

A Easter 7 5.24.20

Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11

Focus Statement: God waits with us.

Fun fact: I learned the etymology of the word “quarantine” this week. Quarantine is from the Italian “quarana”, meaning forty. From 1347 to 1350, the Black Plague ravaged Europe, killing nearly a third of the population. In an effort to keep the disease from spreading, officials in the port city of Ragusa established a policy of “quarantino,” a forty day period that ships arriving from plague-ridden areas were required to stay in isolation before being allowed ashore. It is important to note that even in medieval times, the system of quarantine was imperfect and rife with inequality. One article I read noted: “For [some], especially those with money, quarantine could be optional. “There are people who are able to evade quarantine, there are people who were able to buy their way out of quarantine, there are people who were able to just leave when a quarantine was imposed and not come back until it was over,” says [historian Karl] Appuhn. “So, the people who suffered under quarantine tended for the most part to be poor—people who had no choice.”¹ Coronavirus too, is having an inequitable effect. While all of us are equally vulnerable to infection—the virus itself does not register differences in race, class, or socioeconomic status—the effects of the economic shutdown are being born on the shoulders of those with the least to spare. It is the cruel irony of poverty that staying home to protect the vulnerable most hurts the vulnerable we are trying to protect.

¹ Johanna Meyer, “The Origin of the Word ‘Quarantine,’” *Science Friday*, <<https://www.sciencefriday.com/articles/the-origin-of-the-word-quarantine/>>, accessed: 21 May 2020.

But, why forty days? Why aren't we all in "trentino" or "cinquantino"? I want to make a joke here about Quentin Tarantino, but I can't come up with one, so just know there's a pun here waiting to emerge. Anyway, the question at hand, why forty? According to Appuhn, the reason was probably arbitrary. It may have had something to do with the cultural weight of the number forty. Noah was aboard the ark forty days, Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness for forty years, Jesus fasted forty days, there are forty days of Lent. The Bible is full of stories in which the number forty is the mark of completion.

Biblical basis or not, I think this quarantine is hard because staying home and doing nothing is so antithetical to who we are as people of faith. Our faith is born out of following a man who regularly broke social norms to be with those cast out of their communities. Jesus regularly ate with sinners and outcasts, healed lepers, touched—and raised—the dead, and generally did all the things a good, law-abiding person was not supposed to do. In Jesus we see someone for whom healing was contagious. The scriptural mandates against associating with lepers, the dead, and other deemed unclean were not made in cruelty but out of concern for the health of the greater community, yet when Jesus broke those barriers he didn't become ill, the ill became well.

This practice of Jesus associating with the outcasts is baked into who we are as Christians. On my better days, when I am able to give those congregations who choose to gather unlawfully and despite CDC guidelines the benefit of the doubt, I remember that not being together in the midst of crisis is so antithetical to how the church has behaved for thousands of years. The early church thrived during an outbreak of the plague in the second

century, when Christians put their own lives at risk to care for the sick. And Luther's words from "On Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague" urges care for the neighbor above all. When tragedy strikes, the church shows up, casserole dish in hand, to be with those affected. On Wednesday when the dams broke in Midland, the first announcements I got were from colleagues opening their churches to And what is so challenging about this particular pandemic is that the thing which we the church are uniquely gifted at, gathering for mutual prayer and support and being an embodied example of God's hands and feet in the world, turn out to be the most dangerous things we could do right now. Because of the insidious nature of how this virus spreads, it is safer for us to eat at a restaurant than it is for us to sit together in our sanctuary, sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" and share the Lord's Supper together. And that's weird, and hard, and painful.

Which is why these particular texts are a gift to us in this time and place, when the world around us is beginning to crack open and we the church are being urged to stay closed. Because these texts are about being in that uncomfortable period of waiting on God, and about trusting that there is work to do, and gifts to receive, in the waiting.

Our first reading today was from the first chapter of Acts. Acts, you might recall, is the continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Luke tells the story of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, while Acts is the story of how the early church emerged after Jesus' ministry. Luke, like the other Gospels, ended with a series of resurrection appearances of the crucified Jesus to his followers. Acts starts during one of those appearances, with the disciples demonstrating that despite all that had taken place over the three days of Jesus betray, death, and

resurrection, they still have no idea what Jesus ministry was about, when they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” The question asked here is basically, ‘Jesus, we know that you just literally rose from the dead, but we’re still waiting for you to ride in on a white stallion like the emperor and become king of the world, so, when is that going to take place?’ To which Jesus responded, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

It is not for you to know the times or the periods. What Jesus says here to his eager beaver followers is, wait. Wait. The thing you want, the action you crave, now is not the time for that. The work for now is waiting. How long and for what, that is not for you to know. But... “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Wait, but you will be my witnesses. Wait, because there will be—there is—work for you to do.

And the disciples waited. Not patiently maybe, but they’d just seen Jesus “lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight,” and then “two men in white robes stood by them [and said] “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” so really what else were they to do? They returned to Jerusalem and “went to the room where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthews, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James... constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”

They waited. They waited, they prayed, and they studied. They did those things together, yes, but together just the group of them, not unlike us in our houses in this time. And what we see in this passage is that waiting was not wasted time. It's not that the disciples were just sitting around playing whatever the first century equivalent of Candy Crush was while the world fell apart around them. I mean, they may well have been playing the first century equivalent of Candy Crush, because you have to pass the time somehow, but that time of waiting, that time of quarantine, was sacred time. It was the time necessary for God to act.

Our Gospel reading for this morning is one of those that is just so achingly beautiful that I'm hesitant to even bring it up in a sermon because how could I hope to expand on words as powerful as Jesus' prayer to the Father on behalf of his disciples, on behalf of us who are known to the Father through Jesus. What I'd encourage you to do today at some point is read Joh chapter seventeen aloud to yourself, and let these words sink over you. Read these words aloud and hear Jesus praying for you, because that is what Jesus is doing in this passage. Jesus' last act as the Word made flesh, before going to the cross, was to pray to the Father on behalf of we his people, that we may be protected and saved and known. But the one part from here I will raise up here is verse eleven. "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

Dear people of God, this waiting, this watching, this praying, and sitting still, and holding off, this is sacred work. This is God's work right now. This, counterintuitive as it seems, is what it means to be the hands and feet of God in the world right now. So wait. But as you

wait, know that you do not wait alone. For you are protected by the one who is as close as breathing, one with the Father as Jesus is one. Thanks be to God. Amen.