

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

May 3, 2020

IV Easter, John 10:1-10

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Every year on this occasion – the Fourth Sunday of Easter – we read a portion of the Good Shepherd passage from chapter ten of John’s Gospel, and, every year, we pray together Psalm 23. We customarily read this psalm in the familiar King James language that many of us learned in sepia-toned or Polaroid-ed Sunday-School classrooms, where we Elmer’s Glued a macaroni-Jesus to lead a flock of cotton-ball sheep. In those childhood expressions of this psalm, our happy lambs crossed green, construction-paper fields toward the peaceful pools of water we Crayola-markered into one corner of our project (leaving as much ink on the edges of our tiny hands as at the edge of our art).

Despite these winsome remembrances, we do not so often recall this text as we cross the soft grass of life’s fields. More often, we pray these words in the shadowy, low places of our experience, during dry moments of great fear and worry. And while we recite this psalm in those moments as a reassurance – and surely it is that – these remain foxhole words, words written and prayed *aspirationally*:

*Help me, Lord! You are my shepherd ... you are my shepherd: not this world, not these politicians, not this virus, not this situation ... **You** are my shepherd, Lord! Be my shepherd. Lead me and guide me and be my shepherd, Lord God, because I **want** so much: I want to be my own shepherd, I want to fix this – for myself and for the people I love – but not my will be done, Lord, but yours. Heal me of my pride and my need for control, and may my only desires be what you desire, that your hopes would be fulfilled, hopes for me and for all your people. May I hope as you hope.*

See, the twenty-third psalm does not begin “The Lord is my shepherd, I *do* not want.” No, we and the psalmist pray, “I *shall* not want” ... *shall*, as in my *intention*, that state of being toward which I am devotedly laboring by heart, the one that differs from my current condition. This is a prayer of righteous struggle – of scraped knuckles, and not achievement – expressing the hope for faith, and not its accomplishment. Praying these pastoral words and images shapes our convictions and does not declare their fact, and the power of these psalm *is* its aspiration, the way the prayer pulls us by our hope, through our fears and doubts, and into faith.

In their prescient March 20 article entitled, “Leading Beyond The Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now A Startup,” authors Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard, forthrightly name: “We are not going back to normal ... this is a time [for organizations] to urgently redesign [their] work in light of what we believe is not just a weeks-long ‘blizzard,’ not even a months-long ‘winter,’ but something closer to the beginning of a 12-18-month ‘ice age’ in which many assumptions and approaches must change for good.”ⁱ

Blizzard...
Winter...
Ice Age...ⁱⁱ

In their tripartite model, “To treat the crisis as a *Blizzard*” shapes our response around “emotional and practical support for immediate needs. [In a blizzard, leaders] urge people to take extraordinary measures that not only would be unthinkable in ordinary times, but are unsustainable for long periods. If the crisis generated by COVID-19 is a “blizzard,” it will be over soon. We will all emerge from our shelter[s], and[, together,] resume life roughly the way it was before. Our job in a blizzard is simply to wait out [the bad weather].”

In contrast, a “*Winter* might begin with a [storm], but it is a season lasting months, [and comprises more than only] a single [trial].” New England’rs will know that “winter includes periodic acute events [that] punctuate a continuous period in which human activity must adapt to [inhospitable climate] conditions ... Even in the mild weeks [of a winter], life will be radically different from [what it is in spring or summer – or, for us in the winter of this virus, as life was] just a few weeks ago. And, as with winter in [our part of the country], at any time a [new] storm could arise that [again] brings [our lives] entirely to a halt.”

Finally, if we remain in crisis for as long as 18 months – “a generally accepted timeframe for the wide deployment of an effective vaccine” – we will, collectively, have experienced an “*Ice Age*,” That is, not merely a long disruption with a return to a prior normal, but a crucible experience – one within which we and our world will be fundamentally and enduringly changed into a “new” normal, one ordered by new constraints and new possibilities, by new habits and new routines.

Blizzard.
Winter.
Ice Age.

We Christians, Episcopalians, and members of Trinity Church will not be exempt from the fundamental transformations this virus has inaugurated. While the world we left behind the week of March 9 was imperfect, it was familiar and not without fondness. We must make room, then, for the grief accompanying the recognition that this is not simply a Blizzard delaying that known world’s return ... and, pivoting away from the futile work of mere reconstitution, we must make room, too, for the fears and anxieties that we do not how or when this Winter will end ... yet, laboring *through* those laments, we must also begin the demanding work of discerning who God is calling us as the Body of Christ to become in this moment and for this new age.

The great challenge, of course, is that we do not know how either the world or our place in it will be changed. How, then, do we ready ourselves and our community for a new era ... if we don't know what the new era will be?

We first join our forebearers who walked among the ruinsⁱⁱⁱ of the lives they knew and, like them **we aspire for faith**. Weeping among the rubble, we pray: *The Lord is my shepherd ... I shall not want ...* "I shall not want." Like the "wanting" words of Matthew's Gospel – "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened."^{iv} – the twenty-third psalm invites us to desire what God desires, and the prayer itself becomes a searching for God's lead. Therefore, the pastoral images that follow are not the rewards into which we set the comfortable desires of our own day – "leadeth me, Lord, to a Costco where I can shop without wearing gloves or a mask, and where the toilet paper, disinfectant wipes, and canned chicken are aplenty!" Rather, those lush fields and still waters stand for our promise to follow God through seasons green, and, as in the stanzas that follows, "through the valley of the shadow of death." These are images of our constancy with God, and God's unfailing companionship with us.

Aspiring for faith, then, and dreaming as God dreams, we in these uncertain times – most urgently and above all else – **we act in love**.

"Leading Beyond The Blizzard" invites us to recognize "Every single person [with whom we interact] is experiencing vulnerability like never before."

Some who previously prided themselves on their steadiness and durability, are finding that their usual coping strategies no longer help steady their soul.

Some who brought anxiety and depression into this pandemic, are waking every morning on the very lip of despair.

Some who have always made their own way, are facing certain financial ruin.

Some who felt occasionally marginalized, are feeling isolated and abandoned.

Some who have drawn strength from their family ties, are worrying over spouses, partners, parents, and children who have pre-existing conditions that imperil their health.

People of God, *every single one of us* is experiencing vulnerability on a scale and of a kind for which we have no practice! Therefore, we must "*bear* our vulnerability and pain" – gestures of honesty and authenticity – without "*inflicting* it on others."^v The authors continue, "We owe to everyone we meet tremendous thanks, compassion, patience, and concern, *before* we involve them in our own needs." As Christians, as Episcopalians, as Trinitarians, when everyone around us is hurting, we must set the needs of others before our own.

And when we do this, friends, the hopeful faith for which we aspire, and the generous love with which we act,^{vi} will become oil upon our heads, and whatever the new world we inaugurate together based on these values, will be nothing less than "the house of the Lord."

That we would dwell in those courts forever.

Amen.

ⁱ Crouch, Andy, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard. “[Leading Beyond The Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now A Startup](#).” Journal at PraxisLabs. March 20, 2020. The article, commended to me by the Very Rev. Barkley Thompson, Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Houston, was a great resource as we at Trinity Church were learning the hard way the *Blizzard-Winter* pivot, as we planned and re-planned Holy Week within increasing constraints.

ⁱⁱ When endnoting this sermon, I discovered that the authors published on April 23 a follow-up piece entitled, “[Strategies for Winter: Redemptive Leadership in Survival Times](#).” In this second article, they distill their earlier categories into these topline: “**Blizzard**: You can’t go out – zero visibility and hostile conditions. Need to *shelter*. **Winter**: You can go out, but not for long. Wear protective clothing and check the forecast for storms. Need to *survive*. **Ice Age**: Things don’t grow the way they used to – but we’re finding new ways to live and even thrive. Need to *adapt and rebuild*.”

ⁱⁱⁱ During a phone call this week with the Very Rev. Dr. Cynthia Kittredge, Dean of Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, she imaged our forebearers surviving the “ruins” of their lives. Dean Kittredge pressed the point further than I did in the sermon, naming that the great traditions of world religion grant people of faith advantages for overcoming desolation. The article authors voice this idea, as well: “Grief and loss go together in Christian faith with vision and hope in a singular way, because they are the story of Cross and Resurrection. There is no greater grief than Calvary ... [and] There is no greater hope than Easter.”

^{iv} Matthew 7:7-8.

^v The authors reference Max De Pree, noting that “Trust is built ... when leaders *bear* vulnerability and pain rather than inflicting it on others. We need to have ways to process our own fears that do not involve raising others’ anxiety.” This idea resonates with Nadia Bolz-Weber’s commendation to “preach from scars, not wounds.”

^{vi} Surely this is “the goodness and mercy” we pray “will follow [us] all the days of [our lives].”