (NRSV).

It is easy to lose our way. I think one of the temptations many of us and our brothers and sisters in the Christian world face is the desire to assert ourselves, rather than to extend grace. I have been dismayed that many of those most pointedly refusing to follow orders against large gatherings have been scattered but noisy churches, here and there suing the state or simply ignoring it and holding worship services anyway. The insistence that sanctuaries should be allowed to open and bring people together is not an altogether wrong impulse—for there have been and continue to be many times and places in the world where precisely the thing at stake for our neighbors is their freedom to gather and worship God—but in this precise moment, the thing at stake is our neighbors' safety, and church functions are known to be major means of the spread of disease to those neighbors. The insistence that any of us be open in that way at this moment is therefore actually at best a misread of the needs that surround us right now, and treads into the territory of caving to temptation, the temptation to unaware selfishness. It is, something which, as 1 Corinthians 13 puts it, "insists on its own way" rather than patiently enduring for the sake of others, as true love does.¹¹

It is easy to make those mistakes (and surely we each are making our own as well) when we think of everything happening around us as new and fail to recognize the fullness of context in which all of this rests. We are "back to normal," and we don't entirely know what to do with it, not only because our generation here has been lucky enough to take a break from normal, but also because normal is full of constant uncertainty and unpredictability. But to look at history is not only to remember that people have seen this before, again and again, but also to have the opportunity to see God at work in all the times that have come before, giving us reassurance that God is and will be at work in this time as well. Historically, a great many people have come to faith in past times of epidemic, because these were times in which God's love was evident and showing through the faithful loving witness of those who followed Jesus Christ. We, too, are bearers of the name of Jesus in a time of hardship. Let us listen carefully for how we may, with gentleness and reverence, show God's love to all those living through this time, and may the Holy Spirit speak the way powerfully into our hearts. Amen.

¹¹ See all of 1 Corinthians 13, particularly verses 4-6 being referenced above.