



March 22, 2020 | Lent 4A
Psalm 23, John 9:1-41
Sermon: Rev. Emily Williams Guffey

In hard times, I often like to go back and dig through stories and histories to try and check in, to touch base with those who have gone before. When hard things have happened in the past, to those who have gone before us, how have they managed? What did their struggle look like? What did their resilience look like? What new, creative ideas did they forge because they had to out of necessity? What were their fears, their anxieties? How did they tell their story?

A number of people have been starting to compare this current crisis with coronavirus--the COVID-19 disease--to the pandemic that swept the world in 1918 with influenza. So, I went looking in Christ Church materials from 1918 to see how the church told its story then: to see what changes might they have made in their worship, and what changes might they have made in their records or in their styles of meetings. I wondered how they might have expanded or otherwise changed their efforts in the community or in the world at large.

I haven't yet found exactly what I was looking for in how the parish might have adapted to the influenza pandemic of 1918, but in my search, I did find a number of letters in the church's most essential records: letters that the rector at that time, William Maxon, sent to the parish from his station in France, where he was serving the Red Cross as a chaplain (for of course in addition to its being the influenza pandemic, it was also World War I). William Maxon had arrived at Christ Church to become the rector in 1899, and then in 1918 he sent a series of letters to the parish about his experiences in France, describing who he was meeting from all over the world, how he was doing, what the challenges were that he was experiencing; so many of them indescribable and so far beyond what he had expected to be doing.

We have done hard things in the past. This parish, this congregation, and so many communities throughout the world--we have done hard, hard things before. And here we are again, in a hard place. We are equipped to do hard things.

Thinking about World War I, I also then wondered about what the parish looked like in World War II, which took me into looking at the parish records from 1943. 1943 stuck out to me in particular because I already knew that that was the time when our side chapel, what we now call St. Michael's Chapel, originated and was dedicated as a small place of prayer for families, for individuals, for those serving in the war, and for the losses sustained in that war, World War II. St. Michael's chapel was dedicated and given by a man named John who was serving in the vestry at the time in memory of his wife, Katherine.

In looking at the records from that spring, 1943, I also found a note that the rector at that time, the Rev. Francis Creamer, wrote to the parish as Lent began in that season, the spring of 1943. It jumped

out at me because that was a very hard time, and he was speaking to a congregation, a community, going through a hard, hard time, in ways far beyond their imagining. His words resonate to me in a very strong way, here in our own hard time. Listen to what he had to say:

Dear members of Christ Church parish,

Lent calls us again from the demands and claims of a world which are often too much with us to contemplate the eternal and changeless truths which are revealed only to those who are willing to retire at times from the press and burden of their workaday lives. So, Jesus left the carpenter shop of Nazareth, the turmoil of his native marketplace, and even the laughter, gaiety, and friendly association of his loved ones to meet with God in the wilderness and there find the true purpose for his life and receive the strength and power to fulfill it. Let us hear in this Lent in these services designed for the deepening of our lives and the enrichment of our souls the call of Jesus: "Come unto Me, all ye that travail and are heavy-laden, and I will refresh you."

*Affectionately,
Francis B. Creamer*

Jesus says, "Come to Me, all ye that travail and are heavy-laden, and I will refresh you." And even in that time of rest, that time when all has ceased, when all has stopped, even that time of the Sabbath, Jesus is active. To rest in Jesus does not mean to stop everything, though our outward physical society and time would suggest that. No, our own hearts are actively resting in Jesus even now, especially now. When we seek out that King of our hearts, who is our Shepherd leading us through, yes, valleys of the shadow of death, we are to fear no evil. We may be afraid, yes; full of anxiety; yes. Even my children are starting to experience the fear and anxiety of these very strange times, as they and we all are pulled out of our regular rhythms and called for the good of our whole communities--for the good of our whole world--to stop and be still.

We remember today especially that even on the Sabbath, God healed. (Although, I note that the words of our Gospel today in their physical particularities – the spitting, the taking and creating of mud, and the smearing it on eyes -- strike me as actions we cannot do today for fear of spreading the virus.) Even then Jesus took what he had, did what he could, even in a time of rest, of waiting, of stopping, and healed those who were healed, those who listened to him in such unexpected and indescribable ways (such as the one who was healed in our story today) could not even tell *how* it happened, only that it *did* happen.

We, too, are beginning to see in ways that we have not yet seen before, how intricately our community is woven together--such that our only call is to remain physically separate, yes, but not emotionally distant, not spiritually distant. Our eyes are being opened to new ways, deeper ways, even more essential ways of being prayerfully, spiritually, socially, and emotionally connected with one another.

My beloved, our Lord is healing us even now. Our Lord is taking us by the hand through deep and dark valleys, in which we do not want to find ourselves. Just like our Lord, just like his communities, just like our own parish, we have been through hard things before, and together, we will go through them again, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.