

Sermon for June 7, 2020 – “What If...?”

Trinity Sunday, Year A—Texts: Lamentations 3:19-26, 31-33, 37-42; 2 Chronicles 7:12-16, 19-22; Ephesians 5:8-17-20

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Not to state the obvious but we are living in unprecedented times. COVID-19 is one of the most dramatic and far reaching events in world history thanks—in no small part to the Internet and global communications. The world as we knew it had stopped! Borders were closed. Travel was suspended. Schools and businesses closed. The National Football League, Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League, the NCAA basketball Final Four were all cancelled though the major sports leagues (football, baseball and hockey) are all talking about the possibility of having some semblance of a season, hopefully at some point in the not too distant future. And until a week or so ago things like concerts, eating out, vacations, and—oh yeah—church services had been put on indefinite hold. We’ve been “sheltering in place”, listening to pundits explain death ratios, the spread of the virus, and how the US and global economies have plummeted. From a temporal perspective you might think it couldn’t get much worse. That is, until these last few weeks the protests and violence that seemed to be everywhere in the wake of the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis back on May 25. Our 24-hour news cycle tabulates the pandemic’s carnage daily, the number of illnesses and deaths, businesses closing (some permanently), the emotional and relational fallout fueled by fear and anxiety on millions of people.

Now, as far as I know, Westwood First has had no serious brushes with COVID-19 itself, though several church members have died, and funeral services were unable to be held. Still, it would be absolutely cruel and callous to minimize any of the current challenges and personal tragedy that this pandemic has thrust upon the world. But what if there’s another perspective? What if there’s another narrative that measures and evaluates things through the lens of eternity rather than simply time? The narrative of which I speak is the one that our readings, and many others throughout Scripture, seem to offer.

As I said in my introduction to the readings, we won’t be debating “Divine Providence” today and as far as the debate over whether God tests us, we’ll be looking at that in a few weeks. So while we won’t be **directly** asking the question it’s hard to ignore the evidence, the Scriptural evidence that suggests that not only is God indeed active but that He’s paying very close attention to what’s going on and, not surprisingly, has something to say to His people. Having said all that please let me be clear, I do NOT think that God has sent the pandemic to punish us or to test us.

I'm merely asking, "What if...?" "What if...?" What if there is, in fact, a God who is personal, a God who created all that there is, who loves all people deeply, and longs to have a personal/eternal relationship with them, a loving, intimate relationship that is as a representation of the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity Father, Son and Holy Spirit? What if this love has extended to such a degree that God the Son would come and die to procure forgiveness and eternal life for whoever would turn from their selfish ways and self-focused idols to believe and trust in **Him**? What if this love was expressed in the sending of the Holy Spirit to enable and empower people to bear witness to that love in the world? And what if despite this violence, corruption, injustice, greed, power-mongering, immorality, and neglect of the poor and marginalized, what if all of this became so great all across the world (even among those who claim to be Jesus' followers) that He allowed this pandemic to hit the global PAUSE button that caused the world to stop? What if from heaven's perspective this is a severe mercy?

Again—I'm not saying this happened, I'm just asking the question "What if...?" What if this is a divine global intervention designed to get us to STOP, examine ourselves, look up, forsake wickedness, repent of our greed and self-focus, address injustice. help the weak, love the poor, forgive our enemies, and walk in righteousness? "What if...?" Isn't this the very admonition that God gave through Jeremiah when the corruption and evil of his day had reached its limit? We heard this in our first reading from Lamentations, **"Who can command things to happen without the Lord's permission? Does not the Most high send both calamity and good? Then why should we, mere humans complain when we are punished for our sins? Instead, let us test and examine our ways. Let us turn back to the Lord. "Let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven and say we have sinned and rebelled."**

As I said – let me be clear, I'm not suggesting that we take the prophet's words, actually God's words spoken through the prophet, literally. I do NOT think that God has sent the pandemic to punish us or to test us. I'm asking, "what if...?" What if in an act of severe mercy our heavenly Father is taking what is meant for evil and using it for good? What if, like any good parent, God's put us in "time out."? What if...? What if, far from being punitive God's desire is to help us pause and take stock, evaluate our lives, our relationships, our idols, and return to Him for the life abundant and eternal for which we've been created and which God intends for us?

Think about it, one-by-one the false gods in whom we've trusted have been revealed. And like the statue in King Nebuchadnezzar's' dream with a head of gold, arms and chest of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of mingled iron and clay, a stone "not cut by human hands" has destroyed it. Life came to a screeching halt and all our planning's been put on hold. We sit at home and try to surround ourselves with distractions, things to amuse ourselves, occupy our time even perhaps—to stave off boredom.

Some on the other hand have chosen to make better use of the time. They have seized on the opportunity to do a little self-improvement; maybe take an online class or try that new recipe. But I wonder how many people saw this as an opportunity free from everything that usually distracts them to consider who they really are, to ponder the deeper issues of life, their purpose, to consider the nature of things. Things like love and family, even God, particularly God's great mercy, steadfast love, and amazing grace. Somehow, I think that the answer is "not enough."

In his book, *The Problem with Pain*, C.S. Lewis rightly observed that "God whispers to us in our prosperity and shouts to us in our pain, it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. No doubt [it] is a terrible instrument but it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. "It removes the veil. It plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul." And is there any doubt that the world has largely fallen deaf to God's Word? So what if in His severe and infinite mercy God seeks to free us from being consumed with ourselves and the trivial things we've elevated to importance.

Our faith in the prophets of science, technology, and advanced medicine have seemingly been brought to their knees by an invisible microbe. It has spread indiscriminately across the globe like a tsunami, unstoppable, even as our best and brightest scientists, doctors and researchers race to find a cure. I have faith that they will. But in the meantime what are we to make of all of this? Is this just bad karma? Is it just another thing to get through? Is it just a blip on the screen of world history? Are we to simply follow the mantras that we seem to hear over and over ad nauseum? You know the one's I mean; "Let's think positive." "Let's pull together." "We're all in this together." "We're Americans. We'll get through this." "We've been through tough things before and we'll get through this too." Um, as well-meaning as they're meant to be, I don't think so. And when we, as God's people, lift our eyes up to the hills do we really need to ask where our help comes from? Of course not! We know though occasionally need a reminder that our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. We know that the Lord will keep us from all harm, that He will watch over our lives, our coming and going both now and forevermore.

So, as I've said twice now I say yet again, I do NOT think that God has sent the pandemic to punish us or to test us. But I agree very much with C.S. Lewis and I also believe that pain teaches. I do think that sometimes things just happen, even bad things to good people, that provide us with opportunities. Opportunities to learn. Opportunities to grow. I think in our personal lives and in our corporate experience as a church there are very specific windows of time when we have the opportunity to see life more clearly than ever before. Death and crisis have a way ..of pushing the really important things to the forefront.

Solomon, renowned for his wisdom, said that there is more wisdom in the house of mourning than in the house of feasting. Paul, as we read earlier writing to a blatantly corrupt/immoral society in Ephesus, pleaded with them to, “Awake sleeper, and arise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.” Many followers of Christ have prayed for many years that God would cause a great movement of His Spirit to happen in the world. Something big. Something perhaps, to rival Pentecost, the Reformation, or (at least in the United States) the Great Awakenings. They’ve prayed that God would awaken the whole world to the greatness of His love and the certainty of His return and coming judgment if not actually step down from Heaven and take control once again. We hear the prayer from Psalm 13, “How long O Lord...?” In like manner many of those involved in the Church and have a great love for the Church have prayed that the Church would be renewed, that we would wake up to our duplicity, and our complicity in the systemic evil in the world not the least of which are poverty, racism, sexism, the hypocrisy, the hardness of heart, the immorality, the judgmental attitude. The idolatry that has separated us from our first love—God.

I say this because, and this is important, because God’s discipline, his loving, kind, and even severe mercy to bring about repentance always begins with His own children. I’ll say that again, God’s discipline, His loving, kind, and even severe mercy to bring about repentance always begins with His own children. If this global pandemic, if the racial violence of these past two weeks that began with the senseless murder of a black man aren’t a wake-up call that shakes his Church out of complacency, then I don’t know what will. Could this crisis and tragedy be our chance? Could this be God’s plea/warning His wayward children to “Stop being conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we might test and experience what the will of God is that which is good, well pleasing and perfect”? What if it was?

What if millions and millions of those who claim to be Christ’s followers would respond to this pandemic and racial conflict by forsaking our religiosity, our prejudice, our idols? What if, as 2 Chronicles suggests, those who are “called by His name” actually humbled ourselves and prayed, earnestly sought God’s face, and turned from our wicked ways? What if...? Can you imagine how the world might be changed? It boggles the mind, but one wonders Could it happen? Of course it could—it’s happened before! And it’s happened throughout history most often in times of crisis if not only briefly. Will it happen again? Can we sustain it? I think so but then I also think that only WE can decide that. I say “WE” as both individuals and as a church. At the same time, it’s not a group thing. I mean, we can, as a church, decide that we’re going to do certain things. Our committees, our Session can meet and plot a course forward, but ultimately, and here brothers and sisters is the thing it’s an individual response. It requires each one of us to take the time to be honest with God and get real with ourselves.

The power to change our community, and our world, starts with us. I've long believed that Jesus came to change the world but knew that He could only do so by changing the hearts and minds of individual people. I think this is what Jesus meant when He said that the kingdom of God is within you. What if we took that seriously? What if we Christians started living like Christians every day, in every way, everywhere, for the glory of God and the good of all mankind? If not you—who? If not now—when? What if we worked together?

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.