

A Sermon Not About Coronavirus  
Exodus 17:1-7 (15Mar2020)

Of course I'm going to talk about coronavirus.

I continued hoping I wouldn't need that focus for this sermon. At the start of the week, I was feeling fear was the larger problem, and continuing to talk about it just increased our anxiety. I think that's still some truth. But this became the main thing, and practically the *only* thing we talk about.

I don't like topical sermons, and this won't be one. This isn't *about* coronavirus; it's, as always, about God and you. I also want to say, coronavirus still isn't most important thing. If we could have a fraction of this response to climate change, we'd be addressing a more drastic issue with longer consequences. And yet, even holding that level of concern, I don't make every sermon about climate change (while questioning myself for not doing so). There are many other important issues for us here. But we don't always talk about racism or immigration or hunger, or even about carpet colors and coffee! Some churches try to filter all the messages through sex, but that's not really church, then.

That's because we talk more broadly about life. To say it more clearly, it is not us talking, but God speaking into each and every one of our lives, channeled through the Bible readings, meeting the context of our lives. Today and evidently for some weeks to come, the context into which God is speaking is amid conversations and concerns and planning affected by coronavirus.

So to begin hearing God's word and God's will and God's perspective for our current context, I turned to the reading from Exodus.

When the Israelites were wandering in the desert and parched and longing for relief from their thirst, we may say that their situation is like us looking for help with coronavirus, for a cure, to some sort of solution and relief. They worried for their families and complained of having left behind life in Egypt and were yearning and begging for a return to normalcy and security.

(Little did they know that this was less than three months in to what became 40 years of wilderness wandering.)

While hoping our displacement won't be so long, we too—maybe before this has even really begun—are wishing for normalcy, for March madness basketball games and late night TV and simple grocery shopping and not having to think so much about hand sanitizer and toilet paper. (Sheesh.) For my overwhelmed self, I wish for some other topic of discussion, something else on the news. Instead of this consuming preoccupation, I'd even take other bad news at this point.

We might relate that the Exodus story raced from one crisis to the next. At the end of the previous chapter was when God gave them manna because they were complaining of hunger, and the chapter before that they had just come through the Red Sea and escaped Pharaoh's army.

Coronavirus is affecting us more—maybe both in real danger and in emotional saturation—but we are accustomed to being inundated from one alarming worry to the next. We've got our usual cadre of refugees and gun violence and political campaigns and natural disasters and cancer and all.

Like the people in the Exodus story, we had been griping and complaining, sometimes reasonably and sometimes not. But all of it has taken a back burner, it seems. Of course those other stresses and griefs haven't gone away, they've just been further burdened and overwhelmed.

At least for the meantime (and it seems like these times are mean), we're stuck wandering in the wastelands of COVID-19, finding ourselves isolated (or self-isolated as the redundant term now has it) in a deserted place thirsting for relief.

In this place, we cry out in fear. We cry out in hope. We cry out wishing it were different. We cry out longing just to go back to normalcy. We cry out in anger at life not being what it should. We cry because we're panicked; we've lost our strength and capacity and direction.

I found myself this week in tears as I pedaled,

even though it was a pleasant spring pedal. I found myself crying at my desk, though I had lots of work I wanted to be doing. I found myself crying in the mirror in the morning, even after a good night of sleep. It's just been too much, and constantly too much. It's been my upset, and worry for how you're dealing with it. It's been concern for what will happen within our congregation. It's been trying to keep up with changes that come repeatedly, endlessly. It's been so much uncertainty.

So, yes, I feel our situation has some semblance to the thirsty people in the wilderness, crying out.

I also want to say that I feel church is important in this moment. One of my particular sadnesses and perplexities is how we continue with this vital thing we do and are and which we offer here when it becomes less easy to do so.

We've continued to admit as a staff that we're one of those places where people congregate (and are, after all, called a "congregation"). And we trend older than the overall population, meaning we have higher risk as we try to do our thing. And this is a place where we're accustomed to contact—sharing close and caring greetings, sharing food, sharing life.

As we're making our own way through wilderness and crying out to God, I wouldn't say that the main point of the Exodus reading was the water from the rock. It's not the miracle, *per se*. Our faith isn't an alternative to science and reason and precaution. The importance in gathering today isn't that we're going to pray and beg and cry out loud enough that God will wave a magic wand stick to break a vaccination from the rock, a miracle cure.



We gather because God does hear our cries, because God travels with us. Most of all, it's because we need to hear from God.

We need a response. We are stuck in bad news and we desperately need good news. That makes this an essential service, one of the very last places I'd wish to have shut down.

Like with the woman at the well, Jesus meets us and is responding, knowing our very ordinary details, the ins and outs of our relationships, our personal as well as societal crises. Jesus is present with us and for us, not excluding or keeping away because of those things, certainly never practicing social distancing with you.

Jesus is responding with his own presence, which is the very gift of life, life far beyond the sort of life that cowers from germs and warily follows all the precautions. This life is not subsumed by what is dangerous and deadly but confronts it and overcomes it, life that lays down but can't be lost and won't lose. This resurrection promise blows the Spirit of Jesus into you, a mouth-to-mouth resuscitation that is a contagion of wholeness and of wellbeing over and against all the isolating threats. That's not to pretend that Jesus is an inoculation, some sort of protective cover that keeps us from sickness.

But he is very much more. Today he is present in the promise of living water, water from the rock to sustain you, water of the baptismal font that claims you for life. He is present at this table. Even as we gather cautiously, trying to avoid contamination, it is worth it because here he gives himself, his life, his body, his very lifeblood in and for you. He is present in each other as this Body of Christ. We greet each other with the peace of Christ, a peace we can't find in keeping to ourselves, can't give from ourselves. His peace comes to be with us and is offered between us, even if not with handshakes.

And this embodied good news then takes on flesh in us. I wish we could gather, not diminished and dwindled, but in even greater numbers today, because we need it. We need the assurance beyond coronavirus. We need to know, to be reminded, to gain confidence that life wins, even if it feels like a distant eventuality.

That's also how we hold the words from Romans today. We don't need to hunt for

suffering, to prove endurance and build character, so that we can find our way to hope. Right now we know suffering. So God draws us toward hope. We become confident even while afraid, and come to know that fear produces a yearning that pulls us to God, and God will not disappoint us.

I hope that is true for our trembly lives, for these days that have had so much consternation and upset, the bombardment of the news and turmoil of so many changes to our rhythms and expectations. For those of you who are most fearful or who are most at risk, I hope you can find some strength, some endurance, some way ahead through the Spirit poured into your hearts.

As church together, I hope we also find ways to offer this goodness and care and love and life.

A set of words that were especially meaningful and helpful for me this week came from a sociological history book that measured during plagues of the early centuries of Christianity that Christian care and nursing, even without medications, cut mortality by two-thirds. They were invested in the promise of life and in Jesus' words that "I was sick and you visited me."<sup>\*</sup>

Again, a blog post from ELCA Advocacy offered meaningful and helpful words to me this week, that when "our anxiety and uncertainty tempt us to curve inward and fixate on self-preservation, as church in this pandemic, we can also shine a light on impacts for our most vulnerable neighbors. As a church for the sake of the world, committed to God's call to love and serve our neighbor, we turn our attention to those who will be most impacted by what may be massive disruptions."<sup>\*\*</sup>

Besides those broad and indirect words, some of the best words of my week came from a member here. As I'd been fretting about how we were going to get to be church and to carry on and receive life and be life, I got a note from Lisa Bauer offering for our congregation and the

community that she and her family would be available to deliver groceries or medicine to those shut inside who couldn't get out.

That is a version of really seeing, of knowing our reality, of Jesus coming to touch us, embrace us, and bring us to new life.

Thank you, dear people. I don't like this, but we're going to be okay. I'm confident.

Well, God, our prayers—like everything else these days—are mostly about coronavirus.

So we pray for those who have the disease, for those most at risk and vulnerable, for those who are working hard to prevent the spread—from government officials to health care workers, to those responding at home.

We pray for all that radiates out from the virus—for people, especially in nursing homes and care facilities that are shut up and unable to have visitors and will suffer from isolation, for those who are suffering because of missing work and income, for students out of rhythm without school, the plans we lament are interrupted, for the panic and fright and stress of so much overwhelming news.

We pray for our congregation as we both try to go through this together and also experience disjunction. For those gathered here, for those joined by watching.

And for the rest of our lives. For all the joys and sorrows we face. For medical concerns, for insurance to approve medication to slow cancer, for preparing for surgery, for all dealing with dementia, for those who are awaiting medical test results, all who are fraught with anxiety, especially young people, for Amanda Huff moving to start a job in Paris, for signs of spring and hope, in bird song and sprouting bulbs and worms and more, for spirits lifted by music and laughter, for all that you see we need and know we are, and hold in your embrace, through Jesus

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<sup>\*</sup> *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark, pp73-94

<sup>\*\*</sup> <https://blogs.elca.org/advocacy/elca-advocacy-in-time-of-covid-19-pandemic/>

Christ our Lord. Amen