

March 22, 2020
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Annie Pierpoint Mertz, Preacher
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Benicia
Sermon Preached via Facebook Live
1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

Rainbows and Resurrection

Last Sunday we were grappling with a Lenten fast from gathering as a church. For me, it was so many things all at once; eerie, hard, heartbreaking, and life-giving too. So many people were able to join in during our broadcast -- old friends, people who have moved away, those who for whatever reason can't be in church on a Sunday morning. The comments allowed all of you to "talk in church," which was wonderful. I felt the presence of God in my entire body, and I felt the deep history of our community. For 165 years, there have been wars, attacks, natural disasters, any number of events that felt like the end of the world. Like the end of St. Paul's. But the love of God, expressed here in this community, has persisted.

And, in the midst of all the grace, new opportunities, and joy of having live-streamed our first service, there was grief. As soon as I waved goodbye to all of you last week, and we turned off the camera, I cried. I missed you so, so much.

I wonder if maybe you had a week like that too -- swinging back and forth between courage and fear, cheer and dread. I wonder if, like me, you put on a mask of bravery to do the grocery shopping without getting close to anyone, then came home and fell apart just a little.

I was tempted to preach here today with that mask on. To bring my A-Game, that stiff upper lip, that kind of Jesus-flavored Christian swagger that says "Guys, I've GOT this." If God is for us, who can be against us? Death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, including viruses, can separate us from the love of God!" And I'd end with a joke about hoarding toilet paper to *really* convince you it's OK. That I'm OK.

But that's only half the truth. Yes, I believe that quote from Romans -- we have not been separated from the love of God -- but I don't think that "I've got this." I'm slowly starting to think that God's got this.

Now. Having said that, if you're like me, you have a few bones to pick with God over this whole coronavirus thing. God "having this" isn't looking so rosy at the moment. Yes, nothing can separate us from the love of God, but we have been separated from so many things that remind us of that love. A bustling Sunday coffee hour. A beautiful song sung in worship. Bread. And Wine. And each other, for Pete's sake.

There's pain with that. There's hardship and grief. What I want to know, what I've been asking God all week, is why does it feel like my faith is faltering now? Why does it feel so scary to put this in God's hands? To be honest, part of me thinks that I've checked all the boxes -- I go to church, I pray, I serve others -- and therefore I'm entitled to a faith that saves me from fear and grief at all times, so I can say, la-dee-da, isn't God Great, all the time, everything is heaven and rainbows and resurrection.

But Jesus didn't die on the cross to save me from pain. To save me from fear, or grief, or uncertainty. Jesus died on the cross to save me from my sins. Jesus did not say, come, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you a permanently great attitude. Jesus calls out to the weary and gives them rest. A nice green pasture to lie down in, some still waters to drink from.

So perhaps the most faithful response in a time of fear and pandemic is not to proclaim just rainbows and resurrection, but to proclaim everything. To stand up and say God made me, God loves me, and I am tired and afraid, and hopeful and excited, and golly this sure looks like the valley of the shadow of death, but there's neighbors helping neighbors all around.

If you're like me today, you might find a measure of comfort in John's Gospel. It's a long story, but a good one. As it unfolds, we see a man healed of blindness, yet takes a while to truly see what happened. The more he tells the story, the more he understands it. When the neighbors confront him and ask him how this amazing thing happened, he talks about his interaction with "The man called Jesus." No Messiah, no King of kings, just a guy who spat in the mud and told him to wash in the river.

Then he is hauled before the Pharisees to tell the story, and they ask him who he thinks this guy is. He answers: "He is a prophet." So still a man, but a special one. One with a connection to God, and a guy worth listening to.

From there, this whole thing turns into a big ol' mess. His parents are hauled in for questioning, then he is again, only to be insulted and labeled a sinner, and I suspect the whole time he just wanted to be done with this whole thing. Maybe, just maybe, instead of re-telling the story over and over to people who won't listen, he wants to go look at some stuff, all the things he'd never seen. Can't you sense his mounting frustration? Can't you feel it? A lifetime of hearing the wind rustle the leaves of an olive tree, and now that he can finally sit and see them dance in a gray-green shimmer, he's dealing with ALL THIS.

By the time Jesus circles back to him, he's *had it*. He's ready to move on and live his life. And Jesus pops the question of belief -- "Do you believe in the son of man?" Listen to the frustration and anger in his voice: "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."

If you're like me today, maybe you feel that anger too. The world is falling apart, we're isolated from one another, wondering how we're going to live in a

new normal, we're deprived of the signs of God's love that we've come to rely on, and here is Jesus, coming alongside us, and popping the question. "Do you believe in the son of man? Do you believe my Father's got this?"

If my faith was the la-de-da, resurrection and rainbows sort, my answer without hesitation would be "Yes, Lord, I believe." If I'm honest, today I'd answer the question differently. "Well, Jesus, I'm gonna try my best. There's a lot of fear and anxiety and grief in my heart right now. I have a hunch that you'll lead us through this shadowy valley to the good stuff on the other end, but that looks like a pretty tall order from here."

Yes, I recognize that I'd be saying this to the Son of God, who conquered sin and death and Satan and the grave and all that. He can probably handle a global pandemic. But just as he is allowed to be the Savior, so am I allowed to be fully human before him. Today, if you're like me, you can't quite see the rainbows and resurrection. But I can talk to Jesus honestly about my blindness and pray for the healing and the vision that awaits us on the other side. Thank God that I get to do this with all of you.

Amen.