

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter 3-A (16 April 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 2:14a,36-41, 1 Peter 1:17-23, Luke 24:13-35, Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17

1 Exile

Our Epistle today, First Peter, is a letter written to a people in exile. You see it all through the book. Today's reading begins, "If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile." (1 Peter 1.17 NRSV)

Exile is a theme throughout the Bible. Exile was the repeated experience of the Jewish people in ancient times. Exile was the experience of Jesus and his family as they fled from their home into Egypt to escape the murderous intentions of King Herod. Exile was the experience of the people to whom Peter wrote: Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah and Jews who didn't had all alike been driven out of Jerusalem by the Romans and scattered throughout the empire.

Exile is a theme in the Bible because it is a theme throughout human history: peoples are moved by force of arms or politics or economics. History is replete with ethnic cleansing and tribal pogroms. Today we might consider especially the Syrian people being slaughtered by their own government, various other middle-eastern persons seeking a safe haven from the chaos of their homes, Latin Americans seeking a place where they might be able to feed their children, or all kinds of indigenous people whose homes are being taken from them or poisoned in the names of progress and energy.

Exile is something that you and I know, even if you've lived in the same place all your life. Our normal patterns and habits and expectations have been taken from us, and we feel like strangers in our own communities. Our normal sources of comfort and consolation, safety and security, have been taken from us. Visiting the grocery store, the bank, or the hospital are all alike rife with uncertainty. At a funeral this week, the children of the person we buried, in deep need of one another's affection, all stood six feet apart, wearing masks and gloves. Someone else told me of a birthday party that consisted of people driving by, isolated in their own cars, waving and holding

up balloons. Or a third person who visited relatives and raked their leaves for them, sharing their greetings from the yard while the family they were visiting stood apart on their porch.

2 Fear

What is the difference between exile and a vacation? They're both about being away from home, away from what's normal. But what marks exile, as opposed to a vacation, is fear. Refugees don't leave their homes, their families, their cultures to go to a strange place and try to start over from nothing unless there is some serious fear driving them there.

The amazing, unprecedented shuttering of the U.S. economy is something that would have been unimaginable only weeks ago. But what did it was fear. Right now there's a lot of fear floating around us, inside of us. There's fear of the unknown: not knowing who is actually carrying this virus without feeling its effects, not knowing if *I* might be carrying this virus without feeling its effects. There's fear that *I* might unknowingly pick up the virus from a document, a doorknob, a grocery store, or a family member. There's an awful lot of fear related to job losses and the depreciation of assets. There's fear about running out of food or paper products of medicine. There's fear for the wellbeing of our spouses, our children and our parents.

There's fear of civic unrest and desperate people taking desperate measures. The opening of gun shops as essential services and the rush of business those shops experienced were as pure and unadulterated an expression of fear as I can imagine.

Some of us feel that fear as anxiety that is nearly incapacitating. Others of us squash it down and mask it with casual bravado. For some, the terror is so pronounced that the only response they can find is denial. But right now everyone, rich and poor, hungry and well-fed, of every age and ethnicity and socio-economic status, shares a common fear of getting sick, a fear of making others sick. The current pandemic, the work of a tiny, unseen virus, is pointing to a truth that has been at the core of our faith since the beginning: we are one people, created by one God, and our destinies are all tied together.

3 Peter's Advice

"If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile." (1 Peter 1.17 NRSV)

This is Peter's advice, Peter's admonition. When you find yourself in exile, when you find yourself in fear, live not in terror but in "reverent fear." Another translation puts it as "reverent awe."

What makes fear reverent? It's about whom you fear, of whom or what you are in awe. And this is a very important, very relevant question. Because whatever it is that you fear the most, that is what is going to control your life. That will be the basis of your calculations, the motivator for all your decisions, the focus for all your attention.

Of course, advertisers learned long ago to pull every lever they could in order to grab our attention – fear being the most easily accessed lever of power. So our news sources, our phones, our televisions and newspapers – they’re all oriented around fear and urgency. But Peter offers us an alternative suggestion.

“If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in *reverent* fear during the time of your exile.” (1 Peter 1.17 NRSV) Reverent fear, holy awe, fear of God has a very different character than the fear of the present moment that surrounds us. It has a much longer timeline, a gentler engagement, an outcome that is both more sure and more benevolent than any of the other messages surrounding us, clamoring for our attention and our allegiance.

The fear of God is quieter, isn’t it? Calmer. Gentler. It is not demanding in the same way. It doesn’t get in our faces and make urgent demands that we do something *now*. Instead it is present, constant and trustworthy, a solid place on which to stand and a steady guide to which we can look for direction. It is the fear of God that leads us away from self-concern and anxiety, and frees us instead to “love one another deeply from the heart.”

Pro-tip: doing something for someone else is one of the most effective ways that you can care of your own mental and emotional well-being. Not something huge and extravagant: something small that carries more emotional freight than anything else. Something that helps someone know you care.

4 Jesus

So, finally, caring for others brings us to Jesus. Jesus cared for us by entering into our exile, abandoning the privilege and safety of life outside the human experience. Jesus was born as a little baby and lived as a refugee, a blue-collar worker, a member of an oppressed ethnicity. Jesus shared with us some of the darkest experiences life has to offer and did not shrink even from dying, and dying in one of the worst ways ever devised.

Jesus not only entered into our exile in his personal experience, Jesus entered into the exile of his followers by showing up, being present with them in the dark aftermath of his passion and mysterious resurrection. On the road to Emmaus Jesus found two of his disciples in sad conversation and he joined them, though unknown to them until they finally recognized him in the breaking of the bread. It was this recognition that enabled them to retrace their steps, to hurry back to Jerusalem down the scary dark road, in order to proclaim, in chorus with the rest of the disciples, “The Lord has risen indeed!”

Peter encourages us, in the midst of a fearful time, to live not in fear of illness or fear of hunger or fear of running out of toilet paper. Peter encourages us not to live in fear of deprivation or fear of loneliness or fear of death. Peter encourages us to live in fear of God, who is greater than all other things and the source of every good. Fear of God, who alone has power to save and power to put every loss aright. Fear of God, who joins us in our exile, endures great suffering for our sake, and invites us to to experience the gift of an indestructable life.

Amen.