

Like many of you, I am in “quarantine mode” as I write this week’s sermon. It has been hard fighting off the fear and anxiety that creeps in with every news feed update that’s full of gloom. Already here in our state, most local stores and businesses are closed, parks vacant, hospitals are facing equipment shortages, what once were busy streets are now ominously quiet, and the number of Covid-19 cases is growing by the day.

In other parts of the world, doctors are being forced to make hard decisions about who will receive medical care, and who will die. Countless people are getting laid off without warning, facing sickness in isolation without medical insurance, caring for the infected without adequate protection, watching helplessly as savings dwindle away, and mourning their dead without the dignity of having proper funerals or memorials. And of course churches everywhere have replaced in-person worship with virtual worship services making it difficult for anyone without internet to be involved. I’m sure, like me, you’ve said these words out loud, “What next?!”

Well, on Monday, Governor Henry McMaster announced a new measure to limit groups of three or more people as health officials work to stop the spread of coronavirus cases. Shortly after that news was released, the cancellation of all schools in SC was extended to April 30. Which prompted the same response from Bishop L. Jonathan Holston, who painfully released his recommendation for “leaders of each local church to continue to suspend in-person worship services and all gatherings, meetings and events through April 30”. This means celebrating the most important moments of our Christian faith – Jesus entering Jerusalem with praise, Jesus washing the disciples feet, the Last Supper, the Passion, and most importantly, the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ will look very different this coming Holy Week and Easter

Sunday. I'm sure, like me, after saying out loud, “What next?”, you too have thought the words soon after, “Come quickly, Jesus.”

Here we are, the Church together with the world in crisis and we are brought this Gospel lesson from the lectionary on these last days of Lent, as we prepare for Jesus's Passion. In this Gospel lesson from John, Jesus is summoned by his buddies, Mary and Martha to the bedside of their brother, Lazarus. “Come quickly,” begs Martha, “Lazarus, the one you love is sick.” And Jesus's response to Mary and Martha's plea for emergency medical assistance is odd. John tells us that when Jesus receives the news he says, “Lazarus isn't terminal. This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it.” I can picture the disciples' reaction now, “Well, how do you know Jesus? How can you, without physically examining Lazarus, possibly know he isn't sick or dying?” John also tells us that when Jesus receives the horrible news he does not immediately go where they are in Judea. No, John says Jesus loved them, but stayed where he was for two more days. I can picture Mary and Martha waiting for Jesus to come. Waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting... and waiting. For two whole days, waiting for Jesus to “come quickly!”.

Finally, three days later when Jesus arrives Martha gives Jesus a piece of her mind, “Lord, what took you so long? If you had been here when I asked and arrived three days ago my brother surely would not have died! He's already been in the tomb for four days!” Or as she says in the King James version, “already yet he stinketh”. What was Jesus doing that was more important than aiding a friend in dire need? After all, isn't that what Jesus taught? That a friend is someone who cares enough to drop everything they're doing and comes when you call. Isn't that Jesus's definition of friendship? Was Jesus on another mountain somewhere giving his Sermons and couldn't break away? Or did Jesus just have a busy healing schedule with a thousand sick

people ahead of Lazarus? We don't know. John just says Jesus waited for two days and on the third day, decides to go “wake him up.”

Are you, like me, Mary, and Martha, in this time of waiting, feeling impatient with Jesus? Do you find this three-day time gap, this insensitive 72-hour hiatus strange? I mean I'm angry it takes Jesus three whole days to get to Lazarus! And he takes his sweet time too! True, he does go, but only when Jesus finally stops whatever he's doing, though whatever it is it isn't significant enough for John to mention it. But when Jesus finally gets to the tomb Jesus pulls off a spectacular resuscitation as Jesus cries with tears in his eyes, “Lazarus arise! Come out! Unbind him! Let him go!” And from that crying out, Lazarus miraculously strides forth from the tomb.

It is a popular saying in church when we say, “God is good all the time, and all the time God is good.” If that's true, why is there a three day postponement to do good?

I am a Christian because I believe in resurrection. I believe it as metaphor and as symbol. I believe that God can and will bring back to life all that is dead, buried, forgotten, and festering within us: old wounds, hardened hearts, stubborn addictions, fierce fears. I believe that God is always and everywhere in the business of making us more fully and abundantly alive —alive to love, alive to hope, alive to each other. I believe not only that God is love, but that God is also love *pro nobis* - “for us”. I believe Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. But still, why the wait? Why these empty spaces? Why this wasted time? Why the hopeless despair of prolonged waiting? The unanswered questions? The delayed salvation? If God is a God for us, what good is God's good if it is goodness too late?

From the time that the Hebrews went into slavery to the day that God delivered them from Egyptian slavery there was about 400 years. Exodus begins with God showing up to Moses

in a burning bush saying, “I am who I am, or also translated, I will be who I will be. I am the God of your forefathers. I've heard the cry of my people. I've come down to deliver them from the hand of Pharaoh.” And though this verse is not found in your Bibles I'm sure Moses responded, “Finally! Great! You know Lord, it's about time! We've been slaves down here for 400 years! Don't rush right over now!” I know someone too who's prayed to God every day for deliverance from the relentlessly painful arthritis that has plagued her for a very long time. Every day she's prayed to God for rescue from this hell and she has heard nothing from God.

Stanley Hauerwas, longtime professor of theological ethics at Duke University, once said, Israel's faith was “long training in being out of control.” Like a long-distance runner running away from God's grace. In other words, their faith was long training in being out of control of its relationship with God, without despising God for God's delay. Actually, that's not a bad definition of the training required for the faithful Christian life. As a disciple, as a follower of Jesus Christ, you got to learn the patience to live our lives out of control. To be vulnerable to the comings and goings. And regrettably, also to the tardiness of a living Sovereign God. The Thessalonians asked Paul, “When is Jesus returning? We're worn out with waiting.” “Oh with the eternal, omniscient Lord, a thousand years are like one day,” Paul replied.

Laugh out loud with me in saying, “Nice try, Paul.”

However, there is something in Paul's words there I need to accept. The essential Christian virtue of patience, or perseverance, or endurance: the virtue of allowing God to be God in God's own good time. Our lives are not under our sole control. We live on God's time, not ours. It's generally believed for Christians to say, at the time of death, “I believe that my loved one is now in heaven with God.” I know that's what I heard with every handshake from family members and people who I've never met say at the end of my father's funeral. “He's in a better

place.” And perhaps that is the case. But traditional Christian belief has more typically said that when we die, we wait. The dead wait for the last trumpet to sound, for the general resurrection of the dead. In death, even as in life we wait, utterly dependent upon a God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. To show up, to raise the dead, and to make our lives mean what they could not mean on our own. I believe that even in death we will have a future, but our future, being totally in God’s hands, will be, as our present, in God’s own good time. I believe God is love. It’s up to God to make our lives mean something beyond our time. As Pope Benedict put it, “Only God has a future.” Our sole hope is that the God who raised Lazarus, although three days after his death, shall raise us.

Maybe in this coronapocalypse hiatus we are being made to wait in order for God to get rid of our urge to make our lives turn out the way we want on our own. Maybe this is not a disease, but a cure to be cured of ungodly impatience, to let God be God in time. Maybe we must wait because what God is up to is more than the righting of a few injustices, the soothing of some pain. If it’s a new heaven and a new earth, creation brought to completion, total renovation, it may take a while. Or maybe it is that we are just in a fallen, imperfect world and we must sit and wait and reflect on that truth. But remember that God has made a way for something better.

When I got sick last year and went into ketoacidosis due to a bacteria blood infection of MSSA, I had never felt so weak in my life. I thought for sure it was just the flu and that I’d get over it. When I went to the urgent care to get tested for strep throat, I remember the doctor on duty looked at me with wide eyes and very seriously explained to me that I needed to go to the emergency room ASAP. While in the intensive care unit, I was miserable those first few days. Constantly being woken up to be poked every hour throughout the night so that they could draw blood was difficult to get through. Those two weeks were truly hard and horrendous on me and

my family. I remember thinking to myself, “What next? My father and best friend is gone. Is it my time now too? How terrible that would be for my mom and Kendall. For my church congregation.” Then I thought what if my suffering is a lesson? What if I’m to be a student of sickness? What if I’m meant to grow in my relationship to God even during this craziness? What if I’m hearing you say to me Lord that this is happening because you’re trying to teach me something about my finitude and my morality? What if this has all been for me to say what the Psalmist said, but in my own lamenting and praiseworthy words. That I too join with the Psalmist crying out to you in their “pilgrimage song” saying I believe that God loves us, reaches out to us, saves us. I believe Jesus is God With Us. But not always as soon as we might like. So as we wait in our own sort of intensive care, let us cry out loud to God together in this time of crisis:

“I cry out to you from the depths, Lord—
 my Lord, listen to my voice!
 Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!
 If you kept track of sins, Lord—
 my Lord, who would stand a chance?
 But forgiveness is with you—
 that’s why you are honored.

I hope, Lord.
 My whole being[a] hopes,
 and I wait for God’s promise.
 My whole being waits for my Lord—
 more than the night watch waits for morning;
 yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!

Wait for the Lord!
 Because faithful love is with the Lord;
 because great redemption is with our God!
 He is the one who will redeem us
 from all its sin.

Amen.