

Lent 3A. March 15, 2020. Love in the Time of covid19.
Ex. 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

I heard it said this week, as churches across the country suspended in-person worship, that Christians are willing to die for the chance to gather together in God's name to pray, but we cannot be willing to kill to do the same. I think that names the terrible quandary we people of faith find ourselves in. In a time of fear and crisis we long to be together, to touch, to embrace. and that is precisely what we must not do.

I have been saying that we can be the church without coming to church, that while in-person worship and meetings are suspended, being the church is not. Those are embarrassingly catchy phrases, I think, but it isn't immediately clear what their content might be. Unfortunately, the first part of that content really is staying home. You all know you're supposed to be doing that by now, and "flattening the curve" isn't a phrase born out of the Christian tradition. But care for the most vulnerable, at sacrifice to the self, certainly is. And that is why we are staying home even if we personally don't seem to be at terrible risk: as nothing less than a gallant act of love for those who are more at risk. Binge-watching Netflix, if you can, will save lives and is your Christian duty.

Of course not everyone can stay home. Many folks can't afford to miss work and still others work on the frontlines of this pandemic: the medical field, Costco, and Trader Joe's. To all of you who work while others sequester, you are in our prayers and we know that our lives depend on each others' toil.

Being the church starts right now by not coming to church, or going anywhere else if we can. But it doesn't end there. In times of plague and pandemic, Christians are among those who do not stop caring for others. This may not mean literally binding wounds, but it does mean making lots of phone calls. It means hosting the emergency homeless shelter in as sanitary a way as possible. It means continuing to staff the food pantry. And it means sharing supplies and even going shopping for those who can't. Your neighbor with kids and your neighbor who is within the most at risk demographics needs you to call and offer to run errands. And if you feel alone, frightened, isolated, close to despair--the best thing you can do is just call to check in with someone you're worried about.

When we are forced to self-isolate, we especially need reminders that we are not alone. It is the trouble that God's people ran into in our first reading this morning, lost in the wilderness. The narrator has the people grumbling and quarrelling: there's no water, there's no hand sanitizer, there's no toilet paper. At the end of the reading, Moses goes past the symptoms to name the real question of the people of Israel: "Is the LORD among us or not?" It's a question that won't stop coming, that lies down deep behind all kinds of surface grumblings and quarrellings in hard times. If we aren't asking it yet, we will be soon. And the answer of course is yes, the LORD is with us, even when the times are as hard as they can get. It is not the case that we need God to get here. God is already here, in the hospitals and the grocery stores and the overcrowded living rooms and the empty kitchens and not-empty enough streets and the morgues. What we need is

reminders of God's constant patient loving presence. We have to give those reminders to each other. When we call each other over the next few weeks, when we find small ways still to love without touch, we are of course saying "I am here" but we are also quietly gently showing that God is here, too.

Times are hard and I think they'll get harder. It makes me especially grateful for the bracing realism of Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul says, "We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." This has the potential to get gross, but it won't if we're careful. God is with us, as God was with Paul. But that doesn't prevent our suffering. There's a realism here that I think is helpful. God's love does not prevent us from suffering; God's love gives us reason to hope even in our suffering. The world is suffering. Some of us are suffering. But Christians are a people who suffer with hope. That hope is not based on the absence of pain or boredom or anxiety or on the presence of toilet paper. It is based on the firmest rock we know: the love of God that has been poured into our hearts. We are going to suffer, from loneliness or from sickness or from the anxiety and hunger that come from lost wages or from the maddening constant presence of our greatest blessings while the schools are closed. But we will suffer with the hope that is born of the love of God.

I think that's right, even though I'm not exactly sure what it means. I think that I have before suffered with hope, but I don't know how to describe it. I'm hoping that's okay. And I base that hope on our gospel reading today, since apparently I'm doing a full tour of the readings. The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at the well, he tells her that he is the Messiah, and then she rushes into the city and says "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" She is impressed by the wrong things, her proclamation is imperfect and at least half made of doubt. And it is still the proclamation that brings life to the city. Jesus abides with them for two days and many accept the living water that he gives.

We don't know how to be the church that cannot gather. We don't know how to love without touch. We don't know how to suffer with hope or how to bring that hope to the world when we ourselves have so many doubts. And that's okay. Neither did the Samaritan woman. There is so much now that we cannot do. But it is not finally our job to save the world or really even to know how to do very much. Our job is to love and to hope as best we can, by staying home and making phone calls and going to work if we have to and praying and helping where we can. We do this imperfectly and with doubt. And God is here all along, saving the hurting world. Amen.