

A ROOM WITH A VIEW: Daily Devotions (Mon.-Fri.) from Holy Trinity Lutheran Church

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May 26, 2020

Declaring God's Glory

*The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky proclaims its master's handiwork. (Psalm 19:1)*

Canopies. We are seeing them everywhere. The canopy of rich green carpeting the well-watered earth. The canopy of dazzling magenta blossoms lining streets and sidewalks. The canopy of purple from the creeping charlie spreading out along the banks of the creek (here, they are charming; in our yards, not so much). The canopy of stars enfolding us as it stretches across the sky like a dome, reminding us of our rootedness on this beautiful blue-green planet.

But listen to the first verse of Psalm 19. The stars are not sitting passively up there in the sky. They are actively proclaiming the glory of God. In fact, the true sense of the word we translate as "declare" implies a symphony of sound, as in vast array of small hammers at work pounding out a massive piece of steel. It is not cacophony but cosmic harmony because this is God's handiwork.

Even when clouds obscure our view, even though the stars may not "come out," this vast canopy blazes on, trumpeting out its percussive testimony to the One who created them. They are always there as signs of God's handiwork, now and forever. "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities . . . have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." (Romans 1:20)

May 25, 2020

Humility

*"I am small and of little account,
yet I do not forget your commandments." (Psalm 119:141)*

We are besieged by experts. Many have names with prefixes or suffixes (Dr., Ph.D). Many have letters (CDC, DHS). Many are people who consider themselves experts because they have read

widely in their preferred news outlets. Some claim to be experts even though they haven't read widely. And then there's the constant seismic shift going on, like a small rolling earthquake; even for those who really know what they're talking about, the landscape keeps changing as understandings change.

It can become overwhelming for those of us trying to weed through the thicket of information. This is the cloud that had settled on me recently. Am I doing too much? Not enough? What is the next step forward? How do we know if it is the right step? Experts, please tell us what to do!

Then I came upon this verse. Each of us is just a dot in the global landscape of human uncertainty. We are trying to do the best we can with who we are and what God has given us. Boasting about our expertise will only sow seeds of division. Especially now, there is no place for pride.

We may be of little account in the eyes of the world, but not in God's eyes. God treasures each of us for who we are and sustains our every breath. It is our duty and delight to cling to God's commandments, especially the new commandment to love one another as Jesus has loved us. At the end of each day if we can say, "I did my best in love," then *that* is cause for boasting.

May 22, 2020

The nearness of God

*Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him when he is near....* (Isaiah 55:6)

"How are you doing with all this?" we are constantly asking each other. Well, what can we say? "Doing the best I can." "Hanging in there." "As well as can be expected."

I have to say there was a stretch when I was not doing as well as could be expected. Perhaps this has been true of you also. Well, who wouldn't admit to it at some point? The hurricane of change that has come so suddenly upon the world--the *world*--in almost every aspect of public life is testing our ability to remain upright. Some of us may be bending like palm trees in Category 3-force winds.

Then this verse from Isaiah 55 above popped into my consciousness. It was embedded in my mind anyway because a dear friend once set it to music as a stirring vocal solo. (Music has a way of fixing words deep in our brains.) Thanks be to God that the Holy Spirit pulled this verse to the surface at just the right moment. All of a sudden I felt inexpressible relief. God's abiding presence is unshakable. No matter what the storms of life, God is "a very present help in trouble," just waiting for us to turn to him--not handing us solutions on a silver platter but simply being our rock, our refuge, our stronghold.

The first step in seeking the Lord is remembering that he is there in the first place. Then, what a simple act it is to turn to him! When may he be found? When is he near? Always.

May 21, 2020

But some doubted

Today is the Ascension of Our Lord. The Gospel of Matthew concludes with Jesus commissioning his disciples just before he ascends into heaven. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...." (Matthew 28:19).

But a puzzle presents itself as Matthew sets the scene two verses earlier. "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted."

Some doubted?

We know the story of "doubting Thomas," the disciple in John's Gospel who demanded to see the resurrected Jesus with his wounds before he would believe he had risen. But "some doubted" implies more than one. So here in Matthew 28 we have at least a few among the 11--Jesus' most faithful followers, those upon whom he is depending to continue his work--who hold some measure of uncertainty about it all.

How can this be? Well, when you think about it, doubt is actually a central component of the life of faith. Just as Jesus says that those who think they see are blind (John 9:39), so those who think they have all the answers most surely do not. Belief is not a consequence of rock-solid certainty but a matter of trust. After all, no human can possibly have answers to life's biggest mysteries! (Come up with a few of your own and you'll see how this is the case.)

Instead, the vitality of faith is located in asking better and better questions. It is within those that we gradually discern the constancy of God's presence and hear more and more clearly the voice of our Good Shepherd calling to us.

This same understanding can be applied to the maze we are currently having to navigate of how to get from the beginning of one day to the end, or one week to the next. No one person has all the answers. No one source can tell us exactly what the best thing is to do. We are taking in all the information and trying to figure it out as we go along.

But there IS one thing we can be certain of: God is present in the midst of every question we ask with arms of love extended. Whatever the situation, God is calling to us in love. Love is the magnet, the force, that draws us from one day to the next. Love straightens out the maze and gives us a clear path. Even in the midst of doubt, trust God and trust God's love to see us through.

May 20, 2020

New life, always

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. (Matthew 6:26)

Like many of you, I love watching the activity of birds at our feeders and listening to their calls and chatter on my daily walks. Sometimes I am envious of them. They are able to be exactly what God created them to be--creatures that swoop, play, gather and sing. They are fully being birds, together.

Are we able to be fully who God created us to be? We have often reflected on how the risen Christ is most vividly present when people are gathered--for our faith community, meaning the church gathered for worship. Does not gathering deny a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human?

A book I am slowly making my way through is "Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society" by Nicholas Christakis. At the outset he writes, "The capacity to band together to make societies is a biological feature of our species, just like our ability to walk upright." When we are not gathered, are we less human (or thinking of birds, when we cannot sing)?

This is a time like no other. The freedom to gather indoors in good conscience may not return to us for a prolonged period. This is a problem. But within every problem lies an opportunity, which is a secular way of saying "God always brings new life."

So we cannot gather for awhile. Society as we have known it will not evaporate. Instead, hear God inviting, bidding, *urging* us to explore new ways of creating society within the one we already know. Deeper and more meaningful conversations by phone: "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Gathering online for worship (even if we're watching at different times, we still have the experience in common). Hearing music, liturgy, and the proclaimed word in new ways. Convening small groups by video for free conversation or directed study.

Ways of being together we haven't even thought of yet or are in the process of being invented!

As we are constantly discerning the shape of our life together, let love be our guide. "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

May 19, 2020

Fear – not

The LORD is my light and my salvation -- whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life -- of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)

It is a complication of this time that caution is being mistaken for fear. Decisions made out of what can be called "an abundance of caution," gauged solely to minimize the risk to others, are being interpreted as acts of fear.

There are two kinds of fear in scripture. One is fear of enemies, those whose purpose is to "steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). The other is fear of God, meaning the acknowledgement of God's majesty, power, and might, as in "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). In the latter we hear God thunder to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth....when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" God is over all and in all. Who are we to think otherwise?

It seems to me that the caution being applied by institutional leaders to areas of our life brings both of these kinds of fear into focus, like binoculars. On the one hand, we are indeed confronted by an enemy. On the other hand, God's wise and powerful hand is leading us and God's love is supporting us. The act of "caution" acknowledges danger from a position of confidence, hope, and love.

Whenever anxiety threatens, I suggest calling to mind the verse that we wait all year to hear: "Fear not: for behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people: For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ, the Lord." For in God's great gift of love lies our hope.

May 18, 2020

Faithfulness and the Holy Spirit

*Faithfulness shall spring up from the earth,
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
The Lord will indeed grant prosperity,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness shall go before the Lord
and shall prepare for God a pathway. (Psalm 85:11-13)*

At first glance it may be difficult to fathom how these words could be speaking to us in the midst of this time. The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits is released every Thursday; here's the update from May 14: "With the latest numbers, a total of about 36.5 million applications for unemployment insurance have been filed since the virus began shutting down businesses in mid-March. That's close to the level of all claims filed during the last recession, which ran for 18 months."

How can the church interpret "prosperity" in such a time?

We are especially challenged because the church at large seems to be caught in a mighty tug of

war unique among modern-day institutions.

On one side is a fierce craving for the hope that in-person worship can bring, which has led some churches across the country to continue or to resume in-person gatherings. When I got up this morning I was greeted by a story posted last night about a single worshiper in California who potentially exposed 180 others to the virus on Mother's Day (I cross-checked, and it did happen): <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/17/us/covid-19-mothers-day-church-exposure/index.html>

On the other side is the equally fierce desire for human well-being and to curb the spread of the virus by limiting in-person gatherings. At the moment this is where Holy Trinity is positioned.

How then can we be speaking of prosperity when we cannot even gather inside in groups larger than ten? I suggest replacing "prosperity" with the word "creativity" or "resourcefulness": "For the Lord will indeed grant resourcefulness, and our land will yield its increase."

God IS at work in this time. We simply must be on the alert to invite and harness the creativity of the Holy Spirit. Here's an example of how that can happen. Our son's wedding on May 16 was limited to 10 attendees inside the church that ended up being able to host us. At virtually the last minute the church offered the use of their video technology by which they stream their weekly services. As a result the total attendance--from around the country, around the world--was larger than it would have been, had all those invited actually showed up!

At present Holy Trinity does not have such technology. All we have is an iPhone. We are looking at the possibilities of outdoor and "drive-up" worship. In the meantime let's do what we can. How many of you are watching our weekly services? How many of you with children are watching at least through the children's message? How many are coming to our online Sunday School? Please do these things! It's only a half-hour of your time once a week. You can worship in your PJs with your coffee. Have the service on as your family shares Sunday brunch. Spread the word among family, friends, and on social media. Extraordinary possibilities for sharing the gospel are in our midst, right now. "Righteousness shall go before Lord...."

Your staff and council are bringing all the creativity we can muster to bear on this time, so that we may continue to be strengthened as a faith community. "Morning by morning new mercies I see....Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"

May 15

The peace that passes all understanding

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. (John 14:27)

Jesus brings us this peace. But can we receive it when our hearts are filled with anxiety?

Let's look back in John 14 to verse 23. Jesus is talking to Judas, whose heart was anything but peaceful at that moment. Jesus says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

This is a capsule description of the Christian life. When we open ourselves to God's love, our hearts are filled to overflowing and that love is poured out into the world in acts of love for others. God the Father and the Son have made their home in our hearts. We are willing to lay our very lives down for the sake of others. Thinking not of our own convenience or our selfish desires, we will do anything to protect our neighbors and keep them safe.

This fullness of love brings the peace that passes all understanding. The turmoil of life is swirling around us. Has there yet been a calm day in the news cycle during the past two months? Yet the peace that comes from knowing God's love anchors our lives in Christ a way that no anxieties can shake. Judas knew no such peace; he went to his death filled with remorse for what he had done. Begin and end every day in love, and be confident that Holy Spirit will guide your every step.

May 14

No fear

God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of self-control. (2 Timothy 1:7)

Haven't we all been caught up in the web of fear at one time or another these past two months? Fear snuck up on me for a short time as plans were being laid for our son's Martin's wedding, which is taking place in a church this Saturday on the original date with ten in attendance (others may Zoom in).

But as it became better known how easily the coronavirus is transmitted through aerosols, I became increasingly fearful -- not for myself but for my husband, who checks pretty much all the boxes in the high-risk category. I was shocked to observe the paralysis of fear creeping up on me. "This isn't like me," I thought. Of course we would still go, but a little voice on my left shoulder kept harping at me: Do nothing. Go nowhere. Then you'll be safe.

Then it hit me one morning as pale green leaves sparkled in the sun: Living this way is not living at all. I raised my arms to God. Let me be like that dancing leaf!

This verse from 2 Timothy reminds us that God has called us to be bold disciples. God gives us the power to share Jesus' love in words and actions, and the self-control to center our lives in Christ and to care for others through safe practices. These gifts of power, love, and self-control free us to live fully as the new creations in Christ who we became at our baptism.

Paul wrote this letter to Timothy from his prison cell in Rome knowing that his execution was imminent. "I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time for my departure has

come," he says a few chapters later. Paul is eager for Timothy to know that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a cosmic "NO" to the fear of death, which drives every other form of fear that exists. If you let fear control you, death wins. Instead, take hold of the abundance that Jesus brings and let your life be a cosmic "YES."

May 13

Restore my life

I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. (Psalm 143:6)

In our journey of faith there will be times when we feel dried up: our energy gone, our spirit dull, our hope evaporated. The demands of this time may be pushing some of us toward that. We keep veering from despair to hope and back again. Look to the left and you read that we are almost at our benchmarks for reopening. Look to the right and you read that the worst is yet to come. I myself have been feeling weighed down, and finally realized I am grieving--grieving the loss of so much that we loved in life that, in the blink of an eye, has been stripped away. We are all in this together in loss as well as in virtual community.

Grief is isolating, and so is thirst. "Therefore my spirit faints within me," the psalmist cries out in verses just preceding. "My heart within me is appalled." (Psalm 143:4)

But by verse 6 the psalmist has made the life-restoring move: "I stretch out my hands." When we find ourselves on the verge of desolation, let us do the same. Do it visibly. Reach out to God and pray aloud for the spiritual nourishment that God alone can provide, the "spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Do it on your walks as I do (my dog always turns his head, thinking I'm talking to him). All we need do is ask. For only God can restore our life--not returning it to what it was before, but fashioning it into something new. A new creation, full of surprise and the joy of discovery.

What if we cannot physically come back together in the church building for an indefinite time? Here is the good news: We will not die of thirst. We will stretch out our hands, we will lift our cry, and God will make of us something new. Peace be with you - Pastor Raabe

May 12, 2020

Spring Symphony

*Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;
...let the field be joyful and all that is therein.
Then shall the trees of the wood shout for joy. (Psalm 96:11-12)*

For many of us, the daily outdoor walk (or two, or three, or four) is a saving grace. What a multi-dimensional tapestry of life we find around us! No longer does ice crackle merrily under our feet.

Now we are strolling, like Dorothy in Oz, through a symphonic spectacle. The tulips gaily open their voices to the sky in swaths of colorful harmony. The flowering trees burst into joyful songs and shout forth fresh scents. The gently leafing trees hum along in the background. Each day is freshly composed by the Author of Creation. "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19)

What has become of our songs? We must not let them be silenced, the looming restriction on congregational singing aside. The cultural fallacy of our age is that human beings think they are set apart from the created order. We lord it over creation. We raze mountains, plunder fields, cut down trees. Yet we were fashioned by the same God. We are composed of the same molecules through which the wind sweeps. We come from the same dust and return to the same dust. We cry, "Restore us, O God." How? By recalling that we are the same stuff of which the cosmos is made, and that we are all in it together.

As you find yourself outside in these warming days, tune your heart to the joy around you. Experience your very being as an instrument sounding in the symphony of spring. "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Hallelujah!" (Psalm 150:6)

May 11, 2020

Shine on Us

*Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.*
(Psalm 80:3)

In this soaringly lyrical psalm, the singer laments that God has abandoned God's own people over their lack of faithfulness. The vine that God had planted in the rich garden soil is shriveling up for lack of nutrients, and so from within the midst of the people this fervent prayer is lifted.

In the traditional blessing at the end of the service, which comes from the book of Deuteronomy, we hear: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord's face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace."

What does it mean for the Lord's face to shine on us? No one has ever seen the face of God, but we might imagine it to be even more blindingly brilliant than the transfigured Jesus, a radiant energy infinitely more powerful than the sun. How we long for God's face to shine on us in these long days until the fullness of life can begin to resume! Like the psalmist, let us pray from within our rooms for God's face to shine on us and fill us with the life-force we need to sustain us through this time.

"Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness."