

Holy Week Message: Finding Normal

Dear Friends,

I'm Pastor Laurie Skow-Anderson and I serve as the bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. This is Holy Week. Today we are being church together, worshiping and living our faith together, even we are separated in our homes.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at human hands and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we who are caught in this difficult time of a global pandemic might look to the way of the cross and find it the way of life and peace, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, now and forever. AMEN

Dear Friends,

I want to begin by saying "I thank God for YOU," and for your faithfulness in ministry during this fight against the coronavirus.

We are here now in a very odd place, we are in the midst of Holy Week, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday when...

NORMALLY we'd talk about Jesus, and the last few days of his life; his horrible suffering and shameful death on the cross. But today it seems like we are long ways from **normal**. We are caught up in **CRISIS** caused by a virus. Normally, we'd be in our church in our usual pews. But instead, we are in **EXILE** in our own homes. Some of us have cabin fever, others are anxious and fearful and the rest of us just want someone to blame.

NORMALLY during Holy Week we'd be focused on

- Jesus' last supper, the bread and wine, and the familiar words of Holy Communion. Or
- Normally we'd remember Jesus' servant leadership as he washes his disciple's feet and his commandment to love one another.
- We'd focus on his disciples and remember that nobody names their baby Judas because Judas Iscariot is Jesus' betrayer.
- We'd talk about how Jesus leads his friends out into the garden of Gethsemane.
- We'd remember the trials, Jesus, before Pilate, before Herod, the crowd crying "crucify him, Peter denies him, the whipping the nailing the blood, the pain, suffering...
- Normally we'd read the last words Jesus spoke in agony from the cross...
- **Father forgive them** for they know not what they do
- **Today you will be with me in paradise**
- Behold your son, behold your mother
- **My God, my God why have you forsaken me**
- I thirst
- **It is finished**
- **Into your hands I commend my spirit**

That's what we'd **NORMALLY** be focused on, but dear people of God, you are living

through a crisis! A catastrophe! You are in the middle of the history making COVID-19 pandemic. You are in the midst of a generation defining event. People are getting sick, some are dying, hospitals are overwhelmed, millions lost their jobs, nothing is normal today....

BUT...nothing is new either....this has happened before. Our namesake Martin Luther writes about the Christian's response to the bubonic plague in the 1500s.

But even more recently than that....there was the influenza epidemic in 1918.

That was a little before my time, but when I was Pastor in Pelican Rapids, MN I visited an elderly church member named **Maude Krogstad many times**. She celebrated her 100th birthday while I was her pastor. I remember she baked her own chocolate birthday cake and served everyone in her assisted living facility. She was a remarkable, strong, faithful woman. More than once during our visits she told me that she had been a little girl, 8 years old during the Spanish influenza epidemic swept through Northern Minnesota and killed many people.. She remembered it well because two of her sisters and her brother died. She became sick but survived. She remembers everyone in the house was sick, nobody could really care for her or help anyone else. Can you imagine being 8 yrs old and losing three siblings? I remember walking through the **Ringsaker Cemetery** in Pelican Rapids and reading the names on tombstones of children that died in 1918. Maude Krogstad was a survivor. She lived through the crisis of the Flu Epidemic, died 94 years later, at 102.

Dear friends, we will survive this too. We are living through a crisis, **but nothing is new it has happened before**.

If you think about it, the story of God's people as recorded in the Bible is one major crisis after another.

- **Noah's Ark and the Flood**

- In the Bible we read about famines, droughts, the 10 Plagues, the poisonous serpents, kings and wars and giants and enemies
- The Exile was perhaps the greatest crisis. The Prophets calling the people to turn away from SIN and return to God, but they would not listen and the people of God were defeated by their enemies. Ancient Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple was destroyed. The people were forced to leave their homes, and live in EXILE in Babylon.

Question: Does this social distancing, this safer at home/shelter in place, feels as though we are in EXILE? Not in some other country but in **EXILE in our own homes?**

Confined to a space.

There is a tiny book in the Hebrew Bible called **LAMENTATIONS**, I'm guessing that **most of you haven't read it, and maybe never even heard of it. For good reason, Lamentation is only 5 chapters long and is depressing! It is a 5 chapters of complaining. Who wants to read that? 5 chapters of laments, complaints, and cries to God.** The people had a lot to complain about.

- Their enemies destroyed their city Jerusalem and destroyed homes, stolen business, desecrated the temple
- The people had to walk 900 miles to Babylon. This is more than just inconvenient.
- The writer of Lamentations refuses to suffer in silence and cries out to God.
- The EXILE destroyed individual lives but it also destroyed community life.
- Lamentations will not gloss over the suffering. It does not rush to hope when there is

no hope to be found.

- It is the cries and prayers of those who suffer... “Where is God's mercy and justice?”

Dear friends, There is a time for lament. (Ec 3:1) For everything there is a time and season for every purpose under heaven. This might be a time to complain and cry out to God. We should not silence the lament too quickly. In most situations, when someone is hurting, saying, “There, there, don’t cry,” is not helpful. There is a time to cry in prayer to God.

This is a time to Lament, to cry out to God about the crisis we are facing today. This is a health crisis, a financial crisis, a family crisis (kids home from school for weeks), and perhaps even a faith crisis. For some of us COVID-19 is an inconvenience. For others it is a real crisis.

- We lament the loss of community, from the social distancing.
 - Loss of church community
 - Lonely Senior citizens in care facilities
 - High school seniors lost the last weeks with their classmates
- We lament financial losses, loss of jobs, income
- Loss of loved ones who died from the coronavirus

This week during the Holy Days between Palm Sunday and Easter we normally remember the crisis of our Christian faith... the Messiah, our Savior, Jesus dies. Jesus was born in Roman occupied territory. He wasn’t a Roman citizen, he was a Jew. Jesus was the leader of a small motley group of students who called him Rabbi. This entourage walked all over Judea, Galilee and Samaria. He performed miracles, calmed a storm on the sea, feed 5000 people with 3 fish and five loaves of bread. He heals the sick, the blind, the lame and restores the outcast to community. He teaches about the coming of the Kingdom of God that will turn everything upside down.

The people loved Jesus! The people really loved Jesus! They gave him a parade of Palm branches, wrote a Hosanna song in his honor, Hosanna to the Son of David Blest is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. This parade/political rally was the prelude to the next great crisis that would forever change the world.

The people loved Jesus that is to say, most people loved him, but the religious/political leaders of the day saw Jesus as a threat, they saw their power slipping through their fingers and so they plotted and plan their own political rally that would turn the crowd against Jesus and restore their control over the people.

The crisis had been brewing for some time, the virus of discontent spreading through the leaders, until it came to a head.

- Jesus had eaten supper with his friends, when one of them, Judas, slipped out.
- After supper, Jesus and his friends went to the garden to pray.
- It was there that Judas put into motion the plan that would activate the crisis. With a kiss on the cheek he betrayed Jesus.
- The crisis unfolds with a trial and a rally where the crowd pledge their loyalty to the leader of Rome, Caesar, and turned on Jesus and demanded he be crucified.

Then it happened.

Jesus is again in a parade, carrying his own cross through the streets of Jerusalem, outside its walls Jesus is crucified, nailed to a wooden cross. It is from the cross Jesus leads us in the ultimate lament... Jesus quotes *Psalm 22 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

The bystanders near the cross, hearing Jesus, know the rest of Psalm by heart...

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. Why are you so far from helping, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

IN YOU THEY TRUSTED

And to all who were there at the cross to hear his lament that day, it appeared that God was silent and had certainly abandoned him.

Jesus hung on the cross until his heart stops beating and the blood stops flowing, and his lungs collapse. Jesus dies and the earth itself joins in the lamentations. The sky darkens, rocks were split, the earth quakes, the women sob and wail, the temple curtain is torn in two.

Today, on this side of history, we are drawn into the lament. We have experienced many little deaths, losses in our lives.

Stop for a moment, stop for just a moment and sit still, in the quiet, pay attention to your breathing, each breath is letting go, releasing the laments for all you have lost in the last month, the last year. Breathe and exhale and release the lament for a life time of losses. Breathe... Where were you God? Where are you God?

Martin Luther taught that it is precisely in places where we would least expect to find God, in pain, disaster, catastrophe, crisis and in the cross---God is clearly present. Lamenting does more than express despair. It shows us that in the most difficult of times and places, we can trust that God is present and hears our desperate cries for help. We should not rush to quote other happier Bible verses to silence the laments.

These days before Easter, nothing is **NORMAL**. We are in **CRISIS**, in **EXILE** in our own homes, exiled to stop a pandemic plague. These are days for **LAMENTING**...

- lamenting all the losses we've accumulated in life...
- lamenting the days when God seems to be practicing social distancing from us...
- lamenting that God seems silent when we need a word of hope the most.
- Lamenting our human pride and arrogance, our sinfulness that seems unforgiveable ...
- We lament like the women weeping at the foot of the cross, we lament with anger and fear like the disciples that abandoned Jesus as he hung dying,
- we lament in Exile, trapped in our own homes

And so during this week that is anything BUT normal, **we hoping to find normal**, as we wait as if we are in Exile. We wait alone at home. We wait like the women outside the tomb. Waiting for what?

Waiting to find the normal again.

We are waiting for a crack in the horizon that opens the world to the dawn and assurance that the sun always rises. We wait for Jesus. AMEN