

Rainbowed Assurance
March 15, 2020
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Last Thursday I was on my way to a lunch meeting, when I ran into the St. Paul teacher's strike on the corner of Selby and Lexington. It was a cold, rainy day and many were dressed in ponchos, carrying signs and umbrellas dripping wet with cold rain. They looked miserable.

I honked my horn a little, and waved to express some support as a feeling of remorse overcame me. I was surprised by it at first.

Tears even welled in my eyes. I could feel some anger, even grief—there was something in the way they bent over, like as if they carried the weight of the world on them.

It unleashed something deep in me; not only sympathy, but a kind of shared burden, a heaviness. Maybe it was the weight of a caving oppressive economic system built to favor the elite, or the deteriorating honor, respect, and even dignity of those who serve public institutions.

But today, looking back, I realize as this epidemic rages on, I am also plagued by a feeling of helplessness; a feeling that we are somehow entangled together in systems and now health epidemics beyond our control. How much control do we have over this towering economic system that seems to disregard common well-being; leaders that seem to deny us our common dignity? And now this.

Something was revealed to me through those teachers striking in the rain. Something lost and broken; wet, cold, forgotten within a greater system that cherishes everything these teachers are not.

And boy do we need them now; well-paid civil servants who believe that what they do matters.

Nurses, medical staff, health officials, home care teams!

And as our familiar routines and structures of support become even more despondent I feel as though there is something being revealed that is even deeper, beyond this virus; an epidemic of deep spiritual thirst.

As we strip back our normal routine what will we find?

I've begun to wonder if this is the way Lent was meant to feel. A true wandering in the wilderness, feeling tempted for 40 days or for those poor Israelites 40 years of not knowing..."Would they make it? Would this promise land ever come?"

In today's scripture Moses is trying to lead his people—they are thirsty, afraid, angry...will they ever make it through this wilderness? Moses is afraid they'll stone him and turns to God to beg for guidance. He gathers a tiny cohort of elders at God's bidding and heads out in search of a

rock. He finds the rock, strikes it with the same staff that opened the Red Sea, and finds within a gushing stream of water.

Now none of us have a staff with the power to blow open large bodies of water and lead nations, but we do all have tools in our hands to quench each others thirst and to equip ourselves for the challenges at hand.

We have video conferencing, and endless social media platforms which are nothing short of a miracle, but we also have this journey we have embarked on together. Physically we are separate but we are not alone in this wilderness; we have a shared mission and ministry, a shared narrative of a God who loves us and we love in return.

In Lent we are asked to strip ourselves of the familiar comforts of our everyday living in order to understand better our reliance on a greater source of wellbeing; a God that will provide in ways we can't imagine. So maybe, this is our true take at lent, a fast that we did not chose, but rather a fast we embark upon together in circumstances beyond our control. A fast that reminds us of the greater guidance beyond the fast we might prefer or various activities we chose to fill our days with.

I will be honest, I am upset that I had to cancel my vacation to Florida and feel totally unequipped as a church leader to minister to you in this physically separated way. Churches are communities, and it's best to support each other in the flesh, but we are being asked to grow here, and no matter what we are connected. You are not alone. We are in this together. This we can choose.

Our God is a God who wishes to sit with us at the deep well of our thirst. I love to imagine that day when Jesus approached that Samaritan woman and told her about the eternal living water of a God that loved and affirmed her. She exemplified all that is disenfranchised, cut-off, broken; everything and everyone that has every felt isolated, separated, and alone.

As a Samaritan she was mixed race; both Assyrian and Jewish, but not accepted as either. The law, cut her from her inheritance. She had five husbands. We don't know the full story on this, but we know she ended up with a man that was not her husband in an age where women owned nothing, and depended entirely on men for survival. She was alone, and isolated in so many ways...

And so, Jesus comes along; the embodiment of the God's blessing and promise, asking for a drink of water. Now you might ask, "why did he ask her?" As the embodiment of all of God's love and blessing why didn't he offer her the drink? But Jesus is make a point here. He very clearing wants to tell us that this is not the kind of water found in a well, but the kind that you find from the living water from within us.

The water that we search for, we already contain. It's in us. Jesus knows it, and wants this woman so badly to find it.

We may reply, in our most desperate times, that the well is deep and we don't have a bucket.

But Jesus would assure us as he does, the woman at the well, that the water may be deep, but it is there! God gives us the promise of a spring of water gushing; sparkling rain-bowed in the sun, in a simple question: Can you give me a drink? With Jesus God takes the rainbow covenant and brings it down to Earth. Makes it intimate, accessible, living, breathing in us all.

Since this epidemic hit, there has been an outpouring of support; many of you have been calling and emailing in, the greater church has been posting resources, I've been in several on-line meetings this week...

This fast we've taken together, is forcing us to find resources we didn't know we had. Forcing us to grow, express ourselves in new ways and revealing new things.

Maybe for the first time it matters who does and does not have health care; who does and does not have sick paid leave. Suddenly we're in this together.

Just up the street from the corner of Lexington and Selby is JJ Hill Montessori of St. Paul Public schools. I'm assuming that those teachers striking in the rain last week were the teachers of this school, the same school where Philando Castile served lunch. He was the black man pulled over in Falcon Heights for a broken tail light and ended up getting shot and killed by a police officer. Clergy from across the metro had been invited to attend the memorial service—a joint effort by school staff and Black lives matter. I remember a teacher who spoke at the service describe Philando as “Mr. Rodgers in dread locks.”

After the service, the clergy were asked to lead everyone to the Governor's mansion to call attention to the public outcry for better training of police officers. Some people who came to protest were really angry. We stood in the rain and shouted “Black lives matter!” Some people spoke and said things that were pretty hateful.

I remember feeling remorse, sorrow, regret. As I do now, I felt overwhelmingly unequipped to offer any kind of comfort or assurance. But I also remember how on my way home I turned as I was driving to look back over that neighborhood; the school and the Governor's mansion, and saw a great big rainbow stretched over the top of it all. Over the anger and sorrow were all those beautiful colors of promise sparkling in the rain. It didn't fix things but it reminded me that there is a greater force working out there and it's in me and in you and sometimes we just need to remind each other it's there in phone calls and video conferencing. There's an endless stream of living water waiting for someone to ask: Can I have a drink?