

Lent/Easter, 2020

Dearest Parishioners wherever you may be,

Here we are in the middle of Holy Week. And here we are in the middle of a time unlike what most of us have previously experienced: wondering and waiting to see how this virus, COVID-19, will unfold or impact our lives. So many unknowns. So many chances to be curious. To be open-hearted. To be Christ-centred. To be immersed in the Passion Narrative.

In the unfamiliarity of this new landscape we are dwelling in, I am reminded of an experience I had almost twenty years ago. At that time, I am in Paris on my way to Chartres where there is a 40-foot labyrinth inlaid in the stone floor of the cathedral. You can see it here:



It's 2002 and I'm racing up the cobbled streets from the train station in Chartres, France, my wheeled suitcase flying out behind me. I'm going to be a small group facilitator for a week-long Labyrinth Seminar led by Rev Dr Lauren Artress, and I'm late. I misread the train schedule and tried to take a train that doesn't run on Sundays. Now I'm so rattled. This is so not the way I imagined arriving back in one of my favourite places in the world! At least I know my way to the guest house where we'll be staying. Then I come around the corner of the great cathedral and stop short. I am in the midst of a sea of dark-brown faces and white robes. Many are smiling at me. It's as if I suddenly was transported into a dream or into another world. There's not another white person in sight. I am utterly shocked by this sudden unexpected reality. After a few bewildering moments, I grasp that these are Christian pilgrims from India, come to one of the great holy sights of the world. This jolt of strangeness

shifts my understanding of reality - it's as if I happened on a thin place unique to that moment. Going forward, my life will be different because of that moment on the south steps of Chartres cathedral.

Here and now, we who have embarked on Holy Week suddenly find ourselves in a shockingly different world from any other Holy Week in our lives. Unable to do it together in person, unable to walk into the church sanctuary and worship with each other, unable to follow the path of Jesus from his triumphant entry into Jerusalem to his death on the cross, to his resurrection and the empty tomb. It's astounding and heart-breaking. But as one of my colleagues, Scott Denman, points out, it offers us a powerful opportunity.

Scott suggests, "Look at it this way: We have before us an opportunity to actually live into the amazing stories of our tradition in a way we never have before. Are we not all entombed in our homes? Are we not all, like the disciples, hiding, sometimes in fear? Are we not like Jesus, asking why God has forsaken us? Are we not like Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome asking, "who will roll away the stone", a stone that keeps us from life together? And do we not look for a resurrection that will allow us to rise up and greet each other, not just in spirit but in body? We have become a living passion narrative!"

Yup, our lives have become like a metaphor of His journey through the last week of His life. It's like we are now pilgrims walking in the footsteps of Jesus. We *can* choose to be as pilgrims in this experience, choose to bring this time, our experience, into the context of sacred journey. We can be willing, even eager, to discover what it could mean for our souls.

As pilgrims we will acquiesce to the unknown, step out of our daily lives and enter into a time of potential spiritual awakening. When I arrived in Chartres back in 2002, I had indeed chosen to be on pilgrimage. And as any pilgrim will tell you, we should expect the unexpected. In the words of WH Auden,

**He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.**

No doubt we who are social distancing or even self-isolating would rather it didn't get any stranger than it already is. But what if we viewed our current experience through that filter, seeing this as the Land of Unlikeness, watching for 'rare beasts' and savouring our 'unique adventures'? What if we decided to live at least this week as our own personal Passion Narrative, following more closely than ever before in the footsteps of Jesus and the disciples?

The rare beasts might scare us half to death. Our adventures might strip us bare of all illusions. And... that is the nature of pilgrimage. That is the possibility offered to us if we claim the pilgrim role. I invite you - claim it. Make it your own. Put this time that is so outside what we know as normal into the context of sacred journey.

There are many wise people out there who are offering strategies for weathering this time in wholeness. Instead of strategies, we might look for practices that sustain and support us as we learn the ways of this new world and walk the pilgrim way. Phil Coussineau in his book, *The Art of Pilgrimage*, says,

“One of the ancient functions of pilgrimage is to wake us from our slumber.”

If that is so, then let us choose practices that awaken. Let us pay attention and listen to each other, listen to the natural world around us. Let us practice the ritual of reading sacred texts - the Bible and other sources that inspire and nourish. Let us renew ourselves each day. Let us practise gratitude and praise-singing. Let us offer compassion for any we come in contact with. Let us live the heart of Jesus on this Passion pilgrimage.

We will have our services this week, though they will look different - how could it be else! And our work continues, for the parish and in our outreach. We have not laid off any staff and still have bills to pay. As well, on the recommendation of our treasurer, your Parish Council (meeting on Zoom) unanimously approved that:

1. We will continue to pay Parish Staff with at least 30 days notice if changes are necessary.
2. The Rector's Discretionary Fund be increased from \$2,000 to \$5,000 so Gyllian may respond to needs in the parish as well as the wider community.
3. We will donate \$1,000 to Salt Spring Foundation's COVID-19 Emergency Fund.
4. We will pay to have a banner link on the SS Exchange website to our church services.

Therefore I urgently encourage you to continue in your offerings. As we no longer have a physical offertory plate, please consider signing up for the Electronic Collection Plate - you can email Dale at admin@saltspringanglican.ca to have a form sent to you.

The times and formats of services will be coming in an email right after this one. We hope you can all join us. Together we are stronger. Together we are church. Together we are pilgrims. The quote from Auden continues:

**He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.
He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.**

The great city of course is the one not built with human hands. Together we can celebrate the Easter joy of our Risen Christ knowing we are never alone.

Yours in Christ, lover, healer and light of the world,
Gyllian +