**The Seventh Sunday after Easter: May 24, 2020, the Rev. Karen Swanson**

**Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-16; John 17:1-11**

 How are we to live meaningfully in the midst of this COVID-19 pandemic? What does it mean to be a person of faith in the time of the coronavirus? These are important questions that we ponder.

 Fortunately, we have guidance. We have guidance from our usual sources of wisdom for the journey as Episcopalians. We have tradition, reason, and the Scriptures. Others have endured confinement and suffering: how did they do it? Intelligent people have worked diligently within their discipline: what do they know that can help us? We believe God speaks to us through Scripture: what is God communicating to us now?

 We might wish that we could look up coronavirus in the Biblical index and get a direct answer, but instead we study and reflect on passages written in other times for other situations and discern what they might mean for us. The author of our epistle lesson from First Peter wrote to a community that was suffering from persecution. We know that they experienced slander and rejection for others. We don’t know for sure if this escalated to physical violence.

 The author wrote to this community to propose a four-step approach to handling the difficult situation they were in. First of all, they were to humble themselves before God. In our case, this might mean recognizing that the COVID-19 crisis is beyond us. No one of us can solve it alone. We need one another. Even together we need God’s help, God’s inspiration, God’s courage, God’s strength, God’s wisdom for our daily lives, and for whatever small or large part we play in addressing the virus and its impact. Coming to God for help is crucial, and quietly listening for His guidance is critical. Now more than ever, we need to take time to pray, and to pay attention to God’s response to our prayer. Does a person come to mind when you pray? Ask yourself what God may want you to do about or for this person. Does an idea pop up? Reflect on how you might be called to employ that idea for the good of your community, your family, you. Do you feel nudged toward a course of action in your prayer? Ask God for strength to act on it. Invite others to join you. God knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows the number of hairs on our head, and the secrets of our hearts. Let us trust God to know what is best for us and to lead us in the right direction.

 The second admonition of the author of First Peter to that other suffering community is to discipline themselves. For that situation, the author emphasized staying alert to temptations that would lead one away from God’s way for us. In the COVID-19 crisis, this might mean taking time to examine ourselves. What are our temptations? Are we tempted to forget the rest of the world and take care of ourselves alone? Are we tempted to lash out at others in our pain? Are we tempted to cling to what we have because we are afraid of the future? We must ask ourselves, “What would God have me do? How can I begin to move in that direction, with God’s help?”

 As we grapple with the COVID-19 crisis, discipline might also mean refraining from satisfying social contact that nonetheless endangers others or myself. We need to ask ourselves: How can I safely satisfy my emotional needs and those of others without taking substantial health risks? Where would God, who knows me best, have me draw that line? Last, but not least, discipline for some might mean eating and drinking more modestly to express solidarity with those who are short of food, and/or to maximize the resources they have to share with others. This discipline is beyond me at this point, but I respect fellow parishioners who have made this choice.

The author of First Peter describes the third step as resisting temptation and remaining steadfast in the faith which I have incorporated into the description of possible temptations. He also encourages us to take comfort in the fact that we are not struggling alone. This is also true of the current crisis. Others throughout the county, the country and the world are also suffering, some of them more grievously than we are. You and I are part of the suffering, but so are many others. The virus has attacked people of all religious backgrounds, all political persuasions, and all nations.

The final step that the author of First Peter recommends to the suffering community to which he writes is to trust in God’s intention to restore, support and strengthen us. What does this mean?

I hope it means that the coronavirus crisis will end, and I think we are called to pray as well as work for that. The more certain meaning of the text is that God through the living Christ and the Holy Spirit will work with us and in us to help us become better disciples: better at caring deeply, better at doing justice, better at sacrificing for others. This idea is supported by the other Scripture readings for today as well.

In the story of Jesus’ ascension in Acts, the disciples are hoping that his resurrection marks the end time, and that one of the features of the end time will be the overthrow of the hated Roman occupiers and the religious leaders they have put in place. The disciples hope that their country will return to its earlier religious, political, and social strength and status. Jesus interrupts this train of thought with the comment that it is not for them to know God’s time table. What they need to know is God’s intention for the near future. God’s plan for is that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to him in their capital city, their divided country, and actually “to the ends of the earth”, throughout the whole world. God’s vision is large, much larger than the disciples’ expressed hope.

Perhaps God’s vision for how we will come out of the coronavirus crisis is much larger and much better than ours. Perhaps it will be “infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” as we sometimes pray.

The Gospel reading for today is part of the high priestly prayer in which Jesus expresses to God his hopes for the disciples. This prayer is the final part of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John. It expresses what is uppermost in his mind, and closest to his heart, as he prepares to leave the earth. In his prayer, he gives thanks for the gift of eternal life which God gives to the disciples. In the Gospel of John “eternal life” means a life in relationship to God which begins on earth, and continues after death. It is a life marked by love, justice and care for all. The center point of Jesus’ prayer is that as the disciples live in loving relationship to God, they will also live in loving relationships to one another, that they “may be one.”

How can we be one in our day of division and disagreement? Maybe the answer is not coming together in our ways of thinking. Perhaps it is instead in our coming together in understanding one another and in loving action. Perhaps what will bring us together is our mutual kindness and care and our common willingness to temporarily put ourselves aside to help those in need both within and beyond our own community. Perhaps our unity will come in our understanding that we all need both God and one another in all our differences.

 May God help us cooperate with his vision for this time, and give us the courage and strength to act in the ways in which he calls us. Amen.

**The Collect**

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

**The First Lesson**

**Acts 1:6-14**

When the apostles had come together, they asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

**The Response**

**Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36**

***Exsurgat Deus***

1 Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered; \*
let those who hate him flee before him.

2 Let them vanish like smoke when the wind drives it away; \*
as the wax melts at the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.

3 But let the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; \*
let them also be merry and joyful.

4 Sing to God, sing praises to his Name;
exalt him who rides upon the heavens; \*
YAHWEH is his Name, rejoice before him!

5 Father of orphans, defender of widows, \*
God in his holy habitation!

6 God gives the solitary a home and brings forth prisoners into freedom; \*
but the rebels shall live in dry places.

7 O God, when you went forth before your people, \*
when you marched through the wilderness,

8 The earth shook, and the skies poured down rain,
at the presence of God, the God of Sinai, \*
at the presence of God, the God of Israel.

9 You sent a gracious rain, O God, upon your inheritance; \*
you refreshed the land when it was weary.

10 Your people found their home in it; \*
in your goodness, O God, you have made provision for the poor.

33 Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth; \*
sing praises to the Lord.

34 He rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens; \*
he sends forth his voice, his mighty voice.

35 Ascribe power to God; \*
his majesty is over Israel;
his strength is in the skies.

36 How wonderful is God in his holy places! \*
the God of Israel giving strength and power to his people!
Blessed be God!

**The Epistle**

**1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11**

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

**The Gospel**

**John 17:1-11**

Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”