

Laetare
22 March, Anno Domini 2020
St. John 6:1-15
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Praise be to God for the manna of His life-giving Word! It is this Word and this Word alone which sustains us and gives us hope in both body and soul through this wilderness of sin and death and disease. These times are vivid reminders of our true need - the need for salvation from the chaos and carnage that sin has unleashed upon the world. Christ invites you to lift up your eyes up and away from all that is sick and broken and find rest in the eternal life that awaits all those whose hope is in Him.

The fear and worry of the world are palpable. Work is slowing down. Restaurants are closing their dining rooms. Countless businesses are being forced to close. People everywhere are being asked not to gather in groups larger than ten, if at all. In two weeks, our own parish has gone from seeing nearly 90 souls gathered together in this space to now 7 today. And for how long? We don't know. The chaos that a virus can cause is quite astounding. We are experiencing a truly global pandemic. What began in a city nearly 8000 miles away has reached our doorstep in a matter of weeks. No nation can avoid being touched by it. Nation after nation is being brought to its knees by something that can't even be seen with the naked eye. O Lord, forgive our foolish pride which far too often thinks far too much of ourselves and our own strength and wisdom. Have mercy upon us.

Yet none of this is new. Indeed, our weakness and inability to protect and provide for ourselves is no different today than it was two weeks ago. The only difference is that we are, or should be, more acutely aware of it. Have you worried about your job, your pantry, the stock market, that nagging cough? Do you have loved ones whose age and health or vocation puts them at even greater risk? Is your anxiety through the roof because even the little bit of control that you once thought you had now seems to have slipped through your fingers? Things of such magnitude have a way of unmasking as frauds the golden calves that we have fashioned for ourselves.

Beloved, do not be afraid. You were never in control. But one who loves you is. The same gracious God who knit you together in your mother's womb and knew all your days before even one of them had come to pass, also created all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible and microscopic. All things are still under His keeping just as completely as they were a three months ago when no one had even heard of COVID-19. And this virus will not be allowed to operate beyond His good and gracious will. Do you imagine that the same loving Father who gave His only-gotten Son into death to rescue you from eternal judgment will not also provide for you even now? You know He will care for you. Just as He provided for the Israelites in their time of need in the wilderness, He will provide for you.

Of course the devil will try to convince all of us otherwise. He loves to see us running around panicking as though God has lost all control or never really had it. He loves to see us sinking into unbelief, despair, anger, and distrust. He loves to see us forgetting the one thing that is truly needful - His Word and promises - because our hearts are overwhelmed with the cares of the world. Repent. Your heavenly Father took care of you yesterday. He will take care of you today. Tomorrow? Don't worry about tomorrow. He's got that covered too. Today has enough for you to think about and tend to. Hear the Word of God. Pray. Tend faithfully to your vocations. Love your neighbor. Does that mean you won't be infected or possibly even die from this disease? No more than is the case with any other disease or manner of death that afflicts mankind and that is constantly swirling around us. Unless you are one of those blessed to be alive when our Lord returns, your physical body will die. That fact hasn't changed. You still live in this world that is infected to every last cell with the plague of sin. This virus is just another manifestation and reminder of that. There is nothing new under the sun. Dear Lord, wake us from our slumber and teach us to number our days.

But the same Jesus who lifted up His eyes to behold the needs of the crowds and provided for them, sees every one of your needs today and will no less provide for them. However, if the best that your Lord does for you is keeps you from getting sick, He's really done nothing. He hasn't really helped you for very long. You would still die in your sin one day. What will your health or your wealth mean then? Nothing. All temporal things suffer the ravages of sin.

Dear Christian, rejoice! You don't need to fear death. The Lord Jesus has seen this need too and provided for it in abundance. That is why He took on your flesh. He has overcome not simply the symptoms but the disease that lies at the heart of all of them - your sin. In His own holy, perfect, sinless flesh, God's Son has

willingly submitted Himself to God's righteous wrath and judgment. He knows what lies at the heart of all your fear and unrest, even if you don't always recognize it. He lifted up His eyes and beheld His creation decimated by sin, cast under the dark shadow of death. He saw you dying the slow eternal death of your rebellion against God and has provided what none of us are capable of providing. He gave mankind hope. Christ Jesus has rescued us from death by suffering that death Himself. He certainly didn't quarantine Himself away from sinners so that He wouldn't be infected. Just the opposite. He was saturated with our death. All of it. He who knew no sin because sin for us.

The Lord of death allowed Himself to be swallowed by death in order that He might overcome it, burst forth from the grave, and ascend to the right hand of the Father. No longer must death hang over you like a cloud of impending doom. You don't need to fear either the death of your body or your soul. Both have been redeemed by Christ. Your sins are forgiven. The guilt of your iniquity has been removed. Death has no claim on you because in the waters of Holy Baptism you were clothed in the righteousness of Christ and you were born a child of God. He bestowed His own life upon you. He gave you His eternal Spirit. And now He bestows upon you the medicine of immortality, His resurrected Flesh and Blood. These destroy death. They forgive sin. Holy Communion is a real and true participation in the life of Christ. And in receiving these things according to your Savior's own promises, you may be assured of the resurrection and redemption of your body and the life everlasting in God's kingdom.

Dear children of God, do not let these days drive you into fear. Do not imagine that your good Lord doesn't see your need in the midst of this pandemic. He saw it before you knew about it and has already prepared your daily bread. His good and gracious will for you will be done not only in spite of this virus but even through it. And even though we cannot gather now as we long to in the house of the Lord, still His Word will come to us. And on that day when we are gathered here together again, it will be a day of great rejoicing. Until then, may our Lord use these days of isolation and rationing to bring all of us to hunger for the one thing needful - the life-giving Word of our Lord and Savior.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the Name of +Jesus.