

August 23, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 18 Exodus 14:21-28

Dearly Beloved;

Barbara and I are well. It is the question I get asked by everyone to whom I speak... "How are you doing?" It is my prayer once again, that this epistle and its attached sermon finds you healthy as well.

This past week, Rebekah brought Matthew out to us, stayed overnight, and then returned to Toronto to do the work to which she has been called at Graceview Church in Etobicoke. Matthew will be with us for a week. Rebekah brought him to us so that he would not have to travel on public transit of any kind. When the week with us is over (next Thursday), we will drive him to Oshawa and Rebekah will meet us and take him to his apartment near Mt. Sinai hospital, downtown Toronto. Thus, throughout the cycle we will have kept him out of crowds and off public transit as an enclosed space.

As we all know, life in the time of Covid-19 is much more complex. This coming week, the Session of St. Andrew's Church will be meeting to consider the question, "Shall we reopen for public worship." I will report to you by this means what our decision is, in next Sunday's edition of this pastoral letter. You may also hear from a member of Session, because we know that not everyone has a computer to access this document. The Church sign will also be used to communicate that services are resuming and when. And I must remind you, that no matter when we do reopen, it will be for worship on Sunday only. Services will be shorter than an hour,

(my target is forty minutes) because meeting in interior spaces as you are aware exposes us all to more risk than outside spaces. The rules governing our assembling will be those of Public Health as mandated by the government of Ontario. I will give you more information about that next Sunday, if we decide to proceed. I thank you for your patience and your understanding.

It seemed to me appropriate to turn back to the story of the Exodus at such a time as this. It is a story about the grace and power of God who does miracles in the midst of HIS people. HE is the Lord God Almighty. I believe we have witnessed a measure of that grace and power during the time in which St. Andrew's has been closed. For me, as for you, this has been a unique space of time. Remaining at home for the balance of the time, going out only when necessity dictated, has not been the norm for any of us. We will remember 2020, as long as we live as the "Year of the Pandemic," and a time when society "rat race like life" came to a strange halt that felt like it would never end.

And yet here we are, facing the question of reopening St. Andrew's for public worship. That is the glory and the terrifying responsibility of this time. Because our worship tradition is a public one, where anyone who wishes to come is welcome to do so, it is possible we will have people with us who have come from other places in order to join us in worship. It has been strange for the balance of our congregation to not be able to gather together. It will be

strange to come together and not be able to greet one another with handshakes and hugs. And yet even as we celebrate, should the church reopen soon, there will be reminders that we do so (to some measure) surrounded by risk.

In Exodus 14 that is one of the dynamics of the Exodus. A Hebrew population of slaves suddenly received freedom. And yet, under God's guidance, and under HIS sovereign protection, they were so aware of the danger of their situation. When they reached the Red Sea they were cornered. They did not have boats to cross the water to the other side. They knew they were being pursued by the Egyptian elite chariot brigade, which had been dispatched to catch them and destroy them. And for us, two questions immediately arise. Have we been set free? And are we really in great danger in the midst of new freedom?

What we know (the science of modern medicine is important here) is that the rate of spread of the Covid-19 virus is greatly reduced at this time in Ontario. The Hebrews were cornered in a much smaller piece of real estate than our Province. The good news is that our Provincial Government guided by the information gathered by Public Health in Ontario is convinced that it is safe for people to gather in limited numbers, under specific conditions. Wearing masks is part of that regimen especially for our age group. So yes, our provincial authorities have said we may resume the right to assemble when we are comfortable doing so. In other words, we are free to make a decision about worshipping at 110 Mill Street.

I love our democratic system of government. And for the most part I feel those who wield power in this odd, strange, trying and dangerous time, have our best interests at heart. They are (I believe) trying to make good and safe decisions about us at this time. My first allegiance is to Jesus and the God revealed in and through HIM. HE calls us to be as wise as serpents, and as gentle as doves...and to respect those in authority over us. I believe that God is with us. I believe that God alone can make us safe and keep us safe in these current conditions, provided we are both faithful and careful. The best example is that I won't leave my mask at home if I am leading worship. By the way, I will be wearing a face shield so that you can see the twinkle in my eye.

I have already learned that wearing a face shield provides challenges to the user. At the baptism of Thomas May, my glasses continued to slip down my nose so that it was difficult to read the words of the service. I have gotten a "band" to hold my glasses in place. And the microphone I would use in the sanctuary would be on the other side of the face shield. That means I would have to raise my voice to be heard, which causes droplets to fly farther if they escape from behind the shield. So, I have gotten a halo mike, which will be on the inside of the shield and nearer my mouth, and I have checked that it is compatible with our existing sound system. So I am free to conduct worship should the Session decide to reopen but, I have had to make (as will you) adjustments. Being set free, means we suddenly have new responsibilities, not the

old ones, brand new ones in keeping with the current circumstances. Another way of saying that, is that God saves, Jesus Christ is Lord, but HE calls me to do my part...wise as a serpent, gentle as a dove. Yes, we have been set free, but there are things we must do to both guard that freedom and remain safe.

Remember the second question? “Are we really in great danger in the midst of this new freedom?” The numbers yesterday (I am writing on Saturday to post on Sunday so yesterday was Friday) were 130 new cases of Covid-19 in Ontario, with 3 deaths. I know as do you, that we are blessed to live in one of those areas of Ontario that has not seen a new case for weeks. That is the upside about our safety margin. But for 130 citizens of our province Thursday was not a good day. On Friday they became part of the slowly rising, but rising number of cases reported in our province. For three people Friday was the day their death was reported to all of Canada in addition to Ontario. You have to believe it. There is danger out there. And we will be taking a risk if we choose to gather together.

Why turn to Exodus 14 at this particular point? When you connect all the dots, here is what it tells us. There is a modern state of Israel, because of what happened on the banks of the Red Sea. Notes in some Bibles point out that it is possible to translate the name of the body of water as the Reed Sea, a much shallower body of water, but still in practical terms, uncrossable. And that is the point of the Exodus History.

The undisciplined, mob of Hebrews that came out of Egypt included every age on the spectrum of human life, and every condition. They had neither rafts nor boats nor any other means of getting everyone across safely.

The Scripture is specific. The Lord told Moses to stretch out his hand. A wind began to blow out of the East. The waters parted and piled up in astonishing fashion. The Hebrew slaves, set free, crossed on dry ground. The Egyptian war machine, a chariot brigade with scything blades on the wheels, said, if they can do it, we can do it. And they pursued the Hebrew rabble. The wind stopped blowing. At the behest of God the waters swept the chariots and charioteers away.... "not one of them survived." As for the Hebrews, not one of them was lost. They saw the waters part. The wind roared in their ears. They saw the power of Egypt swept away. They were witnesses. The current state of Israel, the land of the Jews, exists because Jews believed in their hearts and souls, they had seen God the Lord shape their destiny. Religious or not, the Jewish people look to this episode as a founding of their nation. A generation saw and heard and lived in the midst of the experience.

It is not lost on me that with all the illness and death that has been part of this pandemic to date, second wave pending, (the science is that this is not going to be over in much less than 2 years), not one of our people have been sick with Covid-19 or died of it. Two people connected to our assembly are fighting cancer at this time who had not been diagnosed

before the order came down to “go home and stay home.” One of them is very ill. Unrelated to Covid-19. To me, that is remarkable. And you are witnesses to all of these realities. And by the way, Ardith Irvine, my sister in law has had her surgery, came home the day of the surgery and hosted Barbara and I at dinner at her home during last week. What am I saying in all of those facts? It is almost like, normal illness continues to be a part of our assembly’s life. But we have been preserved from the danger to date of Covid-19. Our age is a factor. Our age group has taken Covid-19 seriously from the beginning. And we must continue to do so. We are witnesses to the fact of what social distancing, self-isolation, masking, hand washing, hand sanitizing can accomplish when a plague strikes for which there is no medical cure. What I am saying is God is with us, as HE was with the Hebrews, as HE was and is with us in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

When, and if a decision is made to re-open St. Andrew’s for worship, I must also add this. Do not come to service if you are not feeling well. Do not come if you are uncomfortable with the idea of doing so. Each of us will have to work through the idea of doing something we have not done since mid March: assembling with other people, perhaps as many as 40-50. And if numbers are lower than that...so be it. None of us can afford to be critical of anyone who decides not to attend, should we re-open. All of us have demonstrated a measure of support for this company of believers, this band of brothers and sisters, to the extent, that we are virtually on

target to make our budget. Your financial commitment to date has made plain the quality of your faith.

In the mean time think on this. When Covid-19 struck our shores, Canada, and Ontario within her, suffered losses. But the truth is we have done rather well all things considered. Some of the credit has to go to those who lead our various jurisdictions. Much of the credit must go to medical personnel who continued to stand their posts even as PPE seemed to be running out. I see God's hand in the manner to which this awful virus has affected us. I see it, as of a type of the deliverance the Lord provides to a faithful, disciplined band of disciples. And I also believe that faithfulness in the hands of a gracious God means that many beyond the borders of the faith community receive blessing. Though we think of ourselves as small in number, we are a type of yeast affecting the whole loaf of Ontario, and Canada. And to the these things, especially the grace of God who saves, you have been witnesses, these last 6 months.

Let us pray;

Lord we continue to praise your name as our first and foremost duty. We lift up before you those whom we can name that are ill asking that they too might be bathed in your love, your grace and your mercy. Be with their kin, who continue to worry about what will happen in the coming days. Be with Ardith as she heals from surgery and as she copes with all the related issues of the past week. Be with those who are undergoing chemotherapy and with those who are awaiting

further tests and the beginning of treatment. Preserve your church in our midst, and heal our nation. Bring an end to Covid-19's power to disrupt and end life all around the world. In Jesus name we pray. Amen