

“Duty of the Present Moment” March 22, 2020
Pine Bluffs United Methodist Church

John 14:27 “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled; neither let it be afraid.”

This afternoon I am sitting here in my study thinking of you all with love and prayers as we prepare for a sabbath when we will not be together physically in worship. I will miss being with you as we gather as the Family of God in our beautiful sanctuary. But I am resigned to this closing of our building for an uncertain time because I know you. I know that your hearts are full of God’s love and mercy and that you will continue to be “the church” in more ways than I could even imagine!!!! It’s hard, so difficult, but as I am hearing from many different sources—“We will get thru this together!” and I would add “...with God’s help.”

Recently I discovered an article by L. Roger Owns titled: Can Lent help prepare us for a pandemic?” He had some really pertinent points that I found helpful and I would like to share some of them with you:

The CDC is talking its cue from the Boy Scouts, as it urges local communities and institutions to be prepared. On Saturday morning it was clear that my community was heeding that advice, stymied as we were in the aisles of Sam’s Club, slowly maneuvering oversized shopping carts past one another loaded with non-perishable foodstuffs and economy-sized packages of toilet tissue. In more than one place I’d read the recommendation to purchase two weeks’ worth of necessities. For a family of five with two teenage boys, that’s a lot of chips and salsa.

Four hours later, a wall in our basement laundry room stood half obscured by neatly stacked provisions. And the children had been warned that this stash is off limits.

Don’t panic, we’re being told. Be prepared. But government health officials have offered no wisdom on how to prepare the soul, as fear and uncertainty rise like the prematurely sprouting daffodils in our front yard. And for folks like me, who have made an art out of catastrophizing, that kind of preparation is equally important.

Fortunately, being in the season of Lent we are in a season that offers just the soul-wisdom we need, however uncomfortable it may be.

On Ash Wednesday I sat in our seminary chapel. I was on edge from too much CNN-checking. A pandemic seemed inevitable. The assertion that healthy people had little to fear had failed to reassure me, as two of my immediate family members have asthma. Then the worship leader introduced the prayer of confession, and I scribbled on my bulletin something she said—just a phrase, but one that named the reality I know I was rebelling against: the fragility and uncertainty of human life.”

There’s a Shambhala Buddhist meditation center across the street from the seminary, but I don’t need to go there to learn the impermanence of everything, the fundamental flux of life. Christians spend one-tenth of the year displaying that reality before our own faces. We mark impermanence, flux, and uncertainty right on our foreheads. Maybe this year, we washed those marks off too soon.

Lent’s regiment for inner-preparedness is simply this: a steely-eyed gaze at reality. Just as Jesus ‘set his face like flint’ toward Jerusalem, so our spiritual practice must be to investigate reality unflinchingly. Part of that reality includes the ash truth we smeared on our foreheads just days ago: none of this lasts. And neither scientist nor charismatic leader is going to swoop in from the wings and make it go away. Nothing unexpected or implausible or magical is going

to get us out of this.

Thomas Merton once mused, “I wonder if there are twenty people alive in the world now who see things as they really are... They are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart.”

Looking at reality has a dual benefit: it frees us from both catastrophizing and magical thinking. Things are only as bad as they are, not as bad as we imagine them to be. The universe isn't falling apart—however often the universes we've created, with ourselves at the center, do and inevitably will again. But things are also not better than they are, as our daydreaming of a miracle cure or the uninformed reassurance of some political leaders would have us believe. There's no one to save us from the universal conditions of fragility and uncertainty or from the particular ways those conditions manifest themselves: the disruption of our routines, economic collapse, serious illness, death.

When Lent relieves us of these twin habits of mental escape, we are freed to embrace what many saints and spiritual writers refer to as the duty of the present moment. You don't have to believe that present circumstances are willed by God in order to believe that even the present reality of uncertainty, fragility, and decline is the vehicle for God's love and grace. And that grace frees us to ask, *What does this moment—this reality—require of me?*

For some the duty will be—indeed already is—to exist as patiently and lovingly as possible in quarantine. For others it will be to show-I, sacrifice the inclination for self-preservation, and care for the sick. For many, the moment calls for listening to the experts and preparing thoughtfully, making sure there's enough hand soap, peanut butter, and Cheez-Its on hand to endure a governmentally imposed staycation.

In the midst of that work, the duty of the moment calls for something else as well: loving reality, even in its vulnerability. Especially in its vulnerability.

For me that meant, after the construction of a basement wall of food, putting fearfulness aside, looking at the ten-year-old girl in front of me, who was a little stressed by the reason for our shopping trip, and saying yes to her plea for a trip to the park to practice her softball skills. Saying yes to basking in this sunny, spring-like weather winter afternoon. To running and laughing and sweat-ing. To accepting the joy of this reality.

Not worrying that this too shall pass. Not afraid that in a month this park might be closed, and we might be confined to our home, where the duty of the moment would call for something else: family prayer, playing Yahtzee, and making pancakes. Lots of pancakes. There's enough batter in the basement to feed a family of five ten meals of pancakes. But we need to make one more trip to the store. We forgot to buy chocolate chips.

Our scripture for the day is John 14:27. “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

A devotion by Beth Klingensmith on this scripture will close our time together today. She writes: Fear, panic, worry, anxiety. These emotions many people are feeling lately; perhaps all of us to some degree or another. But Jesus wants us to have peace in our minds and souls—His peace.

The peace this world has to offer is so fragile. Financial peace can be gone in a matter of days when businesses close, people are laid off, stocks fall, food prices rise and the rent and mortgage are still due. Our peace in good health is gone when illness hits, drug stores and grocery stores are out of medicine, and there are no beds in hospitals.

But the peace Jesus wants to leave with us is His peace. He knows what is going on. He knows what is happening tomorrow, next week, next year.

He knows what I need and says not to worry, do not lose sleep, do not fear tomorrow. I am here. I will not leave you or abandon you.

So take care of what you think about. Don't let your fears run away with you.

I am God's child. I know I am as surely as I know the sun will set.
He is my provider and He is my peace. He is my strength and He is my hope.
Place your hope and trust in Him. Give Him your fears and worries and receive
His gift of His peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding.

*Please pray with me. O God we face days of trouble. You stand by us in every
situation. Please stand by us today and hear our prayer. God, we need your help.
We are confused. We are pressed on every side and don't know exactly what to do.
This we know: we must turn to you. You are our answer in this time of trouble.
We trust you. We are thankful for the Holy Spirit. He is our Comforter and
Helper in this time of need. We rely completely on him for the strength we need.
Today we need courage more than anything else to face this tough time.*

*God, today we have so many 'why' questions and do not know the
answers. So we turn to you for strength in answering the "what" questions. What
will we do during this trouble time? We will follow you and obey you. May this
time provide opportunities to minister to someone else. This is our prayer. Give us
the courage to go on when we think we cannot. Give us words to encourage others
when there is little encouragement in our hearts. Give us the momentum we need
to face another and another and another day with your grace and love. By facing
life with your grace and love, we will be victorious over every trouble. May we
show that grace and love to others around us and walk in His peace. In Jesus'
name. Amen.*