

Dear Friends,

Peace and All Good!

I have been looking forward to being with you this weekend—to seeing Bella and Eva's play, to hearing Gracie's clarinet, to watching the little ones first buzz then fade on sugar, and as always, enjoying the beauty of flowers and their exchange in our prayer. I had also been hoping to hear your latest ideas and insights in your own worlds and what you have been learning as a group from the Committee on Ministry's sabbatical study plan. It will have to be another time. I am very sad we can't be together at the same time I am relieved that we are all well—in terms of the pandemic. Of course, I know the story isn't that simple.

I am very aware that many of us are struggling with financial crises, with mental health concerns, with family that is too close or too separated or ill or unable to understand, with careers and studies either at a standstill or in hyperdrive, with fear and anxiety for friends and neighbors and community. I will not gloss over these even though I cannot resolve them. The struggle is real.

This week, our President has fretted and stewed that, "We need to open the economy!" Duh. I am convinced his distress is real but it's not because he's worried about us. He's worried about *his* ratings and numbers. This national moment has exposed the faultlines of disparity, laid bare the ongoing racialization of our system, not to mention gender inequalities, and shown our foolhardiness about the nature of Nature. These are all things that are uninteresting to our President. This moment has revealed what is all too real and purposely hidden in policy discussions all the time: Most policies and programs are not designed to help—really help, not just maintain temporarily—our society grow into wholeness. When they speak about, "making us whole," they mean restoring us to the state we had prior to the crisis—no better. And the President doesn't want that to remain visible for too long.

Two things are abundantly clear:

- 1) The coronavirus *doesn't* recognize human designations, borders, or categories.
- 2) The pandemic *does* take advantage of every crack in social structure as well as the vulnerabilities of individuals and communities that result from our designations, orders, and categories.

In *our* everyday lives we experience this as an open secret. It informs our life as a community. No matter where we fall in the social strata, we share the desire that all have all they need. Seeing others shocked by the true meaning of "living paycheck to paycheck" is not comforting. This is especially so when I suspect the nation will not retain this perception for long. I know our president is deliberately planning to hide it again; he has said so. "When the Coronavirus is over, we must forget it as quickly as possible," he said—and he didn't mean the virus itself!

As people of faith, with sensitivity to the big issues as well as each other's personal concerns, we cannot forget. What's more, we must *not* forget even if we, yet again, rapidly constitute a minority of the aware.

A few days ago, Richard sent me a picture of our church azaleas busting with blooms. He entitled it, "Spring keeps springing." Ostara's Sabbat maybe over but the earth continues to awaken. No matter the stresses we feel, Lady Day skips from forsythia to pear to cherry to dogwood dressing them in brilliant and delicate flowers, trying to engage our senses with hope. You may have seen in the newspaper that our neighbor, First Presbyterian, is incorporating what they call a 'folk ritual' in their Easter celebration. They are 'flowering the cross' in their church yard with the blooms brought from the homes of their parishioners. (Effectively, they are borrowing from the festival of Ostara and from our set-up for flower communion! Who would have guessed they'd draw closer to us theologically in a pandemic!) Besides all the pretties and adaptations, the Abrahamic festivals that are upon us offer us ways to remember what has been revealed in our present circumstance. They also ask us to deepen our commitment to address it as we reenter in-person engagement.

The first festival, Passover, has already begun. As you know, the backstory is the ancient Hebrew's experience of slavery. Part of what had made their enslavement rise to the level of 'unbearable,' was an escalating

building program by Pharaoh. He not only wanted more and bigger monuments (to his own divinity!), he wanted the enslaved people to pay for it by hauling their own mud and making their own bricks with which to do his building. There are certainly many parallels between the exploitation of that day and today!

Did Moses actually speak to Pharaoh when they'd had enough? Did the ten plagues happen as described? Did the Egyptians actually chase the Hebrew people when they departed?. Some scientists have dedicated their lives to trying to figure it out and the best they have is, "Maybe." So historically, we don't know but theologically we do: The Hebrew people had an experience of being enslaved and leaving it through the power of their covenant with each other and with their God. Jewish identity centers on and grows out of this Exodus story. The 40-year process of changing their minds and practices from enslavement to freed-folk is a reminder that justice requires both social-systemic and inner-spiritual work.

The feast of Passover begins and ends with special meals as well as prayers. The foods are symbolic, the story is retold through ritual questions, an extra place is set for the return of prophet Elijah, and the whole of family and community gathers. They are sad to have to keep their observance without opening their doors in hospitality this year. I sent our greetings to Sandy and Temple Adath Israel saying I hoped that their meditation and prayer on their story would help lead our society out of our injustices. Naturally, *we* can also look to their story and find encouragement to choose liberation and inspiration to work for justice.

The Easter story is key to Christian identity in the same way the Exodus is to Jewish identity. The Easter story is also an account of justice. It includes the life/ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, not just one aspect of the story. (We are aware of folks who try to emphasize only parts of the story and neglect the big picture even at Easter. I'm not interested in tumbling down that rabbit hole right now! Instead I want to emphasize that the early Jewish Christians heard the story of Jesus as all of a piece.) What was the story? How did they hear it? Jesus was a poor man in an occupied land who lived a life encouraging and serving the poor, teaching the unlettered and the highbrow curious, healing the sick, challenging the social structure that oppressed all but the most elite, criticizing hypocritical leaders, and practicing a life of prayer. He was executed by torture by the state because he was true to this mission and public about it. He was raised—yes, *raised*—not by his own power but the noncoercive love of God. And those who had loved him experienced his new-life-in-God in a physical, visceral way. This is what the earliest church heard, a story of a whole, courageous life *and* that Jesus' voice was not silenced despite being victimized by the superstructure of an occupying power.

For them, Jesus' story meant three things: First, humanity is truly precious to God and God's work with humanity is through noncoercive love; second, victims of injustice are no longer voiceless; third, Jesus' life was a pattern for emulation—though it involves great risk and requires a community to complete it. Easter was a time to renew their covenant with each other and their God as well as commit to the same work Jesus had done.

Modern Christians are also sad to miss their rituals this week. They'll miss retelling and re-enacting this story, as well as family gatherings throughout the weekend. Nevertheless, we can still look to their story for insight into the meaning of a whole life, the resurrecting power of noncoercive love, and the importance of community solidarity in giving voice to victims of injustice.

In less than two weeks, our Muslim partners will begin Ramadan. Throughout the month, they will fast from sun up to sun down. It is a hard practice meant to open within them a hunger for God and solidarity with the hungry everywhere. Extra study of the Qur'an and extra prayer bolsters their practice. Another significant custom is being together—early in the morning for a special breakfast preparing for the long day; late in the evening breaking the fast with prayer and a meal of thanksgiving (iftar) for the grace of the day and the month. Families often invite friends with less to join them for the evening meal. Our local community also has a public potluck on Friday evenings at the masjid to which they invite their interfaith partners. They are going to be as sad as the rest of us missing these gatherings. (I have enjoyed this for several years now and I already had it on my calendar. I will miss it sorely!)

One of Muhammad's prime concerns was fostering a *felt* connection among all people rather than a tribal hierarchy. The structure of Ramadan includes many ways to strengthen such bonds. When Ramadan ends,

the Muslim community will celebrate Eid al Fitr. There will be lots of partying, but a key practice is to immediately do what they've learned in Ramadan—share food with the hungry.

Our Abrahamic kin have much to offer us for reflection as they “celebrate” while sitting in the same boat as we are. They also have much to offer us when we are back to work in every way:

- First is the insight that hope is an element of every enduring religion. Remember, hope is a walking stick that helps us get from here in the muck, worry, discord, and injustice to there on the level ground with inner peace, right relations, and social justice. It got the Hebrews out of Egypt, Jesus out of the grave, and Muslims out of tribes into community. Hope is meant for you—no matter which story you embrace. Don't forget to look for the way across.
- Second is the realization that we are all made of the same stuff with the same needs and concerns—no matter how some try to take advantage of us, no matter that the system we're living in either isn't working for us or is overworking us, no matter that we are anxious about the details of today. Remember, you are both absolutely unique—and totally just like everyone else! Don't get overwhelmed; raise your walking stick in the air as a flag for assistance if necessary! Say something and one of us will respond.
- Third is the awareness there are many systems that are unjust no matter that our highest leaders want to hide the dysfunction. It is our responsibility to raise the alarm and try to make them better for everyone. Great religious figures, from Moses to Jesus to Muhammad, have had to deal with similar situations. They offer us examples and teachings to do things differently. Unfortunately, we may not be able to do our best activism right this moment. Indeed, we may feel depressed or beaten down right now. We will be able to resume our work together. Remember, both systemic and inner work are needed. If you aren't on the frontlines right now, take advantage of the moment for some inner work. If you are on the frontlines, tell us what you need and let the rest of us support you.

I wish we were together this Sunday but wishing doesn't really make anything happen. So instead I will pray you blessings where you are:

May Spring keep springing around you and demand your full attention.

May your attention bring you refreshment and renewal.

May you create a way to celebrate the Tradition that feeds you and the story that inspires you.

May your celebration spill over into your ongoing effort in this pandemic

so that whether you are out of work or overworked, you may be strengthened.

May you be alight with a vision of a better society.

May your vision be ever before you as hope draws you on.

May your weariness be lifted; may your zeal be tempered; may a healthy rhythm enfold you.

May you be assured you are essential in the work of justice

but ever mindful that it is not yours alone to accomplish.

May you be steadfast in struggle—calling for help as you need it; offering help as others call out.

May you be returned to us whole in our near future.

Happy Easter!

Claudia

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