It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times

Over the last couple of weeks, as I meditated on the readings we have heard today, the sentence, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” repeatedly came to mind. This is of course, the opening sentence from Charles Dickens’s great novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Something about these words seemed apt at this moment. We are in the season of the Easter, which for me, is the “best of times” to be sure in the church year. The joy of Easter was, spiritually, emotionally and liturgically, juxtaposed in my thoughts with a near constant barrage of thoughts, feelings, and facts regarding the novel Coronavirus, Covid19, unfolding before us in a worldwide Pandemic. In many ways, this is the “worst of times” for our nation, no, for the human family in my lifetime. Fortunately for me, this was not the first time I had been “hit over the head” with the contrast between the surpassing joy of faith in the midst of a stark reminder of my vulnerability and frailty as a human. Often as our human weakness is so starkly evident that our faith may be
challenged. The joy of Easter far offsets this for me, thanks to God.

As our liturgy began, Father Matt prayed: “Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work…” “Him” is of course our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ, whose resurrection we celebrate in this glorious season of Easter. Then, in the Liturgy of the Word, we read together Psalm 116 saying “I love the Lord, because he has heard the voice of my supplication…” God has given us the gift of God’s unfathomable love in Christ’s death and resurrection to sustain us through these “worst of time.” As Peter spoke to the crowd in Acts, he was speaking in what was a “worst of times” for him, and his brother disciples, saying that Jesus, the crucified one was both Lord and Messiah. The thought bringing hope and comfort in that “worst of times” for that first small group of believers.

1st Peter speaks to how we may respond to this gift of the Risen Christ: Quite simply, we are told to “…love one another deeply from the heart.” With faith and hope “set on God” we love one another. How many ways has Jesus said
this to us in the Gospel readings we have shared through Lent and Holy week? He spoke it in words recorded in the Gospels, and communicated it through his actions of which we read, as he went obediently to a horrifying death, for us. Yes, for me and for you.

In this powerful juxtaposition on the worst and the best, I read(RED) the Gospel of the Emmaus Road experience. I always deeply identify with the two shocked believers, walking home from Jerusalem, the events of what we call Holy Week, fresh in their minds. They may have been present when Jesus of Nazareth entered the city in triumph. Then they watched, through a very human flood of emotion I am sure, as that amazing man, Jesus, was arrested, tortured and then crucified. Now they walk toward home and talk and try to understand all that they had seen and heard. How could you make sense of the report of an empty tomb? So they walked and they talked, and a Man joined them on that road and was able to enter the conversation. Not only did he joined them, but he entered the conversation very meaningfully. We read “beginning with Moses and all the
prophets…” He went on to interpret to them “the things about himself in the scriptures.” In spite of this, they did not recognize Jesus Christ.

Reaching their destination, the village of Emmaus, the stranger seemed to be going on down the road. The men with whom he had walked and talked invited Him to stay with them and He accepted. Something made them want to prolong the contact. Having invited Him to join them, you might expect that one of these men would then take the role of host when they sat down together to eat. But our story tells us that Jesus took the bread, and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. And they recognized Him.

Jesus is then said to have vanished from their sight. The eyes of their faith however, now saw him clearly, and they said “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us...?” They returned then to Jerusalem and found the eleven and told them “what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”
This recognition of the Risen Son of God, in the broken bread each week is what calls us to this table today, in these worst of times. Down through 21 centuries, the Church has gathered in the best and worst times of human history to hear the Word of God and to experience Jesus, the Word made flesh, through the act of communion, as we receive the bread and wine, “in remembrance” as Jesus commanded. And we are strengthened to be God’s People in God’s world by this act.

In our present situation, we cannot gather. Your physical absence from this beautiful church is so evident in the empty seats before me. Yet your spiritual presence with us who are gathered here is palpable. I do not know who is watching at this moment, but we are united for this moment, as the Church, the Body of Christ. Gathered to be in communion through the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. Our faith allows us to participate in an Act of Spiritual Communion when unable to be physically present for Eucharist. After we move into the Liturgy of the Table, we will see bread blessed and broken here, and we will join in
praying “An Act of Spiritual Communion.” We join ourselves, through faith in this Sacrament, even though we are scattered around other places, other cities, and perhaps other states or nations. After all, we are “streaming” live, a gift in this worst of times.

So my Sisters and Brothers, gathered and participating in this Eucharist, we are the Body of Christ. We are gathered and fed and sustained by the presence of the Risen Christ so that in this “worst of times” we may share with the world in whatever ways possible the Good News and come to share more fully in loving one another “deeply” as Christ commands. Christ makes this moment the Best of times through His love. We are sent out to love and serve the Lord.

Amen.

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