

Hope and Truth in the Midst of Covid-19

Psalm 10:1-18; Romans 8:35-39

Who of us is not consumed by the new reality of the COVID-19 pandemic? Schools cancelled, gatherings prohibited, food and product shortages, every sniffle examined for symptomatology, each ache raising anxiety, tempers shortened, and long stretches of unstructured time with no place to go. Uncertainty and fear characterize this moment.

The sermon I had planned for today has been tossed aside in favor of this one. I think you would have preferred the one you are not hearing. In preparing for this sermon and weighing a message to communicate, I was torn between two very basic human needs: hope and truth. The needs of hope and truth resonate with, and are particularly suited for, communities of faith in this moment of time. I believe you cannot have one without the other. Hope and truth are intimately and inextricably connected. Rosy predictions of America being spared the ravages of an epidemic have left us unprepared and vulnerable. When statements are made unrelated to truth, we are given false hope. You and I don't need more of that in the guise of religion.

The values we have pursued and extolled for decades we find hollow in the present moment: political power at the highest levels of government, fame and celebrity, sports stars and the lifestyles of the super-rich. None provides protection or salvation in this moment. The superheroes of today are the ones who have always been here, but we ignored:

- care givers and nurses,

- technicians and researchers in medicine and in technology,
- school teachers and workers on production lines,
- custodians and sextons cleaning streets and businesses and homes,
- moms and dads, and caring neighbors,
- cashiers at grocery stores and pharmacies,
- restaurant cooks and staff preparing food.

Up until this moment we have showered the wrong people with too many accolades while underpaying those who make our world work. The Church is at fault as much as anyone. Now human connection and caring and sacrifice and hard work and knowledge and love have taken center stage. This pandemic has laid us bare and tossed our shiny but worthless values into a crumbled heap.

Before the advent of the Coronavirus, every person I know had a plateful of challenges and stressors and desperations. The pandemic only complicates them: aging parents who need assistance, chronically ill children or spouses, meeting payroll deadlines, making tuition and housing payments, putting food on the table for kids, initiating new business ventures or executing business plans for the next six months, finding brief vacation respites from the unrelenting pressures of life.

And now add to all of that the Coronavirus, with its complications and its demands and its uncertainties and its limiting of how life can be conducted. This acute crisis overlays the chronic and long-suffering concerns all of us had prior to its arrival.

I don't know about you, but I am tired and worn out, and this nightmare has just begun. Do we have the resilience and patience and stamina for the long haul? I turn to the scriptures for help and to listen. Maybe there I will find hope and encouragement, maybe some light will shine upon the shadowed path of the present moment.

And in the voice of the psalmist in Ps 10, we hear these words: "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" That is not happy talk, it is not the language of positive thinking. Can't I find something more comforting? Instead I hear in those words the same desperation I feel.

And shockingly, its message does not distress me. Perhaps I am too overwhelmed to be disquieted. I find comfort in the words. A person of faith from millennia past knew my experience and in the face of his or her own desperation felt no need to reach for easy reassurance or glib words or cheap grace in the midst of tragedy.

Easy assurances that "eventually all will be okay" do not sit well. In the 14th Century, "all will be okay" was true about the Black Plague. And 7 years after its beginning, indeed the plague did subside. We would rather not know that it left 50 million dead in its path of destruction.

Words intoned by the pious, "Fear not," glibly offered because the speaker is in a state of denial, or their circumstances are decidedly different than yours and mine: they have all the

resources in the world available to them. If they knew the reality in which many of us live, with jobs lost and bills to pay and bank accounts empty and health insurance gone, they would be afraid.

Please do not offer cheap grace to us in a time of crisis. It only makes us wary of the sources from which it comes.

For thirteen verses the psalmist vents his spleen at adversity and unfairness and injustice. Could the psalmist not sum it up in two verses instead? Move to hope and resolution for God's sake! But for God's sake and ours the psalmist will not.

For 400 years, the children of Israel endured increasing oppression in Egypt. For 40 years, they wandered in the wilderness. For 70 years they existed in exile. For generations they waited for the Messiah to appear. In our attention-shortened, media driven world, what do you and I know about resilience and patience and stamina? If we want to learn about such things, we should turn to communities of color with their deep and long experience, who in extended periods of trouble have learned love and forgiveness and keeping on in the face of injustice and prejudice and depravation. Yet today those same communities from which we should learn will more likely be demonized and scapegoated as the reason for our troubles.

For the psalmist, only after the hard realities are faced and the doubts are aired and the truly guilty are fingered does complaint give way to hope. Be sure that a reckoning will finally come.

Only then is certainty expressed that God does indeed see and God no longer hides, and when God sees, salvation will come and healing will flow and injustice will be righted and good will prevail.

Yet the church remains shortsighted. Already I hear leaders in faith communities bemoaning the loss of Holy Week worship and Easter celebrations. I have spoken similar words. Now pastors hope-against-hope that Christmas will not be interrupted this year. We sound more like retailers desperately trying to salvage our bottom line than people of faith preparing to join the battle against this pandemic.

The present reality presses us for a better hope based on the truth. Hope and truth are in this moment in time, not some unknown time in the future but now when we embody the love of God. Hope and truth are reflected today when our actions embody life in the face of death. People of God, we must not wait four weeks to live into the reality of the Easter proclamation that Jesus lives and brings us life. People of God, we must not wait until December for the incarnation of Jesus to take form in the way we respond today. Either today is our Christmas incarnation, and today is our Easter dawn, when faith encounters our world in its present crisis, or our faith is as hollow as the values that guided us astray.

And many are not waiting. Tables are being set up in streets with groceries for people to take. Restaurants in many towns are providing lunch for every cancelled school day of the week, to any child regardless of income. Bars and diners are providing meals for out-of-work hospitality workers. Breweries are now

making hand sanitizer. The auto industry is looking to retool production lines to manufacture ventilators. Small businesses and groups and individuals are sewing surgical masks for health care workers and hospitals.

People at Grosse Pointe Memorial are stepping up. They are volunteering to check on the isolated, to provide care and groceries to those quarantined or sick. Some of our members plan to take any governmental funds that they may receive and direct it to others in dire financial situations. Others are organizing grocery and food distribution. Some are examining ways to assist the homeless and hungry in our community.

Their actions are tied directly to the hope and truth demanded by the reality of this moment in time. They are the incarnation of Christ in this world now, they are life overcoming the forces of death today. They are not thinking of Easter and Christmas in the future. No, they are being Easter and Christmas today.

And when I see hope and truth marshalled together in such a fashion, I am assured that God sees, and healing and salvation will come to the orphan and widow, and to all God's people, and to this world that God holds precious and loves.

As we move through this time, people will find many avenues of healing and salvation to utilize. We will rediscover the well-worn paths of old that have lifted and sustained the human spirit: music and song, poetry and all forms of writing, art and dance, nature and its majesty. We must resist dividing the human family into squabbling camps, we must stay unified together.

In all of this, hope and truth will lead us to experience salvation in this difficult time.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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