Sermon for Palm Sunday  
April 5, 2020

I traveled once with a group of friends, and discovered that one of them, the one I roomed with, was different from the rest of us. She was a planner. And by that, I mean she had to have her days scheduled, even on vacation. She wanted to know where we’d meet up and when, and if those plans changed, or if someone was late, she wasn’t always good about being gracious.

The rest of us were befuddled, at best, and annoyed, at worst. “We’re on vacation! Why do we have to plan where we’ll have dinner when we’re at breakfast?”

Many of us feel more comfortable with plans, though, so what it comes down to is how we react when those plans change, whether by choice or by circumstance. Though not to the degree of my friend, I like making plans, I like having plans, I like knowing what to expect in advance, but I can also appreciate the importance of being flexible.

One of the things I really enjoy planning is worship. I like it all, whether it’s for a random Sunday in the middle of the long season after Pentecost or a festival Sunday. And we had plans for today, for Palm Sunday. We had plans for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Easter. We had hoped they would be plans that would create meaningful worship experiences, that we would gather together during this most holy part of the church year, and lift up our voices in prayer and praise.

We made plans, assuming that nothing would happen to change our them significantly. And, as a congregation, we were looking forward to our Palm Sunday processions, the solemnity of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, the joyful proclamation on Easter that Christ has risen.

We had plans. But – without intending to, without expecting to, without wanting to -- apparently, we gave up those plans for Lent.

This whole time so far has felt very much like what Lent is supposed to be. Even as my work continues, even as I keep coming to church on Sunday mornings, life is slower now. It’s not what it is normally. And, much like I’ve looked forward to being able to eat chocolate again when I’ve given that up for the 40 days of Lent – only to a far greater degree – I’ve found myself looking ahead to the joyful day when we’ll be released from these directives.

But Lent calls us to live in the present, as we make our way to Easter. It asks us to be patient and intentional, and it invites us into a contemplation of our lives and that which we deem important. Lent is a time when we are supposed to try to be more introspective, when we’re supposed to reflect on our lives and our need for God’s grace, so that our Easter celebration is rooted in our knowledge that we are in need of God’s grace and mercy.

Because of this virus, many of us are finding ourselves with extra time, slower lives, being removed from our routines. I’ve had friends tell me how much they’ve appreciated seeing their children form closer relationships, how much they’ve enjoyed spending time baking or cooking as a family.

Obviously, it’s not all sunshine and roses, because there are people who are genuinely suffering greatly, people whose existences are threatened. As a church, as a community, we have a duty to help those people, to pray for them, to advocate for their well-being. To the extent that you are able, I hope that you will do those things, mindful of our Lenten disciplines and our call to Christian discipleship, which include caring for the vulnerable.

While the cause for the opportunity to live deeper into Lent -- to remind ourselves or to learn anew how to live intentionally, to nurture our faith, and to seek new ways to experience God’s mercies – isn’t an ideal situation, it is an opportunity for us.

Perhaps, during all this extra time we have -- and to the extent that we are able to do so -- we should be asking ourselves an important question: In our longing to return to “normal,” what parts of that normal are really worth returning to? Or, to put it in another way: When Easter arrives, and we have the freedom to pick up the things we’ve given up for Lent, should we be in a hurry to do so?

The path of discipleship is one that should always include introspection and prayer, careful consideration of the choices we make, repentance and an awareness of our need of God’s grace, and paying attention to the needs of those around us, most especially those who are vulnerable.

We’re about to enter Holy Week. In the evening devotions I prepared and in our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday serives, we’ll dwell on the story of Jesus in the days leading up to Easter. It’s a whirlwind of events, culminating in the final meal he shares with his closest friends and followers, before being arrested and given a sham of a trial.

And it would be wonderful if all our plans that we made could be used, and we could all gather together today with our palms, gather together in a few days to remember the first time Jesus shared bread and wine and to sing “were you there when they crucified my Lord?” And it would be wonderful if we could gather in this place next Sunday and lift up our voices in joyful alleluias.

We had plans.

But even though those plans have had to be modified, Holy Week will still happen. Easter will still happen. And, one day, we will gather as the people of God in this place again. Who we are when that happens will depend upon who we are through this time when we are separated.

As we prepare to enter Holy Week, may we remain mindful of Lent’s call to repentance and confident of God’s everlasting love and enduring presence in our lives.