

“Is not this the fast that I choose:...

to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say,
Here I am.”

~Isaiah 58: 6ff

Dear Friends in Christ,

As I write this, governors and health officials are releasing statements regarding how best to slow the advancement of COVID-19, the current pandemic. Included in these statements is encouragement to practice “social distancing.” Schools are cancelling classes or going to online learning. Events have been postponed. Professional hockey and basketball games are canceled, and people are encouraged NOT to gather – for sporting events, workshops, conferences, classes, and...worship.

And worship, of course, includes practices that the health department warns against...physical contact, shaking hands, close proximity to other people, even breaking bread together, maybe even sharing a cup, or dipping bread (and maybe fingers?) into a common cup.

It may be that by the time you read this, many congregations will have suspended having worship and cancelled all events where people gather.

We have been forced into a fast...a Lenten fast... of Christian fellowship, community worship and prayer, and the joy of being together with Christ in our midst.

Usually my Lenten fast has been more in the direction of giving up pizza, ice cream, or chocolate. It is a strange thing to give up community, gathering, and the joy of worship. It is not a fast that I would choose. And yet it is the fast that we have been given.

And yet, even in this, even in this loss, this fast, God will raise up something new.

Perhaps in the absence of what we have taken for granted and being bereft of community, we will

value more deeply the gift that God gives us in each other.

Perhaps when worship is cancelled, we will miss it more. In this season of uncertainty and our efforts to prevent virus spread, I hear an underlying irony, or at the very least, I observe an aspect of human nature; the minute we are told we cannot do something is when suddenly we want to.

There is blessing in the absence of God, for it is then that we seek God more fiercely. It is when darkness feels heavy that we pray with greater desperation. And it is when we are bereft and in the midst of loss or crisis that scripture speaks with greater meaning and resonates with the soul that is suffering.

So we will, independently but together, fast from community, and gatherings, and very possibly, worship and all that we receive at the Lord’s table...for a time, a season, a moment of history.

It will be alright.

Grace abounds.

It is good that we miss, that is, that we notice the absence of, what is so important. But in the meantime, we will stay connected, through prayer and phone calls, through online devotions and our own personal meditations. And hopefully, at least for a time, we will still be able to gather for worship that may or may not celebrate the Eucharist or include sharing a hug or a handshake of Christ’s peace.

Please hear again what the angels say throughout scripture, because they know us all too well...
Do not be afraid.

And as people of faith, we will watch as the light of resurrection breaks forth with the Easter dawn, and all is made new. It will be alright. Whether we can gather in worship on Easter or not, Jesus still lives! And another day will come, when we will together celebrate God’s answer to our cry for help, the answer that comes in the one who died and rose again, the answer that is Jesus the Christ.

Yours in Christ, Bishop Katherine Finegan