



## Easter is Coming

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church  
March 29, 2020, the Fifth Sunday in Lent: Selections from Exodus 12 and John 11*

It is hard to believe that only three weeks ago, I stood before you in the Nave at St. John's talking about what it means to be born anew despite doubt, fear, and inadequacy. We talked about the practice "turn"—specifically, about entrusting ourselves to a loving God despite doubt and a lack of certainty.

Today, three weeks later, the world as we knew it has changed. Things we would have believed impossible three weeks ago are now our everyday reality. The bars were actually closed during St. Patrick's day. People are asked to stay home unless absolutely necessary. Millions of people nationally have filed for unemployment. As of Thursday when I was writing this homily, approximately half a million people around the world were infected with COVID-19, 35,000 of them in New York alone. By the time you will hear this homily three days later, who knows what those numbers will be, who knows what else will have happened that we also thought would be impossible.

And in the middle of all that, we have strange and painful scriptures. The reading from Exodus was the tenth plague, in which the

firstborn of all Egypt died. Because the story of the ten plagues doesn't show up in our lectionary, perhaps many of you aren't familiar with it. It is the story of the ten plagues that were visited upon the Egyptian empire as Moses demanded of the Pharaoh, again and again: "Let my people go." These stories sound as fantastic as Tolkien's description of Middle Earth. The first of the ten plagues had taken place in the River Nile, the river that had been both the life of Egypt and also the place Hebrews were commanded to drown their baby boys. In that first plague, the River turned to blood; the Egyptians came face to face that their very lives depended on the slaughter of the innocents. As the plagues continued, so the story goes, the natural world was turned upside down; there were crazy storms of hail and darkness, there were unnatural swarms of locusts and gnats and frogs, and there was pestilence, and still the empire would not relent. Finally, the most awful plague of all, one I do not pretend to understand; the firstborn human and animal Egyptians died, killed by God, and thus finally Pharaoh's pride was broken and he let the people go. I struggle that this death is attributed to God, even though there is a certain harsh justice about Egyptians experiencing so much of the death they had long inflicted on their slaves the Hebrews.

These stories seem strange and fantastic, but perhaps they are meant for such a time as this. The world is turned upside down, and the earth is warming, and hurricanes and tsunamis are increasing, and COVID-19 has the entire world's human population on its knees. It is almost beyond recognition, beyond understanding. But our

scriptures contain the spiritual memory of such a time as this. And it is a story that ends in liberation of the oppressed.

Our second story is much more personal and intimate; it's the story of Jesus' beloved friend Lazarus who has died. Both Martha and Mary said, if you had been here, Jesus, my brother would not have died. And Jesus breaks down weeping. Maybe he blamed himself. I suspect some of us have the same terrible fault line in our experience of God. If you had been here, Jesus, that which now can never be would have had a chance. If you had been here, God, the loss would not have happened. If our government had stepped up production of tests and ordered mitigation sooner, New York would not have thousands of new sick ones and hundreds of deaths every day. Or if some people had not been reckless and thought thought they would be fine if they kept meeting with people, they would not have brought COVID-19 home to their spouses and parents and kids.

As Governor Walz has said to us on Wednesday, we are too late to flatten the curve of this pandemic: whatever might have been able to have been done is now past, and we are here grieving what will never be because of that. And right here, now, in the middle of the belly of this pandemic beast, a light shines. It is the light of a memory that stretches before and after times like this, the remembrance of the living reality of the presence of Christ who died from the worst of what people can do to each other—and yet he lives. It is the light of the memory of countless Christians across time and space who have loved one another and, despite their natural fear, took courage from

the word of God to minister to the sick no one else would touch. It is the light of the prophets who have told of a reality deeper and broader than all the worst things that can happen, including plagues and death and violence. It is the light of Christ, which shines in the darkness, which whispers of resurrection and the ordinary joy of togetherness that will come again when this storm has passed.

In the meantime, beloved St. John's community, I don't know the future, or the loss that will undoubtedly come to our community and our world. I do know that what I spoke about three weeks ago is as true today as it was then: we can be born again, and again and again, into lives based on trusting the living God. This God is always working for healing and love, and can bring good in any and all circumstances, including this one.

I listened to Mariann Budde's sermon from March 22, and she said she couldn't help but think of J.R.R. Tolkien's statement from the Lord of the Rings. There was a gathering of hobbits and dwarves and elves and men and wizards, when they tried to determine what to do with this terrible Ring that had come to them. Frodo, the unlikely Ring-bearer, said, "I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." Gandalf responded: "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil." Tolkien was writing this great epic tale during World War II, so he knew about wishing the times to be different than what they are.

But here we are. We can face with courage all that is true: the reality of the skyrocketing numbers of those sick and dying, and also the reality of God's love and life at work in countless places all around us and within us. There are other forces at work in this world than the will of evil, the mindless power of the virus, or the selfishness of empire.

In our small ordinary ways, it is given to us to decide what to do with this time, and who we shall be during this time. We are still, here at St. John's, doing our small groups about the practice "turn", which means "Pause, listen, and choose to follow Jesus." This past week we shared turn stories from our own past, and we also committed to a daily reflection about what turns we feel God is inviting us to make as individuals and as a community. These "turns" are not only for our own spiritual edification. They are for the shalom and healing of the world God so loves. It is for us to decide, with God's help, to live from patience, kindness, generosity and courage instead of fear, denial, selfishness and hoarding.

What is the turn God is asking of you? As we are invited to pause, listen, and choose to follow Jesus, perhaps we might consider regular rhythms of pausing. Do not hit send on your email, yet. Do not rush to the next task, yet. Pause the next time you are tempted to check the situation update for the latest numbers of those infected by COVID-19. In the morning, before you pick up your smart phone, pause, get a cup of coffee or tea, and sit in silence with God.

Then listen. To what are you listening? To whom? Deeper than your angst, your feelings, and the news, what is God's Spirit whispering to you?

And choose to follow Jesus. We can go the way of empire or the way of survival alone, it is true. Or we can follow the Way of Love that Jesus showed us and still embodies through us today.

As you consider your personal turn every day, know that it matters. In our small ordinary ways, God is seeking to act in this world. There are other forces at work in this world besides the will of evil or the mindless destruction of the virus. What force is God's Spirit whispering into being within you? You know what it is. Let it awake. Let us join together to walk this Way of Love.

And in May, or June, or July, or whenever it is that we can finally be together again in person, I promise you this: that very first Sunday, we will finally celebrate Easter together. We will sing, Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia! Because we are an Easter people. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection and love and life of Christ are always stronger, in the end, than the powers of sin and death. So hold on, St. John's, hold on. God is with us. Easter is coming.