



Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent  
Rev. Jonathan Stepp  
March 15, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

An old-timer from way back in the mountains was renowned for his ability to forecast the weather, so everyone in the valley where he lived relied on him. One autumn they came to his cabin and asked “should we stockpile extra firewood for a hard winter” and he said, “let me think about it and get back to you.” As soon as they left he called the weather service in Asheville and asked them what the winter would be like and the agency rep told him “we think it will be pretty hard.” The old man passed the word along to his community and they started stockpiling huge stores of firewood.

A few weeks later he decided to call and check again and this time the agency rep said, “last time I told you we thought it would be a pretty hard winter, but now we’re sure it’s going to be a terribly difficult winter.” The old-timer said, “how can you be sure?” And the reply came back, “because the mountain folk know the signs of winter in these hills and they’re all stockpiling huge stores of firewood!”

Feedback loops like this one can be funny, but they can also become self-fulfilling prophecies. We’re currently seeing something like this with the rush to buy toilet paper and other necessities. Our country is presently entering into a bit of a crisis as this new Coronavirus called Covid-19 spreads around the world. Many churches, schools, and other institutions are taking action to respond to this situation – including our family here in the Diocese of Western North Carolina. For the first time in anyone’s memory, public worship has been cancelled for three Sundays in a row.

In this sermon, though, I want us to pause and think for a moment about what is happening in our world and how our view of these events can be shaped by our trust in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Before I do that, though, I need to address an initial challenge that we face when we think about these events. The fact is, we may not all be on the same page with regard to how serious we think the present crisis actually is. For the last month or so two theories have been circulating: one says that this is all a hoax, exag-

gerated by the media to embarrass the President. The other theory says that it is serious, and needs to be taken seriously, but it is not a cause for panic. I believe that it is serious but not a cause for panic. Let me explain why I think it's serious even though it's not a cause for panic.

I'll start with the panic part. As this illness has spread around the world several things have become clear. Most people in any given community do not catch it. Of those that do, most of them are miserable for a about a week and then recover – as would happen with the flu. This is not Ebola or bubonic plague, it's not a cause for panic.

However, it is a serious matter. That's because it can kill people – and it has done so – primarily people over the age of 60 and/or people with other health problems. It is as contagious or slightly more contagious than the flu. It is ten times deadlier than the flu. Because it is a brand new virus, almost no one in the world has a natural immunity to it and there is no vaccine. That means the only way to stop it from spreading is to take quarantine type actions. So, for example, public schools are closed and many churches are taking the kinds of actions that we are taking.

The challenge with a serious viral threat such as this one is that you have to take action to protect people before cases of the disease start showing up. If you wait until people are sick then it is too late, the virus is already spreading. And that is especially true of this virus, because some people don't show symptoms until one to two weeks after infection. It is serious and we need to get ahead of it, but we don't need to be in a panic.

So, if you are still of the school of thought that it is a hoax, or fake news, or that it will go away soon, then I just can't agree with you. And we as a Parish will be making decisions based on taking it seriously.

I began by saying that I want us to pause and think for a moment about how our view of these events can be shaped by our trust in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now that I've addressed the question of whether this is actually a serious matter, let me talk about where our trust in God comes into this. I am struck this morning by one line from our reading in the Hebrew scriptures. Faced with the possibility of the death by dehydration, the people of Israel give voice to one of the great questions of humanity's existence: "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:7)

Some very smart people who are taking our present crisis seriously have said that we may find our lives greatly disrupted in the coming weeks. It may be that in addition to schools and churches, non-essential busi-

nesses like restaurants and movie theaters will be shuttered or have their services greatly curtailed. It may be that people we love will become sick – it may be that we ourselves will get sick.

All these possibilities raise our anxiety levels – and they should raise our anxiety. Unpleasant and even sad things may be coming in our future. Like the Israelites we are right to be concerned – Moses had led them to a campground where there was no water and they were in the middle of a desert! Death by dehydration was a real possibility for them, just as disruption in our lives and even illness are real possibilities for us. It is natural to ask, “is the Lord among us or not?”

What if the Lord is actually among us right now? What if we could trust that the Father who loves us will sustain us through whatever comes next, that the Son who redeems us will share his faith with us, and the Holy Spirit will guide us in ways of wisdom? If the Lord is among us then we have hope. Hope is not a fairy-tale, pie in the sky belief that somehow we will all be magically spared from suffering. Hope is the trust that whatever our future may hold we know the one who holds the future. Such a trust in the presence of the Lord would have real-world, practical effects on how we live in the midst of crisis. For example:

We will recognize that even if we are not at great risk from this illness, many of our neighbors may be. We will love our neighbors as we love ourselves and be willing to deal with inconveniences and disrupted lives in order to make them safer.

We will take care of each other in any way that we can. Even though we are taking a break from gathering as a church, we will show the love of Christ to one another in prayers, phone calls, and connection in other ways.

Most of all, we will lean on Jesus for faith, for a sense of peace, and for a confidence that better days will come.

Is the Lord among us or not? I believe that he is – in word of Holy Scripture, in the stillness of prayer, in the love of our All Saints family, in the care and concern of our neighbors, and above all in the promise he has made to us in Jesus Christ: I will never leave you or forsake you.

Amen.