

Lent 4 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

March 14, 2021

(using the propers for Lent 5 B)

John 12:20-33; Jeremiah 31:31-34

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Friends:

January 21 was the anniversary of the first confirmed coronavirus case in our country. February 28 was the anniversary of the first time that we knew of an American death due to coronavirus. But for most of us, it was one year ago this week that our lives changed. It was one year ago this week that what was a virus from a place called Wuhan became real. We suddenly realized that this was a personal threat that would make drastic changes to our society and to our lives.

One year ago, on March 13, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency and banned most non-US citizens from traveling to this country. On March 12, we at Dove of Peace cancelled choir rehearsal, and on March 14, we cancelled worship scheduled for the next day, March 15. On March 17, the Las Vegas strip was closed and locked up. But for many Americans, it was Wednesday, March 11, when the National Basketball Association halted its season— the same day that the actor Tom Hanks and his wife tested positive— that was when they knew that coronavirus was going to drastically change our lives.

The journey has been much longer and much worse than almost anyone predicted. A year ago, we were told that if we obeyed the guidelines promptly and enforced them in an orderly and systematic way, that if we were willing to pay a very high price up front, then we might keep the deaths in America down to a few tens of thousands. That sounded so incredible at the time. We might be able to keep the deaths down to tens of thousands, and be able to get back to a more normal life by Labor Day. If we pulled together and sacrificed. Best case scenario. But even that seemed impossibly grim, impossibly negative. Impossible.

It seemed impossible to me to close churches. My worst case scenario for church had always been a power failure. With no sound system, no lights, and no air conditioning. During the hottest weeks of summer. That was my worst case scenario for church planning. This idea of shutting church doors for a virus was impossible for me to imagine. The last day of worship happened to have been the second Sunday in Lent. Every pastor I know planned to be open again for Palm Sunday and Easter, four and five weeks later. That's how long we thought the crisis would last. That's all we could imagine.

The word we sometimes use for a shocking change and catastrophic loss is *trauma*. Which is actually an ancient Greek word meaning injury or wound. It occurs once in the Greek New

Testament, the original language. When the good Samaritan rescues the man. “He went to him and bandaged his *wounds*, having poured oil and wine on them.” The Gospel According to Luke 10:34. The man’s wounds were traumas. You can see how the church developed the tradition that Luke was a physician. In the nineteenth century, we came to understand that our inner selves, our souls, could be injured as well, and trauma came to have the additional meaning that it has today.

As is often the case with trauma, the depth of the damage is hidden. And may not reveal itself for a very long time. But out of trauma can come great insight, great beauty, great power, enduring truth. When we read Jeremiah’s words this morning— words which Lutherans read on Reformation Sunday each year— we are reading words from a period of great collective trauma. *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* The lasting words of Jeremiah— more, the lasting words of Isaiah— are borne of the great collective trauma of the Jewish people, the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of its people in 587 BCE. Great insight, great beauty, great power, enduring truth. From trauma. Not only came Isaiah and Jeremiah. Scholars believe it was the calamity of the Babylonian captivity that compelled Jewish scribes to assemble the unorganized scrolls and writings into something more permanent. The dawn of the Old Testament itself. Out of trauma. God’s grace accomplishes great things. Imagine that the entire population of the Jewish people at that time was less than 500,000 souls. Far fewer than the number of deaths in the United States alone due to this pandemic. If that much good can come out of the trauma of ancient Israel, by the grace of God, imagine how much good could come out of our great trauma. By the grace of God.

Our nation now stands on the precipice of turning the page on this pandemic. Once again, many Americans and some of our local leaders are acting spectacularly reckless. Deluding themselves that this is completely behind us and that we can behave as though there is no danger and no worry and no care. Their irresponsibility puts all of us in great jeopardy. Again. Emotional trauma cannot be healed if we pretend that it isn’t real. A child tells an adult about some abuse that they are experiencing at the hands of another adult. How that child’s trauma is addressed— or not addressed— will change the course of many lives. Many are afraid of painful truth or difficult sacrifice. So they delude themselves about reality. Delusion will not lead to healing. Denial will not lead to growth. But God’s grace gives us the strength and the freedom to face painful truth and difficult sacrifice. And in his grace, trauma can actually lead to wondrous things and abundant life. *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* From death God can bring abundant life. *Much fruit.* From trauma God can bring strength and beauty and endurance. But that comes through grace. Not through delusion.

The Church will have to accompany individuals and society in the recovery that lies ahead. It will be the task of years, of a generation. It will be the work of the good Samaritan. To tend to the traumas. To put the injured up onto the donkey. To pay the innkeeper. The Church can and

will carry out this mission. No other institution or organization or community in our nation has the capability for facing collective trauma. For healing it. Not the health care system. Not the government. Not motivational speakers. Not the universities. Not the stock market. Not cable news. Not social media. They can move on. But they cannot heal collective trauma. Only faith communities, grace communities, can do that. Many will come to know the meaning of these words: *Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.* And they will come to know the meaning of those words here. At Dove of Peace Lutheran Church. And in other Christian congregations.

That great trauma of the Jewish people. Which gave us today's first reading and so much more. That great trauma also gave us these words in Isaiah: *"Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance."* [Isaiah 66:10-11] For over a millenium, these words opened the worship service on this day, the fourth Sunday in Lent. Those who grieved the fall of mother Jerusalem would be able to return to her and find nurture. The trauma was healing; the new reality was arriving. These are the great words of promise, which begin in Latin with this word: *Laetare*. In the old days this day was a Sunday of Lent centered on hope and renewal. *Laetare*. ("Rose Sunday" for any old-time Catholics who might have found their way to us.) And when those words of rejoicing were sung or spoken, the people responded: *"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" [Psalm 122:1]*

People ask me when things will return to the way they were. They ask one another the same thing. For a congregation like this one, the important things will always be here. Other things will never be quite the same. My best guess is that we will have some kind of indoor worship service this summer. It may likely be heavily restricted in some ways. And then it will keep getting better. We hope to dedicate our new piano in the fall, when we hope to be truly free to gather around the altar, and to rejoice together in song. Exactly when that will happen no one can say. I am unable to see the future very well. As I said, until recently, my biggest contingency plans concerned Sunday morning without electricity. So I can't say much with certainty. I can say that much will depend on other American citizens and their responsible choices and their irresponsible choices. And the track record so far has not been encouraging. We did not celebrate Mardi Gras this year with jazz. But my current plan is to celebrate All Saints' Sunday, the first Sunday in November, with a jazz celebration. That seems like reasonable planning to me.

Things in church will not change suddenly. And things will not ever be quite the same again. Because we will never be the same again. But God is very definitely at work. Preparing us not just for this summer or this fall. But preparing us for mission for many years to come. And *Laetare* Sunday will be a weekly thing for us all. *I was glad, when they said unto me: we will go in to the house of the Lord.* [Psalm 122:1, Coverdale] *I was glad, when they said unto me: we will go in to the house of the Lord. Amen.*