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Social Distancing Together

Social Distancing bothers us because we do not know how long, or if ever, we will be as we were. Loss frightens us in part because every death reminds us of other deaths. However this week amid the news of 1000 new deaths in the United States, I was surprised to witness, one of the plants I stuck in the ground 6 months ago has come to flower; roses we cut back are fully budded for Spring.

We have been this way before. Each year, winter friends leave for other lives and we say Bon Voyage, missing you for several weeks. We have been this way before. Remember September 11th, a brilliant blue skied morning, our innocent naïve way of life, suddenly taken from us and a ceaseless war. We have been this way before. My wife's grandmother recalls at age 6 being the only healthy one in her family during the Spanish Flu. That 1918 Influenza killed 5 Million people. We have been this way before. The Bubonic Plague of the Middle Ages (when the known World comprised Europe, Asia and North Africa), took the lives of 4.5 Million people. Our present woes will not return to normal after 15 days... The Black Death continued from 1340 even into the late 1500s. What finally cured the plague was a combination of several things: Quarantining ourselves; Limiting large gatherings; Washing with Soap and Water; Disinfecting; Developing natural immunities; and sharing Faith in God together.

When 9/11 happened there was a huge influx of people attending worship, but we did not know what to do, how to respond. The leader of the Motorcycle Gang Hell's Angel's is reported to have just gotten out of Prison and went to worship that Sunday morning. After the service, he went to the Pastor, asking, "When do we get to do the stuff?" The minister, intimidated, responded: "Coffee and Cookies?" And the man said "No man, the Good stuff." Searching, the Pastor said "Prayer Ministry is on Tuesdays, Bible Study on Wednesdays, Choir Practice on Thursdays, what 'stuff' are you looking for?" The man replied, "Feeding 5000, walking on Water, raising the Dead, the good stuff described in the Bible!" After 9/11 we neglected to teach people we need to believe, to call on God for what we needed. Well, not so this time!

In the 36th Chapter, God describes to Ezekiel, A Resurrection Hope for Creation. People will not listen, but The Mountains shall listen to a Prophet's Word. This is because the Wilderness, the ravines, the hills, the valleys have been worn by human illness; Mountains and deserts will now bloom, all will become fertile, and reproduce anew. The Lord will do this because in Resurrection, God's Honor is at stake.

Then Ezekiel has a Vision: a Valley, not unlike this one, except instead of being Green, the entire Valley from Tucson through Nogales was filled with piles of desecrated dry bones. We miss the point here, The Ancient World had Moral Codes, we in our civilized world have forgotten. I recall Bo Shembecker of the 1970's Michigan Wolverines being asked Coaching Strategy when you were ahead 99 to 0, and he said "you keep beating them to the very end." In the ancient world a dominant army relented, before the slaughter of every living being. In the Ancient World, you honored the dead, whether your own or others, by burial, not leaving their dead exposed like this for generations.

Ezekiel's Vision is not about destruction; Ezekiel was a prophet to those in Exile. Survivors of conflict who had given up believing God was alive and real, that God would make a difference, could make a difference in their lives. Talk about "Social Distancing" this was Exile from home and family, Church, God. Like us, when confronted with the enormity of this problem, the reality that a vaccine is not coming tomorrow, but maybe by Christmas, when God asks "Can these dead bones live?" Ezekiel says: "Only you know." Personally, I think that is the underlying message here, God is not dead, God does know and God does care and God wants people to believe, to hope, to work together at life. But do we believe? Do we care? Do we want people to believe in God in the future?

Ezekiel does what God demands, he is a man of God, a prophet, so he prophesies, and from all these different places the bones come together, sinew and muscle and flesh come upon them, but still they are only lifeless. What gives us life? In Hebrew, recall that there is one word (RUACH) that means "Wind, Breath, Spirit, Life-force." Ezekiel prophesies to the 4 Corners of the Earth, for the Breath of Life, the Wind, to bring health and Vitality to these Bones. Are we just going through the motions of National Emergency? Are we Social Distancing by doing other stuff instead of our regular routine, going golfing, going to the ocean, believing the problem applies to other people, or are we truly isolating ourselves? Do we believe God can make a difference? Do we believe God cares? Do we care enough to believe?

The Gospel of John describes God cares. Jesus learns Martha and Mary's brother Lazarus is dead. The natural response of the Disciples of Martha and of Mary is that Jesus could have prevented death. But remember Diane's sermon last week, Jesus reply to the Disciples' "Who sinned, the parents or the man that he was punished by being blind?" Jesus said neither, but that something greater about God is to be revealed. If you were phoning your friends, or communicating by social media, which is the bigger story "Jesus saved a man's life by preventing a man from dying?" or "Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead?"

"Social Distancing," it is a three day journey for Jesus and the Disciples. When they do arrive, the tomb is sealed to separate life and death. Jesus commands removal of the barrier. One of the problems whenever there is change is those who have been in control do not want change. As much as Martha and Mary do miss their brother, they became accustomed to his being ill and now dead, they do not want to go through death again, they do not want to have to clean up after Lazarus.

You have got to love Mary's reply "Lord, there is gonna be a stink!" Death stinks! Decay smells. There is more to what she is saying: Only God has power over life and death. This is not about Jesus preventing Lazarus from dying; Jesus is bringing together those who have been distanced by death from life, to life. The authorities, the Priests, the Pharisees are not going to like this. There is gonna be a Stink doing this.

Lazarus is about as far from the "White Light Near Death" Stories as there could be. You know the stories where the person's heart stops and they see a blinding light at the end of a dark tunnel, everything is sunny and fresh and sterile clean, you are not alone but a Grandmother or Jesus is there in welcome. Instead Lazarus is described as being isolated, alone, bound hand and foot, inside an earthen cave, not only the doorway but all Air and Light dead, shut out. This is a hole of depression, where it is easier to pull the darkness over you, to drown in isolation than to get up and live. Your mind replays the same scenes over and over trying to find another outcome. Anger like a sickness consumes you, but there is nothing to fight. Denial and bartering, blaming, negotiation, get you no where. Everything feels heavy. Swallowing is effort. Breathing is effort. Left alone, scattered, we die, lost, believing no one cares. Outside the professional mourners weep. Martha cooks. Mary prays. But inside that tomb all Lazarus knows is a dark prison of isolation. DO you believe God cares? Do you believe God can make a

difference? The Gospel of John records as truth the shortest verse in the Bible: JESUS WEPT. Then Jesus commanded: take away the stones. Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out. Lazarus crossed from death to life because God in Christ Jesus cared.

My wife's grandmother is 107. Fearn lived through the 1918 Influenza and became a teacher and married, having 3 children, 12 grandchildren, 46 great grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren. WWII ended after great devastation and loss, but ended and there has been new life. September 11th happened, an effort of terrorists to make us afraid, afraid to trust, afraid to live; yet here we are today. Every year our friends return to other homes for a few months, but they return again before long. The point of Social Distancing is not only that we are isolated to heal from disease; when you go to Utah, Washington, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, New York and Connecticut, we miss you, we want to be together. As life changes, please keep us informed. Watch worship on line, knowing we pray for your return. Earlier today, I was at the Grocery, finding many of the shelves restocked with what had been gone. The woman behind me said "You know we really are blessed at be here."