

Saint Thomas' Church
Lent III
March 15, 2020
rmcneely+

Because thou hast made the Lord
(which is my refuge even the Most High,)
Thy habitation;
There shall no evil befall thee
Neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling

Two verses of the psalm that featured in the Gospel that opened this Season of Lent, seem appropriate today.

A very large group of people were camped out
In an isolated desert valley
Beyond roads
Beyond communication with the greater world
Beyond any assistance
No one knew they were there
They were on their own.
And what had begun as a routine day
Had turned horrific.
People were suddenly dying.
The only symptom was a fiery and painful welt
The cause seemed environmental
But it came from everywhere
There was no escape but
people were dying
not long after showing symptoms.
The physicians could do nothing.
There was no cure.
They did not know how it selected its victims
Or who would be next.
And they were very much afraid.
All kinds of false quackery consumed what hope they had.

Rumor preceded exaggeration and panic took hold of them.

One man

A leader of men
A devout man of God
Came forward.

He had an idea that he said came from God.

He said: make a representation of a snake

Put it atop a long pole
Raise it up for all to see
And those who saw it would be spared.

It was done

And it was as the man had said;
All who looked upon what would later be called the caduceus
Were spared
and the crisis ended.

The man's name was Moses.

You can read about it in his book: Numbers chapter 21.

He wrote a song about it

You can read that too. It's the 91st psalm.
In it, you might recognize the verses
that opened this sermon today.

I went to our local Costco last week for my routine run

But the people had departed from their usual courtesy
And store ethic.

They seemed insecure, impatient and some even angry
Selfish

Not quite a panic, but you could sense a fear about them.

And with it, a lack of love. Christian Love.

I was there at the usual time, when the store was less crowded

But that day there were so many people entering the store
 That it was difficult to break through the stream of carts and
 shoppers to get to the cart storage and enter the store.
 Inside a growing line had formed for the people seeking toilet
 paper.

A line that took up half the store
 With store employees regulating the line
 And dealing with the flare-ups caused by people who sought
 to jump the line.
 Not quite a full blown panic
 But you could sense that people were afraid.

Store shelves are emptying,
 something the rest of world knows routinely
 But we do not.

Wall Street investors are fearful of a business downturn
 As factories are short staffed
 Especially in China
 And they have sold their securities at bargain prices
 Driving down the Dow to levels of a year ago.

In an effort to mitigate the spread of the virus,
 Government has discouraged large gatherings of people
 Schools have recessed
 Sporting events and large concerts have been canceled
 And pundits fill the airwaves with dire prophecies
 Based on a dearth of actual clinical data

Our political leaders have joined the fray
 seemingly in hopes of personal gain
 And the detriment of their opposites in this election year.

We are distancing ourselves from each other
 And some of us from St Thomas' are hold up in their homes
 Norm and Nikki are in quarantine at Travis AFB
 Refugees from the Grand Princess

Which remains docked at the Port of Oakland
and has become a symbol of the virus.

We have been gripped in the fear of what is unknown about this
latest virus from China.

All this is foreign to us.

We, the descendents of the World War II generation
Never knew of the sacrifices of our fathers and mothers
Grand fathers and grand mothers.

Most of us have lived in a beneficent bubble
of plenty,
of convenience.

For the most part our needs have all be met

Life has been good

And we know nothing of sacrifice.

Certainly not the sacrifice of our WWII ancestors.

Can it be said that for us ease and convenience
has been the opiate of the Masses?

So when we see the empty shelves, the lines for toilet paper;
it is foreign,
Startling,
Shocking,
alarming even.

But that is the condition that our World War II ancestors faced
every day. And much of the world sees it every day now.

Is it any wonder that we become fearful?

Can we begin to understand the fiery welts erupting on the
Children of Israel as they wandered the desert?

Before we became fearful
We lost our Faith

And then our Hope.
 Lost our faith in God, that He would protect us.
 Lost our hope, that certainty and expectancy for our lives.
 Lost the Christian Love which fuels the three theological virtues”
 Faith, Hope and Charity.
 And then we become fearful.

Fear can be a good thing for us.
 But when it overrides rational judgment and becomes all
 consuming, we suffer.

So what is the cure,
 The antidote to irrational fear?
 Where to we go for the restoration of our faith and hope?

May I refer you to the Gospel for today:
 The parable or some would say the allegory of the strong man who
 keepeth his palace trusting his armor and the stronger man who
 overcomes him.

The strong man has faith in himself
 His arms
 His armor
 His fortress
 And believes that his solitary efforts are enough to protect him
 from the world.
 To keep his all too precious goods in peace.
 His solitary efforts are there to protect his goods
 His possessions
 Which are the object of his defenses.
 His almighty worldly goods.
 He is perhaps ignorant of a greater man
 A stronger man

With the power to overcome all worldly measures.
 That stronger man in the parable is Jesus, the Christ.
 Who is greater than all human defenses
 Who is concerned not with things, and goods
 But hearts and souls.
 For His is the kingdom, the power and the glory
 Forever and ever.

We can put all our faith in ourselves
 Our solitary works and social distancing
 Our talents
 Our ambitions
 Our worldly goods.
 We can let our hope reside in our own solitary efforts
 We can worship ourselves as a substitute redeemer
 We can put our entire faith and hope in our hand sanitizer
 But even with all our CDC recommendations
 We are still fearful.
 The antidote to fear is not more hand sanitizer
 It is our faith in God
 our prayers for His protection.
 And our hope and expectancy of life with Him.

In conclusion, may I also refer you to Moses' song; the 91st psalm;
 Who after all the trials and tribulation
 Threats to his very existence
 throughout 40 years, half a lifetime
 Wandering in the Sinai desert
 Gave us this:

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High
 Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the Lord
 He is my refuge and my fortress
 My God
 In Him will I trust.
Surely He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler
 And from the noisome pestilence.
He shall cover thee with His feathers
 and under His wings shalt thou trust
 His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.
Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night
 Nor the arrow that flieth by day.
Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness
 Nor the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
A thousand shall fall at thy side
 And ten thousand at thy right hand
 But it shall not come nigh thee.
Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the
wicked.
Because thou has made the Lord which is my refuge
 Even the Most High

thy habitation.
There, shall no evil befall thee,
Neither shall any plague come nigh they dwelling.
For He shall give his angels charge over thee,
To keep thee in all thy ways.
They shall bear thee up in their hands,
Lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.”

Moses concludes with God’s reply:

“Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder
The young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.
Because he hath set his love upon me,
Therefore will I deliver him.
I will set him on high
Because he hath known My name.
He shall call upon me,
And I will answer him
I will be with him in trouble
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life will I satisfy him
And show him my salvation.”

This virus is contagious
Fear, panic and hysteria are too.

But so is Faith, Hope and Love.

Let us chose wisely.