



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Peter Thompson, *Associate Rector for Formation & Liturgy*

Fighting in Unison

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 15, 2020

The Third Sunday in Lent

Based on Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-26, 39-42

Let us pray.

Savior of the world, save us. By your cross and passion you have redeemed us. Help us, we humbly beseech you, our God. Amen.¹

A little under two weeks ago, the Director-General of the World Health Organization presided over a daily press briefing at the organization's headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. For weeks, he and his colleagues had been updating the public on the concerning spread of what is now called coronavirus disease (COVID-19). They had watched the virus grow from small clusters of cases in the Hubei province of China to a global crisis, with almost 90,000 people infected in 65 countries and over 3,000 deaths. For forty-five minutes that day, WHO officials offered a calm but honest evaluation of the current situation and urged the world to do more to prevent it from getting worse. "We are in uncharted territory," the Director General, Dr. Tedros, remarked. "We have never before seen a respiratory pathogen that is capable of community transmission, but which can also be contained with the right measures...this is not a one-way street. We can push this virus back." He then addressed the countries of the world directly: "Your actions now will determine the course of the outbreak...there is no choice [but to] act now."²

Before concluding their briefing, the WHO officials took a question by phone from a journalist in Hong Kong. The journalist was seeking comment about the ethnic hatred and discrimination that had arisen worldwide in the face of the new virus. Dr. Tedros' response was surprising and blunt. "Stigma," he said, "to be honest, is more dangerous than the virus itself. Let's really underline that," he continued. "Stigma is the most dangerous enemy...it is more [dangerous] than the virus itself."

There is no doubt that Dr. Tedros knew how dangerous the virus was. In fact, over a month before that moment, in late January—before most Americans had even heard of a coronavirus—the WHO had declared COVID-19 "a public health emergency of international concern." Dr. Tedros' familiarity with the virus, and with the horrifying effects it was capable of, made his statement about stigma all the more remarkable. Even as he worked to defeat a terrifying and almost unprecedented disease—perhaps because he was working to defeat that terrifying and almost unprecedented disease—Dr. Tedros was worried more about social divisions than about physical health. Our insistence on turning against one another, he claimed, was more troubling than the illness that was taking us over.

¹ Antiphon for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. This antiphon is also often used in "Ministration to the Sick" services.

² "Live from WHO HQ - Daily Press Briefing on COVID-19—Coronavirus 02MARCH2020."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1itQoD2LtU>.

The circumstances in which we are gathering this morning are unusual, to say the least. I stare out now over an empty nave where typically at this time more than two hundred people are sitting. The institutions of this city and this country have shut down to an extraordinary extent: museums and churches have closed their doors; corporations have sent their employees home; the lights of Broadway are off. Financial markets have plummeted; travel both domestic and international has dramatically decreased; many children and college students aren't going back to school for weeks. None of us knows what will happen next—whether we, too, will get sick; whether we will pass on the virus to others.

For years, I have heard sermons that ridiculed the fickle, small-minded Israelites for their pettiness and lack of faith as they traveled in the wilderness. I may have given one or two of those sermons myself. But on this morning the plight the Israelites confront on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land is far more relatable to me. The Israelites' whole lives had been completely upended when they left Egypt; they did not know what their future would hold; lacking adequate water—a resource they needed to stay alive—their bodily health was at real risk. Of course they asked those age-old questions, questions we are now asking, too: “Where is God in all of this? How could a benevolent deity allow so many innocent people to suffer? Why doesn't God help us? Is God among us or not?”

Into their questions and into ours, God comes, not with all the answers, not to wave a magic wand, not to instantly satisfy all our requests, but to make a request of us. God does give the Israelites water—the resource they need to survive—but he gives them that water through a human being named Moses. Moses must act—he must strike a rock with his staff—in order for the Israelites to keep living. Jesus, for his part, opens his encounter with the Samaritan woman by asking her for a drink. He seems to be telling her that she has the ability to provide her fellow human beings with water, the very instrument of life, that she has the power to ensure that others live.

It matters that Jesus asks for something as essential as water from a Samaritan woman, from the ultimate outsider—from a person disparaged and disregarded because of her gender, her ethnicity, her religion, and her sexual activity. Daring to make such an important request of this person in spite of the hate she provokes, Jesus shows us that our mutual survival depends on those we're most likely to forget and those we'd most prefer to do without. We rely on one another, whether we like it or not—and how we behave towards each other will help determine whether any of us will continue to live.

The past few weeks have stripped away any illusions we might have had about our identities as autonomous individuals, about our abilities to determine our own fates. We have been reminded over and over again of the interconnected nature of our lives: of how vulnerable we are to problems that originate thousands of miles away, of how reliant we are on the policies determined by our leaders, of how dependent our own health is on the health of others. It's a lot easier to care about the wellbeing of the person sitting next to you on the subway or at church when you realize that person could infect you with a potentially deadly disease. By staying home for worship today, you are not only taking a step towards protecting yourselves; you are also showing compassion for society-at-large; you are doing your part to slow the spread of the virus and minimize its impact for everyone.

We don't yet know how long this will last. The weeks and maybe months we have in store will provide us all with many opportunities to help others: by reaching out to the lonely, by addressing the basic needs of those most at risk, or simply by staying at home. The more we recognize how intertwined our fates are and the greater willingness we show to exercise compassion and consideration for others, the better off we'll be when all this ends.

Dr. Tedros, the Director General of the WHO, recalled that when he was a child he heard someone ask the question, “When [will] human beings stand as one?” “When we have a common enemy from another planet,” came the response. As he sat in Geneva earlier this month reflecting on the potential trajectories

of a new disease, Dr. Tedros thought back to this moment from so many years ago. Why should we wait for an enemy from another planet, he wondered, when we have a common enemy right in front of us, one that is right now affecting us all? “We need to fight,” he concluded, “in unison.”

Cameron Bellm is a blogger and mom who lives in King County, Washington, the region of the U.S. that has been the hardest hit over the past few weeks. A few days ago, she posted on her social media accounts the prayer she composed as she contemplated both the minor inconveniences and the major struggles precipitated by the current crisis. “I’ve been trying to take a step back,” she explained, “and consider all the ways [this situation] is affecting people, beyond the obvious disruptions of work and travel. We have a very human instinct to draw into ourselves when threatened, to claw madly for the last bottle of hand sanitizer. In my own effort to overcome that instinct, I wrote this prayer for us.”³ May the prayer she scrawled out with a sharpie while sitting on her kitchen floor be our prayer as well as we face the terror, the frustration, and the uncertainty ahead.

Prayer for a Pandemic

May we who are merely inconvenienced
Remember those whose lives are at stake.
May we who have no risk factors
Remember those most vulnerable.
May we who have the luxury of working from home
Remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.
May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close
Remember those who have no options.
May we who have to cancel our trips
Remember those that have no safe place to go.
May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market
Remember those who have no margin at all.
May we who settle in for a quarantine at home
Remember those who have no home.
As fear grips our country,
let us choose love.
During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,
Let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors.⁴
Amen.

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³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9iC8UbFGMz/>.

⁴ Cameron Bellm, “Prayer for a Pandemic,” <http://krugthethinker.com/2020/03/prayer-for-a-pandemic/>.