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Thanks, Wendy!

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“Pandemic of Peace”

John 14:25-27

March 22, 2020

We are living in anxious times. The future unknown, we look to God and the Scriptures for comfort. Jesus sensed the anxiety that his followers would feel as he prepared to leave them. Listen and be comforted in these tender words from Jesus, from John’s gospel the 14th Chapter, beginning with the 25th verse. Hear what the Spirit is whispering in your ear:

I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

If you happened to miss it, Saint Patrick's Day was earlier this week. It's understandable if you overlooked it this year, with stocking up on what groceries and supplies that can be found and preparing to "shelter-in-place" Usually, it's a day to celebrate being Irish, eating corned beef and cabbage, and drinking beer or other Irish adult beverages. The story of Patrick and the history – or lack thereof – is fascinating. Usually, there are parades and parties and festivities.

Not this year. Except for the Spring Break revelers in Florida, events have been cancelled all over our country and world in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic. New information and statistics are coming out rapidly, even what feels like hourly. People are afraid and anxious.

John's Gospel was probably written in Ephesus during the last decade of the first century or early into the second century. During this time, Jesus Followers are being evicted from the synagogue and establishing house churches. The house churches are keeping clear boundaries separating them from both the Jewish synagogue and the Roman temples in Ephesus. Conflict, as we know, can sharpen differences between groups who believe they have the direct pipeline to God. As well, conflict can motivate groups to clarify their identity, values and purpose. In the guise of answering his disciples' questions, John uses Jesus' voice to address the new Christian house churches. John's community is a work in progress – much like our virtual community-our new Zoom church- is for us.

In the context of today's scripture reading, Jesus' disciples are anxious and afraid. Jesus has been talking more and more about *leaving* them. His statements and actions have seemed more confusing and cryptic to the disciples – and that's only *added* to their anxiety. This is a natural reaction, I think. Children want to be reassured when parents leave that Mommy and Daddy will be back soon. Our aging parents often get anxious and want to know when we will return to comfort and care for them. Even our animals have separation anxiety. Despite reassurances that we will "be right back," they know you are lying, and you know not to look into their indicting eyes.

As human beings, we tend to react to anxiety and separation in one of two ways: we either worry about what *may* happen *or* we minimize, believing nothing will happen that can be *that* bad. It's normal to be concerned when something new occurs to disrupt our routines and we don't have enough information and

knowledge about what may come next. This is the reaction of the disciples as Jesus moves ever closer to Jerusalem. And it's our reaction in this time of pandemic.

I'm not ashamed to say that I'm experiencing anxiousness, sadness, uncertainty, and even at times, fear. After all, I've never pastored during a pandemic! And just when I think I have a handle on a new balance point, something else happens and I lose it.

Chris has a favorite saying that, "there's no history in the jungle." He had a friend in the early 2000s, a world-renowned wildlife artist. Simon Coombs was an Englishman who made his home in Kenya. He lived in the wilds of Africa practically his whole life. Simon knew well to always take a firearm with him when he went for his daily walks outside his compound into the neighboring wildlife reserve. Cape buffaloes are the deadliest of predators where he lived—not lions, not snakes, not wild boars. Cape buffaloes are mean, nasty creatures and they take no prisoners.

On December 12, 2004 when his sister-in-law was visiting, Simon took her and his wife out for a stroll through the preserve at dusk. He forgot to carry his firearm. That was Simon's last day on earth, gored to death he was by yes, a cape buffalo. There is *no* history in the jungle—one day's experience is no guarantee of the next. That's what it feels like to us now in the midst of this pandemic, Good Lord Jesus Have Mercy. We're truly living in an unprecedented time. Sure, there have been outbreaks of disease in this last century: The Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 infected one third of the world's population at the time and killed 1 out of every 10 people—about 50 million souls—before it died out in the summer of 1919.

Polio was an ancient disease that resurged in the 1940s, paralyzing or killing over a half million persons a year worldwide until Jonas Salk developed a successful vaccine in 1952. SARS and MERS—other coronavirus respiratory epidemics of 2003 and 2012, the African-based Ebola Virus, and HIV/AIDS, to name just a few. Now this pandemic, another coronavirus that causes the respiratory disease Covid-19, is making its way hurriedly throughout the world, with heavy concentrations in China, Europe, Iran, and now the United States.

The New York Times reported this weekend that the disease is currently reported in over 250,000 people in 150 countries, with over 10,000 fatalities. We now know it is just getting started here in our backyard. And we are a combination of anxious, disbelieving, angry, terrified, and disrupted people.

Discouraging people to gather is devastating to small business, schools, non-profits and churches, among others. We've seen the stock market wildly run like a roller coaster in a parking lot carnival and many are concerned not just about keeping their businesses open, but also about hourly employees who may not have a job and no way to pay their bills... the many who now have children home from school and no child care for working parents – sure, they probably made plans for Spring Break, but now it seems children and teens will be home indefinitely in many areas. The homeless and those who are most vulnerable to disease are at risk in ways we can't imagine.

Panic seems to be the response of many otherwise good and ethical people. We've seen them clearing grocery shelves of toilet paper, bleach, hand sanitizer, as well as food staples. Retailers are even limiting the amounts of some items that people can purchase, so *everyone* will have enough. While store shelves are often stripped bare by some people, so many others are doing their best to be helpful in this time of anxiety. This week when I sent a churchwide text checking in with everyone, someone was at Sam's and offered to pick up anything anyone needed. The reply came – *diapers!* – and those were purchased and delivered. Neighbors being neighbors. The Church being the Church. The heart of Jesus lived out in simple, yet profound ways.

Where is the peace in the midst of the panic and fear? When each hour seems to bring more bad news, how do we find a sense of calm and faith and hope? While I have no easy answers, I know what I *do* believe.

This *isn't* the first time that disease has hampered people's plans. I cancelled short trips that I'd planned over the next few months, and I know many others who've done the same out of an abundance of caution. This *isn't* the first time there has been economic uncertainty in the face of a rapidly moving virus. This *isn't* the first-time human beings have been faced with deep fear and uncertainty.

In all those times, God's love has been present. We know it because we experience it in the welcome phone call, in the offer to shovel snow, in people of the church banding together to bring us all into this new and unfamiliar virtual worship space. In every moment of every pandemic, natural disaster, war, or economic collapse – *in every situation* – God's been there.

Bette Midler sings about God watching us from a distance. I see this two ways:

First, this is not God's judgment on the people of the world. The God I believe in just doesn't do that sort of thing. All loving God-Alive wants us to live only good stories. I tell you as your pastor—and I want you to believe me-- that any charlatan who preaches to you otherwise doesn't really know or speak for God. These rantings are the toxic dis-allusions of religious celebrities who love to be on center-stage, who are addicted and intoxicated by their wealth and narcissistic power. Do not listen to them.

Second, God may seem really distant right now in our angst and isolation, but I feel God really close by us all. God's Holy Spirit is seen at work in every medical professional, every scientist working on a vaccine or cure, in every retail worker trying to be helpful, in every helper of every kind that's reaching out to alleviate fear, to offer hope, and to give the best they have to offer.

Each of us has different ways of coping. I listen to music that brings comfort and peace to my soul such as the music Peggy made for us today. I pray, I meditate, I read, I sit 6 feet away, but near at heart to my Beloved, and I take walks with our dog Kona, who is loving that mom and dad don't ever leave him now. Picking up the phone and calling people we love is a good thing to do when we're so isolated. Sending e-mails, or cards and notes in the mail work as well. We can find new ways to be connected and creative ways to celebrate life events.

I don't know how all "this" will work out. I do know that our lives will be different for the next several weeks, perhaps even months. I also know that God is at work in each of us, calling us to service in ways we have not served before, in faith secure in the promise that we are *never* alone – for *God is with us always*. It is a time of high anxiety, to be sure, but with anxiety comes heightened awareness, the opportunity for a pandemic-- of peace and goodwill.

May it Be So.