

EASTER VII 24 May 2020

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White in St Mark's Parish, Bridgewater, Connecticut

I Peter 4.12-14, 5.6-11; John 17.-11

A few days ago, Kaysey called. She has cut my hair for some twenty years, and because of the lockdown I have not seen her since the beginning of March. But her shop was soon to reopen (of course the Governor has since delayed such re-openings until 1 June) and she wanted to schedule an appointment for me before the end of this month.

I had been anticipating this moment of truth with uncertainty, wondering how I would respond when actually faced with the question, Am I ready to end my my isolation in this way ...? And, eager though I am to have a haircut ---my hair has not been this long since I was in graduate school some forty years ago, when a lot of us seem to have thought that we should look like pirates-- my instant realization was that ... I am not ready. After two months of sheltering at home, it seemed just too dangerous to go and breathe, masks or no, with someone from outside the little cocoon that I have been inhabiting pretty much on my own.

Even though the medical community has now learned so much more about how the deadly virus spreads --principally through direct contact with human exhalations-- it is hard for a lot of us to relax the sense that we are besieged, surrounded, by an implacable and insensate foe that can be ... anywhere. And a month tomorrow, when I did agree to schedule an appointment with Kaysey, I am not sure how differently I am going to think This is what it means to feel besieged

For, most of us do feel as though we have been under siege ... persecuted, really; and even though our our adversary is, in recent days, better known to us, its behaviors more predictable, there still seems to be a lot of subtle danger out there beyond our little self-isolated pods. And so a number of us may have been picking up familiar resonances in the readings from the First Letter of Peter from which we have been hearing since Easter. Today we hear, *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you[F]or you know that your brothers an sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.* The letter is addressed to people who, a lot like us, feel hounded, besieged

Of course the early Christians to whom the author of First Peter is writing were not living through a pandemic, and Covid-19 does not seek out only people of the Faith. The persecution that those then faced had to do with their actions, their success in converting so many of their neighbors from more prevalent and respectable religions to Christianity. They threatened the traditional hierarchies of their neighbors' households: they could even inspire women to misbehave, to resist instruction And the families of those who have become Christians were pushing back against the intrusion of Christianity into their settled worlds: they were persecuting the novel Faith.

And the author of First Peter encourages these beleaguered Christians to see their sufferings as akin to the humiliations that Jesus endured in the Passion story, and similarly to bear them without resistance because they will lead, after this time of testing, to the Easter reward that Jesus knew.

Now, Covid-19 is not a persecution, is certainly not a test sent from God to try anyone. But it is an affliction that many of us feel, wondering how constructively to respond beyond sheltering in place, how to shape our emotions and govern our fears. And each of the writers of the so-called 'Catholic Epistles'

(they are called 'Catholic' because they were intended to circulate throughout the early Church) --these authors of the First and Second Letters of Peter, the authors the First, Second, and Third Letters of John, the authors of the Letters of Jude and of James-- are each of them all about helping the early Christians, some very new Christians, to live their distinctive Faith in the places that they inhabit, many of which are hostile to their behaviors.

The 'Catholic Epistles' are written to be read aloud in different Christian communities who from time to time live in fear --in fear of persecutions, yes, but also in fears of many things that they do not fully understand, that they cannot yet control, that are mystifying and demoralizing And so these writers may very much speak to us who need now to live amidst a deadly pandemic, who know what the best medical advice is, and who may also want to hear about how we might faithfully respond emotionally as well

And, each in his own way, each of the writers of the 'Catholic Epistles' is pretty clear: remember that God loves you; love God. Remember that God is present, amidst suffering and amidst joy: God is with you, and this God who knows both pain and joy is grieving with you and will also rejoice with you. Love this God; love God's Creation: love your neighbors as yourself. Practice hospitality; welcome the stranger; share what you have. Forgiveness is important: seek to reconcile, practice reconciliation. What you do matters. Do not curse, seek always to bless. Remember the words and actions of Jesus: copy them, imitate them. Treat others as you would have them treat you. Love the loving God, and love your neighbor, beloved of God, as yourself.

You see, what the writer of First Peter and the writers of the other 'Catholic Epistles' want to cultivate, to strengthen, in the young Christian communities among whom their letters circulate is a sense of purpose, no matter what the circumstances, no matter what persecutions or plagues or whatever else may beleaguer or surround them. These communities have found new life in the words and actions of God's Christ, and their important task is to share what has changed them: they are to keep loving the God who loves, and to keep finding ways to love their neighbors ... because it makes a difference.

A few weeks ago we were dismayed, disheartened to learn that the Food Bank across the street from our church building had been emptied out by thieves overnight. A few days ago I stopped by with a few groceries, asked how they were doing, and learned that the shelves are restocked, that people have been calling weekly to ask for shopping lists to fill. A number of people have embraced a purpose; and, in the midst of a pandemic when many of us feel beleaguered and so many more feel also beleaguered by worrying about having enough to eat, it has made a difference. It has been the sort of blessing that we always have the invitation, whether or not scared, or worried, or wondering ... just to bestow. Amen.