

***Our community is a state of profound uncertainty and upheaval. I continue to hear daily from many of you how surreal it feels. How much anxiety it is causing you and your families. How it is the only thing that anyone, anywhere can manage to talk about.***

We continue to be told that risk in our region remains low. To remain precautionous and not panic. Yet measures have been drastic, disruptive, and implemented with increasing speed and magnitude – all in an effort to slow the spread of Coronavirus/COVID-19. At the rate that things have been unfolding, it is unclear what the next 24 hours will hold, let alone beyond that.

The majority of conversations and considerations that are taking place are practical. This is as true within the church as it has been elsewhere, and for good reason. As quickly as new measures are being introduced, it would seem, new resources are being released to help congregations and congregational leaders make sense of the situation and discern their next steps. We have received and reviewed many of these, and taken them into account with our decision-making. We will continue to do so, in the days and weeks to come.

Mixed in with them, however, have been a number of equally important resources, that have, I suspect, received much less attention. They relate to the question of what it might mean to be the body of Christ in such a time as this. As many of them have pointed out, this is not the first time in history when the church has weathered something of this nature.

With that in mind, I will share that, throughout these past weeks, a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting has remained in the back of my mind. I can't remember where or when I first read about it, but it has seemed to me a helpful image to reflect and focus on these days, given the state that our world finds itself in.

It is a work by the German painter Matthias Grunewald known as the Isenheim Altarpiece. At first glance, it appears to be no different from other triptychs, or three-paneled paintings, like it that were produced at that time. It features Jesus, who is hanging from the cross, and surrounded by a number of women and men.

Looking closer, however, something is different. In addition to the wounds of crucifixion, Jesus is covered from head to toe in grotesque sores.

This painting was made for the monastery in Isenheim. The monks there ran a hospital that was overwhelmed with people suffering from contagious skin conditions who required intensive care. They were at the time in the midst of a growing crisis relating to cases of something called ergotism, which was also known as St. Anthony's Fire. And so, for this hospital, Grunewald chose to portray Jesus as bearing not only the marks of his first century Roman execution, but the signs of the present-day infection.

It is by no means a pleasant image, to look at. But many since have reflected on how it might also be a profoundly comforting one for those who looked at it, standing there.

It was intended, in part, to inspire and invoke prayers for God's healing. But perhaps more than that it is an image of Divine presence and solidarity in the midst of terrible suffering and a widespread culture of fear (fear of contraction, fear of death, fear for the sake of ones loved ones, fear of coming close to anyone bearing signs and symptoms).

***Jesus bore the marks of their epidemic. Jesus was seen to be in this, alongside of them.***

Seen from different angle, there is another layer of meaning to this depiction. The monks, working away in their hospital, understood that, in offering care for those who had contracted this disease, they were in some sense, caring for Christ himself - *"just as you did for the least of these, you did for me"* (Matthew 25:40). To be sure, they must have taken all of the precautions that they could, given what they knew and had available at the time, but they were committed to being with and providing care for society's most vulnerable.

It is easy to shrink back in times like these, to let our lives and our prayers become small. It is easy to get swept up in the current of the headlines, and to lose perspective and lose sight of the facts. It is easy to be pulled loose from the anchorpoints of our faith. It is easy to be dragged along by the stampedes, and let fear end up driving our thinking and behavior. It is easy to stockpile and to give into instincts of self-preservation, to try and safeguard the privileges that so many of us have, or, in frustration or worry, forget we have them, and that there are so many who are facing this who do not.

There are many today, who, like those German monks, remain present to those most vulnerable right now, by virtue of their vocations, and perhaps at some risk to themselves. For others, what that work looks like, and will look like in the days to come, is an open question that will require a creative response. The stance of social distancing that we are all being urged to take (and rightfully so, I will add, again) in many ways seems to be the very opposite of that. It is true that, paradoxically, it might in fact be the most effective way to show love and care for our most vulnerable of neighbors at this point. And yet how can we be there for others, in love, when sanctuaries are empty, borders are closing, facilities bar entry, and we are told to stay home and self-isolate if we are ill?

Regardless of whether or not we are able to meet as embodied communities of faith in this time, we continue our pilgrimage through the season of Lent, as generations of Christians have before us. Like them, we are determined to press on through the realities we face while walking this ancient, trusted, and well-worn path. Unlike them, we have access to unprecedented means of connection and communication. We can continue to check in on one another, and hear from one another. We can share and receive and be nurtured spiritually in ways they could have never imagined.

We will continue our journey towards the cross in these uncertain weeks. Just as we always have. I would invite you, as we do so, to consider Christ crucified as Grunewald chose to paint him - the God-With-Us who suffers with the suffering (both the ill, and the ill-at-ease), the One who has *"borne our infirmities, and carried our diseases"* (Isaiah 53:4).

***Turn everything off for a moment. Sit still and silent. Find a Bible, pick a gospel, and look for Jesus in this time. Pray the way that he taught his friends to. Try and do this once a day. Breathe deeply, hold steady, and keep your eyes fixed on Christ. He is in this, alongside you. – NS 03-16-20***