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The Presence of God in Perilous Times

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A lot of us are struggling these days. How could we not be?
One catastrophe layer over another. The latest are fires in not only California but Oregon, Montana and Colorado.
The coronavirus death toll mounts steadily.
The body politic is divided and shabby.

In my conversations with folks at St Giles, my friends and my family, I hear people feeling increasingly weary and distressed.

I feel overwhelmed . . . exhausted. . . lonely . . . depressed.
I'm eating . . . drinking . . . bingeing . . . too much.
It's disheartening to not see my daughter or son or grandchild.
I make plans and cancel them, make them again and cancel them again, again and again.
I'm longing for a hug, to be around a table with laughter, to sit in a movie theater. I miss singing in church.
And I'm afraid to admit just how afraid I truly am.

There is no greater story of peril and hope that the one we find in Exodus. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls the story the "primal saving event." It is the story of the people of God being led by God and Moses, from slavery into the wilderness for forty years and then finally across the river into the promised land. It contains within it all the major themes of the rest of the Bible. It gives us the idea that God calls people from slavery to freedom, that God provides for a people when in distress, that God chooses men and women, that God will never abandon his people, and that, therefore, there is nothing to fear. All those ideas will come to full fruition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Hebrew people were refugees and immigrants in Egypt where they were welcomed at first. But no more. Pharaoh has now reduced them to be slave laborers for his

ambitious building projects. It is backbreaking and inhuman work. God hears their groaning and pays attention to their cry.

With Moses and God leading the way, the people gather children, belongings, pack animals and prepare to leave their former home. In our minds' eye, we see them crowded at the bank of the Sea of Reeds, also known as the Red Sea. An unthinkable disaster looms. Back on the horizon they see the dust of an approaching army, chariots, horses, infantry. Pharaoh has changed his mind. And the people lose their nerve: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" Their courage and commitment to their future as a free people disappear. "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Life is like that. People are like that. In perilous times we lose our nerve. We harbor nostalgia about the past where life seemed safer and secure. Nostalgia and mourning what was is seem preferable to taking a risk for a future hope.

"Do not be afraid. Stand firm. I will deliver you." This is God's message in a perilous time.

At the heart of our tradition is the radical idea that God calls God's people into a new future, that God is the one who agitates and disturbs us and makes us uncomfortable with the status quo. It is God who calls us to be on a journey, always following with courage and commitment into an uncertain future.

That's how it goes for God's people in the old story. Moses leads them into—of all places—the water, and somehow they summon the courage to follow. They walk in as refugees, scared to death, wishing for all the world they were sitting around the fireplace in the old slave quarters. They walk in as scared refugees, and they emerge on the other side a nation, a people with a new identity and a new sense of purpose and meaning. They will regress again and again; they will continue whining in the wilderness. But they will continue following, day after day, year after year, into their future. As they looked back at it all, they could see the hand of God, but not at the moment. At the moment they were too busy dealing with the immediacies of threat, danger, and uncertainty. It was years later that they realized God's gracious leading.

Sometimes, I hear the absurd claim that whatever *is* must be what God *wants*, since God is, after all, God. I find it hard to reconcile a god who *wills* pandemic death, institutional and individual injustice, with the God I've learned to know and love in the teachings and actions of Jesus. I believe that the gift of human freedom means we're free to do harm to ourselves, others, and the earth. I believe that the nature of divine power is

persuasive and empowering, rather than coercive and overpowering. Our loving God does not always get what God hopes and dreams for us.

God doesn't want things to be the way they are. It breaks God's heart that we are isolated and lonely in our homes, that many are unemployed and fearful they won't get the next meal. God is worried that human beings have not listened to the planet's deepest needs and the consequence is fierce hurricanes, derechos, fires.

In perilous times, God gives us imagination, vision, courage, and energy to work with God and with one another to fashion a world in which people are vibrantly alive and caretakers of a flourishing creation. In all we decide and do, God is steadily with us, offering us hopeful and life-affirming possibilities, but God doesn't force us to accept what God offers. We're free to refuse the will and way of God.

The God we have isn't always the kind of god we want. When things are as hard as they are right now, we yearn for a god who dramatically intervenes. We'd like the waters to part. We'd like foes dragged under the waves. We yearn for a god who dramatically and decisively intervenes on a grand scale to save us.

"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance
that the Lord will accomplish for you today."
Exodus 14:13 (NRSV)

God offers reassurance. But the people of God took it to heart and walked forward toward the Sea, rather than backward into Egypt. In perilous times, God offers us a partnership to accompany us in hard times. God uplifts us with a spiritual imagination that trusts we will get through to the other side.

"Do not be afraid. . . I am with you" —it is the one word God speaks always and forever. And it is a saving word, a redeeming word, the one word we, all of us, need to hear: refugees from a natural disaster, totally cut off from the past, facing a new and unknown future; families and loved ones, victims—of hurricanes, tornadoes and fires, military action. It is a comforting word for the one facing surgery, critical illness, aging; an encouraging word for new parents; a hopeful word for the newly unemployed, unattached: "Fear not. Stand firm. I am with you."

God calls each of us, whoever we are, wherever we are on our journey, however old or young we are—God calls us to live into the future with courage and hope. God calls this church, I deeply believe, to a deeper commitment to the future—with courage and hope

and compassion and generosity and a passion for God's kingdom on earth. Our particular future at the moment is not clear. We have a vision—a hope, a plan—and a confidence that God will lead and God will provide.