

“Business as Unusual”

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Rev. Kimberly Heath
From the Living Room of the Heath family

Do you remember the Exodus? God delivers the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and leads them to the Promised Land *by way of the wilderness*. Not via the short cut either ... God sends them the long way around. Here's the story from Exodus 13: 17-22:

“After Pharaoh sent the people out, God did not take them by the coastal road that runs through the land of the Philistines, even though that was the nearest and easiest route. Instead, God said, “For if they see battle with those contentious Philistines, they might regret their decision and then return to Egypt.” So God chose a different, longer path that led the community of His people through the desert toward the Red Sea. The Israelites marched out of the land of Egypt like an army ready for battle. The people of Israel departed from Succoth and set up camp in Etham at the edge of the desert. The Eternal went on ahead to guide them during the day in a cloud shaped like a pillar; at night He appeared to them in a fire shaped like a pillar to light their way. So they were able to travel by day and by night. The Eternal did not remove the cloud pillar or the fire pillar; by day and by night it continued to go ahead of the people.”

Life was far from perfect in Egypt. Slavery was hard, but it was known. From the start there were not many who liked the idea of leaving their life for a new one. They wanted freedom, but they didn't want the wilderness. But, like it or not, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, it all changed: gone were their homes, gone were their crappy jobs that they complained about, gone were the city and the markets for buying food, gone were their routines ... in a matter of hours, everything was different. None of these urban people knew anything about the wilderness or about living a nomadic/camping kind of life.

Change and loss is incredibly stressful.

And it wasn't just the change. There were threats all around them: Pharaoh chased them, they had no water, then no food, then the Amalekites attacked them. The anxiety was everywhere.

That's the text that comes to mind for us today. I just can't believe the difference one week makes!

My husband and I, with our 3 young girls left to drive south in the wee hours of Thursday morning, March 12th, before all hell broke loose – - just hours before they closed schools and before they began to recommend against travel. It was later that they urged people not to travel and began calling citizens home. For several days it seemed that information was changing by the hour. I was also busy consulting with the church here on our response and decisions to close.

We arrived in Hilton Head, South Carolina, on Friday evening, stayed with my parents for a night, and then moved in to our own rental unit on Saturday evening. However 24 hours later, having just unpacked, we decided we needed to pack up again and get out. We needed to help my parents pack up and drive back too.

Monday was spent packing, followed by two very long drive days on Tuesday and Wednesday. And now here we are back home, in quarantine! With my oldest back home from France and my son home from Queen's University, we now have 7 quarantined in our house! Fun, fun, fun! (Some of you are feeling isolated and like hermits or monks—that's not what I'm experiencing in this 7-person house!)

In the middle of quarantine, I'm trying to figure out how to do church without gathering. We've cancelled pretty much everything at the church as we were hard-pressed to think of anything we do that does not involve the gathering of people. That's what we are all about, and we do it wonderfully at Wall Street! We gather as a church to worship twice on Sundays, we do Sunday suppers, drop-in Coffee Houses and community dinners and Bible Studies; we are also amazing at gathering the community with Recovery meetings, the Brockville 50+ Activity Center, community choirs ... we gather people.

But in a matter of days, it all changed. The church building is quiet. Most of us remember where we were during 911. Just like 911, this is a story that you will be telling for the rest of your life. Where are you now? How are you doing? The feelings we experience might look a lot like what we experience in grief.

I read an article from Rev. Diane Strickland whom we had scheduled to preach here this summer (though who knows now what the summer will bring!) It's about offering support in anxious times. The Rev. Diane Strickland is a Certified Community and Workplace Traumatologist, & Compassion Fatigue Therapist, and she points out that everyone responds to trauma differently. Our responses are not necessarily rational, because as she says:

“Our brains work differently in crisis. Our cognitive function does not necessarily dominate brain function. Instead, our alarm systems working out of the limbic system and the amygdala may launch a takeover. ... So, some people rant about leadership, others fall apart at the grocery store, and still others are up all night worrying about their loved ones. A few will remain calm through all of it. The point here is that we are all different and our response to trauma is unique. We may find others with a similar response, but we can't expect it from others. There are many known and unknown factors that create our responses and as a crisis goes on, our responses may change on a dime.”

Her bottom line is that “We need to be kind to ourselves and to others in this time.”

For me I feel foggy brained, so tired, and there are times when I just want to curl up in bed. How are you feeling? Be aware and recognize that it's normal to be out of sorts, and be kind to yourself and to others when they are not behaving normally.

When there is so much we don't know—how long the government will request we practice social distancing, how the kids will finish their school year, how the economy is going to recover etc. —we need to focus on what we do know.

I don't know how long it took for the Israelites to adapt to being a people who knew how to live in the desert. But it's clear that they adapted. In fact, as you look at the scope of the Old Testament, the 2 events that shaped and maybe even created the Jewish people were events that were hugely traumatic: The Exodus and the Babylonian Captivity, where they were captured by the Babylonians and sent into exile. They did not wish for either event, but God used each event to shape them and to deepen their faith.

If we are open to it, God will use difficult times to create something good. When I was thinking of the story of the Exodus, I noticed for the first time that though the Israelites had no idea how to live in the wilderness, *their leader Moses did*. Why? Years before as a young man he murdered an Egyptian who was beating one of his own people. It was a misguided attempt to do something about the injustice he saw all around him, but God had bigger plans to free them from injustice. When Moses realized people knew about the murder, he ran away into the wilderness, and got a job tending the sheep of a man from Midian. Moses then married, and spent most of his adult life in the Wilderness. Though he was running away from

his own mistake, God had a plan for him even then ... he was shaping a leader and teaching him to lead in the Wilderness.

The wilderness time can be a creative time. The Israelites were different people when they finally crossed the Jordan River and left the Wilderness from when they entered the Wilderness 40 years before. One of the things that they learned was to trust that God was with them, even there. In fact, they were far more aware of God's presence in the wilderness than they were before or even after. One of the warnings at the end was "Take care you do not forget the Lord when you are in the land of plenty!"

Studies show that societies change after pandemics. I read an article in Politico magazine (online) that talks about all the different aspects of society that are likely to be different on the other side of a pandemic or massive crisis on the scale that we have now. The headline of the article is: "Coronavirus Will Change the World Permanently". Here's how: A crisis on this scale can reorder society in dramatic ways, for better or worse. Here are 34 big thinkers' predictions for what's to come." (Follow this link to read more.)

https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579?fbclid=IwAR1ulxHHMsFN7_rCBc1WncZqvHDIUlddTEM5EPnEbrnPzQmU-tBdtm_h2Mq

I have no doubt that this pandemic will change how we function as a society in a number of different ways. It will also change how we function as a church, even when things get back to 'normal'. We've been saying for years that 'the church is not the building' – well folks, here we are! Now we really get to be the church without a building!

Though it's a touch overwhelming, I'm looking forward to using programs like Zoom to connect. We have so many people who are shut in and isolated because of health and mobility, and these are tools that can help them stay closer connected.

Mostly I hope that we will end up digging in to what truly matters. And we may discover that some of the things we thought were important are not as critical as we thought.

What is important is learning how to connect to God as individuals and together. We need to put into practice daily faith practices and learn how to teach them to our children and grandchildren.

God does not cause these bad things to happen, but God will use them to create good. A congregation member sent me a meme on FB that went like this:

Satan- "I will cause anxiety, fear and panic. I will shut down business, schools, places of worship and sports events. I will cause economic turmoil."

Jesus- "I will bring together neighbours and restore the family unit. I will bring dinner back to the kitchen table. I will help people slow down their lives and appreciate what really matters. I will teach my children to rely on me and not the world. I will teach my children to trust me and not their money and material resources."

Amen|

I want to remind you of S.T.A.R. Some of you know this tool really well, but we need to remember:

S: Stop: Take a moment to stop looking at the news feed or doing anything else

T: Take a Breath: Literally breathe slowly and deeply and roll your shoulders. Relax your body.

A: Appreciate: Think of a memory, a time when you were truly grateful and filled with joy. Bring Jesus into that picture. Listen and look to anything he wants to say to you. Now give him or tell him about something you are worried about and again listen. Say thank you.

R: Respond: Now go back to the tasks of the day you need to do, and remember: *You are not alone.*

We are in an uncomfortable and even frightening place — but we are not here alone. God is with us and will never leave us, and God will bring good out of this time.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

A Prayer of the People:

Holy God, we thank you for the coming of Spring. In a time of upheaval and change we thank you for the things that remain the same: we thank you for the melting snow, we thank you for the crocus flowers that are bravely emerging, we thank you for the lengthening of the day and for the sun, we thank you for returning robins, and the songs of many different birds in the morning.

Most of all we thank you for your love and for your faithfulness. We thank you that you never change, you are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Help us to be anchored in your presence.

Oh God we pray for those who work in the medical field: nurses, doctors, lab techs and so many more. We pray for those who are part of the supply chain that bring us food: farmers, truck drivers, factory workers. We pray for those who have been laid off or who are afraid for their jobs. We pray for seniors and for those whose immunity is compromised. We pray for those who were anxious and depressed before this began and now find their anxiety and worries compounded.

God we pray for protection from the Covid-19 virus. We pray for wisdom for our governments as they lead us through this health and economic crises. We pray for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his government and for Premier Doug Ford and his government.

Thank you that they are working together.

We pray for members in our community and our family who need an extra blessing. In a moment of silence or out loud name the names of those who need prayer....

Focus our eyes on you God. Focus our eyes on what you are doing in the world and the small blessings that are all around us.

Together we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen