

Easter VI
1 Peter 3:13-18 and John 14: 15-21
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I am not a neuroscientist. So I don't know precisely how memory is stored in the brain. But my hunch is that when the pandemic has passed, my recollections of this intense crucible will be stored as a series of images: an achingly empty sanctuary, the MTA buses with drivers wearing face masks circulating the sanctuary driveway, the gallery of faces emerging on a Zoom screen, looking up at the deep blue of the sky at twilight, exhausted yet relieved to have made it through another day.

The images convey the suddenness of the change, as well as the completeness of the upheaval. Virtually every aspect of daily life was upended, leaving me with an enduring sense of being dis-oriented, missing the structures created by office hours, school days, practices, and monthly in-person meetings. I miss the adrenaline push of wrapping up a sermon on Saturday nights and the sweet completion at the end of worship on Sunday mornings. Even though the work, meetings, and school have continued, the form has been so different that previously inconceivable questions have emerged. For example, the stay-at-home order directs us toward "essential travel only." What is essential? Groceries, medical appointments, exercise. What about everything else with which we fill our days? I don't miss those nights when each member of our household went in a different direction or the exhaustion at the end of an over-scheduled weekend. On the other hand, I do miss aspects of my routine to which I rarely paid much attention: greeting the school crossing guard, wandering through a bookshop or the solitude of a drive to Baltimore Washington conference center. And while I have cherished the way our family can now linger over dinner, playing a nightly game of Uno, I worry about the cumulative affects of such a long stretch of relative isolation on the social-emotional needs of middle-schoolers, retirees and all of us. We have been in new territory, without much of a map.

When the Israelites were led out of Egypt into the wilderness, in what is known as the Exodus, they had to learn new survival tactics, practices like collecting their manna from heaven each morning and trusting Moses to find God's gift of water in a rock. In this strange new world of the pandemic, we are similarly challenged to discover our survival tactics; through questions like: Is this piece of my life essential? From whence shall come my daily bread? How do I stay physically distant and yet rooted in our shared humanity?

I hesitate to dwell too long or celebrate too easily the gifts the shut down might bring – slower pace, shared family time, new insights – as if the destructive path of illness, death, and trauma were given at the service of some privileged silver lining. It is a privilege, as some journalists have rightly named, to be able to practice social distancing. Last weekends' newspaper was filled with articles about the disproportionate suffering brought by the pandemic on communities of color, the

ways the closing of schools has exposed the vast inequalities in our educational systems and how deep the devastation may be for those unemployed or underemployed. Reading it, I felt even more in the wilderness, for the pandemic has laid bare the brokenness of life that exists alongside our common humanity.

So perhaps a better analogy than the Exodus is the Israelites' second journey into the wilderness, that historical period known as the exile, when the people of God existed apart from their land and its accompanying structures of meaning, worship, and identity. Exile might capture the disorientation of our here-and-now life, with its mixture of new questions being asked, deep suffering revealed and traumatic uncertainty over the future. Exile exposes the folly of the past, the courage needed for the future and – Israel's primary lesson – the promise of God to be ever-present, no matter the place or the circumstances.

Neither of our scriptures today deals with Israel's exile. But each attends to the impact of exile – the sense of alienation between what life used to be and what form it has yet to take. 1 Peter was written to communities facing exclusion because they gave their hearts to a suffering God of love rather than a powerful empire. The letter says, in essence, keep doing what is right, even if you are ridiculed for it. No matter how scared you are of the future or how vulnerable you feel to forces beyond your control, keep your eyes, heart and mind on Jesus. Keep making choices to allow your life to be part of God's ever-flowing love for the world. The good that you do will endure and in so choosing the way of Christ, you will find yourself next to God.

One way to approach the pandemic is to say all that I need to be concerned about is myself or my small circles of loved ones. I'm going to care exclusively about my needs, the goods I require. I'm look away from the painful news, focused on my self-sufficiency rather than admit how scary this all is. Another approach risks opening the eyes, and the heart, wider to take in the enormous suffering, as well as the tremendous acts of hospitality, sacrifice, and good will happening around us. It is to learn how risk, fear, and courage often go hand-in-hand. Keep doing what is right. When we move closer to another's suffering, Christ comes among us, too.

When the disciples gathered around Jesus at his final meal, the location of our text from John's gospel, they were not in exile. But by every indication they were about to lose their leader. They were facing in the days ahead, a life forever altered, and their fear was that without Christ's bodily presence a wide gulf would emerge between his love and their lives. Jesus offers the bridge across the distance, a path through the wilderness: If you love me you will keep my commandments. Love me, act like me. When we care for the vulnerable, notice the pain and move closer to someone in need, we find our way forward. When we act like Jesus, we find him coming toward us.

Biblical scholars often employ a three-fold framework to describe the exilic experience: a progression from orientation, dis-orientation, to re-orientation. Before the loss of land and the accompanying loss of identity, the people of God had one

view of the world and their place in it. Being transported into exile disorients them. In the suffering and uncertainty of a strange existence, along with the grief, they cannot live as they have in the past. A new way of living becomes essential. When they settle into a new land, new communities, new rhythms, their re-orientation demands humility – God, we acted wrongly, - vulnerability – God, it is upon you that we depend, - and a renewed determination to act as God’s own people.

There is a message here for us about a faithful way forward in this strange, painful, grieving season. My prayer for us, and my charge to you, is that we find a way to dwell long enough in the dis-orientation that God can re-orient us toward a better future. Here in a strange land we face where we have gone wrong, where we have misshapen God’s character and where we need to act with more passion for those who are not only suffering now but have long struggled. Is there one way in the weeks ahead you can move into closer to Jesus by acting as Jesus acts? Is there a story of a life different than yours you can listen to? Is there something you thought was essential to your life that needs to be released? Is there an act of love to which you are called?

Thanks be to God who is with us, on every path, in every place, calling us into God’s circle of love.