



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Good Lord, deliver us Ezekiel 39:21-29 & St. John 6:1-14

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One of the defining marks of modernity is our feeling of safety. We each face our trials and our hardships, but our society, in general, is characterised by a feeling of safety and security. Something bad may happen to a person here or a person there, but our society, our economy, our world will keep humming along no matter what. We have control. Even when something bad does happen on a large scale, it's a given that things will bounce back. Last week, as the markets crashed, people were saying, "Ignore your portfolio. You're in it for the long haul. Don't worry. It'll recover." And chances are it will eventually, but it highlights our general attitude.

And now a new virus has spread around the globe. People are dying. Whole countries are in lockdown or even under martial law, and the illusion of safety has been shattered. People don't know what to do. They panic. They hoard. They lose hope and spiral into despair. People are afraid.

We've put our faith in science, in medicine, in government, in the economy and every one of those things is being shaken to its core right now. People are afraid. And it's not just people "out there". It's people in here. It's Christians, too. In good times we share Bible verses about "Fear not" on social media, but when everything starts to fall apart it's not so easy. And not surprisingly, I've been mulling over that this week.

We've started praying the Litany daily. I knew to do that because it's what the Church does in penitential seasons and in times of trouble. And yet these days

have given it new meaning for me. We've never used it here at Living Word as part of the liturgy, but in our previous churches it was always the way the service was begun during Lent. But I have to say that it didn't mean that much. It helped to establish the penitential nature of the season with its sombre tone, but that was about it. It had something of an historical feel to it. To sing words like, "From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire, and flood; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death, Good Lord, deliver us," just seemed a little over-the-top. "Plague"? We're not living in the Middle Ages anymore. When I was in seminary, we'd jokingly — on occasion — add our own over-the-top deprecations.

Or think of the words of "Eternal Father, strong to save". Somehow everyone knows the words, but for the life of me, I can't remember the last time I sang it in church. "Eternal Father, strong to save... O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea." It seems archaic in a day when the only time most of us have ever been at sea is on an enormous pleasure boat. It was a great setup when we saw them singing it in the chapel service in the *Titanic* movie, but we all know that things just aren't like that anymore. We don't sail little caravels around anymore. *Titanic* was a fluke. Our ancestors in ancient times — like the Hebrews — feared the sea. It was that bit of creation that God never fully tamed. But that's okay, because we've finally done it for him.

Modernity has saved us. Science. Industry. Democracy. Capitalism. They've saved us. Through them we've taken control of the world. We've become prosperous like no generation in history. We've eradicated plague and polio and nearly every other disease that cut the lives of our grandparents short. We've become so safe that we've actually had to downgrade our fears. Where previous generations feared disease and death, famine and war, today we fear speech that hurts our feelings or challenges our thinking. Even when tragedies do happen, modernity buffers us and lets us think we're still in control. People still die of

cancer, but we *know* that science has a cure just around the corner. Car accidents and plane crashes are flukes. It's not that we didn't know what to do. It's just that we should have set the speed limit lower or that an engineer at Boeing made a mistake. He's been fired and we trust it won't happen again. And just so with this bug that has confronted us with fear like our generation has never known. It's a fluke. Or many are developing wild conspiracy theories. Why? Because we've deceived ourselves into believing that our ship is unsinkable. But we're starting to wonder. Is this our generation's iceberg? We're starting to wonder if, just maybe, we're not really in control after all — that modernity isn't as unsinkable as we thought.

Our forefathers knew better. They knew plague and pestilence and famine and war first hand. Thomas Cranmer wrote the Litany in 1544 during King Henry's war with Scotland and France. The Litany is a testimony to the fact that our forefathers in the faith knew they were not the ones in control. Only God is sovereign and so they cried out to him, "Good Lord, deliver us". Since then, we've all but forgotten. It's even infected our liturgy. This week I went looking for the Collect for Times of Plague and Sickness. Our Reformed Episcopal Prayer Book is supposed to be "traditional", but it's not there. I went back to the 1928 Prayer Book. Not there. I looked in the old Canadian Prayer Book — the 1918 one — Ah!, there it was, but that wasn't it. It was a watered-down version. I had to go all the way back to the 1662 Prayer Book to find the full version of that collect, the one I've been praying each evening at the end of the Litany. The one that speaks of the Lord sending a plague on the obstinate Israelites when they rebelled against Moses and Aaron. The one speaks of the plague the Lord sent on Israel in David's day because of the King's sin. The one that calls on the people of its own day to repent and to plead the Lord, by his mercy, to withdraw his destroying angel. It was a collect prayed in faith just four years after it was written, prayed by a desperate people during the 1666 London plague. Prayed by people who

knew that they had no control and could only cry out to the Lord for deliverance.

Brothers and Sisters, Scripture reminds over and over that God is sovereign. Scripture calls us over and over to see his goodness and to see his faithfulness. Right from the beginning. He created this world and it was good. It was we who rebelled, who broke it and introduced corruption. It is our own fault that we were cast out of the presence of God. Sin cannot live in the presence of the holy. We, ourselves forged the very chains that enslave us, sin and death. We are to blame, not God. And yet he does not abandon us to sin and death. He made clothes for Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness and he gave them a promise that he would, one day, set right what they had broken. He called them to live in faith.

Scripture also reminds us that while God is not the author of suffering, sickness, and death, he often allows these things, uses them to get our attention, to call us back to faith when we have wandered, and to bring us to repentance. To remind, in those times when we've forgotten our enslavement, when we've come to embrace making bricks without straw as if it were what we were created for, when we've forgotten that the Lord created us for more than bondage. Think of Pharaoh, whom we read about in our study of Exodus not very long ago. The Lord sent Moses to Pharaoh with the command, "Let my people go!" Pharaoh responded, "I do not know this Lord." And so the Lord made himself known to Pharaoh, not once, not twice, not three times, but ten. The king who thought himself a god, the king who thought he controlled the cosmos, was brought to his knees before God.

But even God's own people rebelled. They were the people who lived with the Lord in their midst. They were the people enlisted by God to be part of his project to set this broken world to rights. Of all the people on earth, they were the ones who knew his goodness and his faithfulness first hand. And repeatedly they rebelled. But over and over we see his patience with his people. Israel's history is a long story of human

rebellion, of God calling them to repentance, of Israel refusing to listen, of God bringing calamity on them, and of the people finally repenting and returning to him. Only to be repeated in the next generation...and the next and the next...until the whole nation was finally defeated by the Babylonians and carried off into foreign exile. If they were not going to live as the people with God in their midst, God would take away his presence from them. That's what our Old Testament lesson from Ezekiel is about. The people of Israel sat by the waters of Babylon and wept as they wondered what had happened. And through the prophet Ezekiel the Lord answered them:

**I will set my glory among the nations, and all the nations shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God, from that day forward. And the nations shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity, because they dealt so treacherously with me that I hid my face from them and gave them into the hand of their adversaries, and they all fell by the sword. I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their transgressions, and hid my face from them.** (Ezekiel 39:21-24)

This is the God that many people in the Church today have forgotten: the God who chastens his people in order to bring us to repentance, in order to bring us back to our calling and mission—to be the people with God in our midst, to be the people called to be part of God's project to set this broken world to rights. Brothers and Sisters, to be that people we must walk in faith. We must give our *whole* allegiance to the Lord. Think of Israel. Israel never stopped worshipping the Lord. But the people worshipped other gods in addition to the Lord. They trusted in horses and chariots instead of trusting in the Lord. They cheated the poor and abused widows and orphans. Before the eyes of the watching nations, they made a mockery of the Lord. As I've said these last few weeks in our study of Exodus,

Israel was to be the people that brought honour and glory to the Lord's name, but instead the nations looked at Israel's faithlessness, her corruption, her idolatry and mockingly said, "Where is your God?"

As the Lord says here, his glory will be known amongst the nations...one way or another. If the people he has made his own will not bring glory to his name, then his glory will be made known in judgement. All the nations would know, the Lord says, that Israel went into captivity because of her iniquity. Like Adam and Eve, sinful Israel was cast out of the presence of the holy.

I can't help but think that God is chastening us now. He's been calling and calling and calling to us, getting louder and louder, ever more obvious, but we refuse to listen. And now, in many places—in fact across the entire country in which I was born—he has allowed the civil magistrate to close our churches in response to this sickness sweeping across the globe. And it's almost that bad here in Canada.

Now, we aren't old covenant Israel. The Church is the people who live with God in our midst, not because we gather around a building housing his presence, but because he has placed his own Spirit within us. But something vitally important has been taken away when we are no longer able to gather corporately as the people of God. Our community is stifled and crippled. And our witness and voice to the community is muffled. Jesus told us not to hold our light high to lighten the darkness, but we've allowed our light to become dim.

Like the rest of our society, we've put our trust in science, in industry, in government, in the economy. Don't get me wrong. Science and medicine, industry, good government, and sound economics are all gifts of God's common grace. They've benefitted us immensely and we should thank him for them. But that's just it. We've allowed our science and industry to *displace* God. We've put our trust not in him, but in the gifts he's given us—to the point that that old collect for times of

plague sounds archaic. We look at our prosperity and we take the credit for it ourselves. Look what we've done! We claim it all as a triumph of the human spirit. We applaud our children as they graduate high school, standing at podiums across the country, proudly proclaiming those awful words of Henley: "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." That could be the motto of modernity.

This week as the world fell into fear a bunch of celebrities got together and thought they'd cheer us all up and restore our hope by singing John Lennon's "Imagine". I've never understood its appeal. It's an ode to Nihilism. "Imagine there's no heaven...no hell...all the people living for today...nothing to kill or die for and no religion too." It's a song that declares that there is no God, that there is nothing beyond today. And that's exactly why it pops up every time there's a tragedy. It assures people that Providence is a myth and that all we need to do to make things better is to work harder to control this world ourselves.

But, Brothers and Sisters, it's not just the world. The Church has been unashamed in buying into these false sources of security, too. Like Israel, we've brought false gods into the Lord's temple. Like Israel, we've put our trust in horses in chariots—or in our case, science and industry and government. Like Israel, we've cheated the poor, we've abused widows and orphans. Like Israel, we've robbed God of his tithes. We've increasingly built our churches and our liturgy with ourselves at the centre and we've gradually pushed God to the perimeter.

I tremble to make such a statement, but I believe the Lord is chastening us. I tremble to say that, because it's a frightening thing to consider. I tremble to say it, because it's no longer fashionable to say things like that. And yet we see it in Scripture over and over and over. And our forefathers, like those men who wrote the collect for times of plague and sickness in the Prayer Book back in 1662 saw it plain

as day. I think that if they saw our squeamishness, they'd simply ask, "Why would you think that God works differently today than he always has?" And they would be right. Brothers and Sisters, our light has become darkness and the Lord has put a basket over it. He's put a basket over it that the world will no longer look at the Church and say, "Where is there God?" And he's put a basket over it as a wake-up call to us to repent and to return to him. We must let go of our false gods, of our sense of self-importance, of our false belief that we are in control. We need to take hold of the Lord in faith with both hands and let our lights be kindled again by his merciful grace.

And, Friends, that's the good news. We could go on with the lesson from Ezekiel. The Lord did go on to promise that he would restore his people after a time of chastening. But I think we should turn over to our Gospel now. St. John tells us the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand. John tells us that a large crowd was following Jesus. They'd seen him healing the sick and they wanted to hear his message—they were hungry for the Word. But it had been a long day, they were far from home, and they had nothing to eat. Mark writes that Jesus saw this and that he had compassion on them. He took the lunch of one boy, five loaves of bread and two fish—and you know the story—he blessed it and divided it and somehow this huge crowd the size of Comox had enough to eat and leftovers to spare—twelve basketfuls.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus is the proof of God's compassionate love for sinners. By his incarnation, by his death, by his resurrection—by his great sacrifice—he has saved us. Like the crowds that day who so desperately wanted to be near him and to hear what he had to say, if we will draw near to Jesus, we can be assured that he will have compassion on us too. It doesn't mean the way will be easy, but it does mean that the God who takes notice when something so small as a sparrow falls will be with us.

We may be living in the moment when the world's faith in modernity is shaken to the core. This is the time, now more than ever, that the world needs to hear once again the good news that Jesus, crucified and risen, is the world's true Lord. If we will but take hold of Jesus ourselves and let go of everything else, he will remove the basket and kindle our lights. We are privileged right now to be able to gather here this morning. Our presence here, our cars parked outside for the public to see, are a little bit of light that the Lord has allowed to escape from under the basket this morning. R. R. Reno wrote this week in *First Things*, "When we worship, we join the Christian rebellion against the false lordship of the principalities and powers that claim to rule our lives, including sickness and death. This does not mean carelessness about our health, nor does it mean indifference to the health of others. Instead, it means that as Christians we have higher priorities. Our end is in God....The massive shutdown of just about everything reflects the spirit of our age, which regards the prospect of death as the supreme evil to be avoided at all costs. St. Paul observed that Christ came to free us from our bondage to sin and death. This does not mean we will not die. It means we need not live in fear."

And so this morning we gather to bring glory to the Lord. May these dark days drive us to repentance. May these dark days renew our faith and cause us to hold tighter to Jesus than ever before. And with our faith renewed, we pray for our friends, our families, our community and our world, lifting our prayers up to the one who *is* truly in control: Good Lord, deliver us. Amen.