

Epiphany 5b: 2/7/21
The Reverend Dee Anne Dodd
St. Paul's Wallingford CT

*Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.* Isaiah 40:31

A colleague of mine said something on a Zoom call that's stayed with me:
"Last week was the longest month of my life."

Can you guess when he said that, what week he was talking about?
You might have felt the same way that week; I did.
It was the week back in March when life as we knew it fell apart.
March Madness was cancelled. Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson were diagnosed with
Coronavirus. Hand sanitizer and toilet paper were nowhere to be found.
It was the week when we left church on Sunday, March 8,
never suspecting that we'd be doing something called "livestreaming"
the following Sunday, March 15.

It was the longest week . . . that felt like a month, *at least*.

And yet, in a sense we hardly skipped a beat.
We gathered for worship, one way or another, that Sunday,
and the one after that, and again after that.
God was praised by the people of St. Paul's, as elsewhere.
The Word was proclaimed.
Jay led us in making a joyful noise unto the Lord.
Miss Frances offered a children's message.
And it was all projected into your home – through your computer or iPad,
smart phone or TV or whatever –
from Jay's laptop propped up on a stepladder in the middle of church.

It wasn't slick. God knows, it's still not.
But we were there. We were there for each other when we needed it most.
Spiritually connected even as we were physically distanced.
And everything we've tried since, some successful and some not so much,
has been offered in that same spirit.

It hasn't always been pretty.

There are things for which we'd love a redo. Things we wished we had done. It hasn't been easy (at times, it's been hard). But we've done it. By the grace of God, and the bewildering magic of technology, the kindness and goodwill of this parish community, the support of the Episcopal Church in CT, the incredible commitment and skill of your church leaders and staff, and YOU, we're here, together, one way or another – loving, learning, serving, organizing and praying. Thank you. Thanks be to God for you.

At the parish meeting which follows this service we'll see a slide show packed with pictures and fun facts of some of the ways – most of them new and different – that we've done the work God has given us to do this year.

There are pictures of goodie bags being delivered. People in face masks standing six feet apart in front of the church protesting for racial justice. Church School taking place everywhere from kitchen tables at home to under the big tent on the North Lawn to a hike in the woods, and then some – including Zoom, for children, youth and adults. More than 2,000 pounds of food and more than \$2,000 collected to help our neighbors in need through Master's Manna. Other drive-thrus for everything from "holding crosses" to blessing animals to picking up pretzels. Pilgrimages and prayer vigils, in church and online. Virtual choirs and real live music. Worshiping together from a near-empty church to the comfort of your own home. Taking church on vacation. Gathering out on the North Lawn – under the big tent as shade from the summer sun and later under hats and blankets as fall turned to winter. All the while joined with sisters and brothers in Christ participating at home, whether through YouTube or WPAA-TV.

Again, it wasn't always pretty or easy. As a member of our Regathering Task Force pointed out, "We've had a technical difficulty or something go wrong every single week. And, still, God's been praised."

That's what we're here for.

Of course there are things we miss, things we mourn.

What do you miss the most? *Who* do you miss?

It hurts so much to think of those we've lost during this period, who won't be there with us when we do get together.

Every so often, on a rare venturing out, I'll run into a parishioner peering out from behind a face mask.

We exercise great restraint and don't hug.

But we exchange greetings, asking how each has been.

Sometimes the answer is, "Waiting to get back to normal."

And I definitely get that. We're all eager to get on with our lives.

But may I humbly suggest that "waiting to get back to normal" may not in fact be the best use of this time?

It's probably not even realistic. Deep down we all know that things are never really going to be the same.

That "February 2020 ain't never coming back".

What if we were to take seriously all there is to learn from this season to take with us into the next?

What are we learning – about ourselves? About being church?

About God who is always about to "do a new thing", as scripture says, whose "mercies are new every morning"?

Sending God in Jesus into the world is not exactly what you'd call "normal" or business as usual, now is it?

And yet that is the God we worship and serve.

That is the God who did not, not, not visit this pandemic upon us, and who is with us every step of the way through it.

Showing us a new way.

Showing us that the Church – even a New England Episcopal church that's been around since 1741 – can learn a new way, and quickly.

We've shown this year that we can turn on a dime if we have to.

Just think what we could do if we chose to turn and try something new to which God is calling us?

We've shown we can do it when we have to; now, will we want to?

Rather than waiting for a time that's never going to return,
what can we be doing to prepare ourselves and one another
for whatever comes next?

Better to "wait for the Lord," as it says in our reading from the prophet Isaiah.

The passage comes at the beginning of a section of Isaiah written when
the people Israel were finally nearing the end of Exile.

(Almost like vaccines being introduced during a pandemic, perhaps?)

Isaiah is trying to rally them for whatever comes next.

He doesn't sing "Happy Days Are Here Again".

To people exhausted and weary, Isaiah shares this promise, this poetry:

*Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

So be it. *Amen*: which means, so be it.

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