

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, 2020  
*Virtual Grace*

Organ Prelude - 1 stanza, "The Church's One Foundation" (*Hymnal 1982, #525*)

Announcements -

This is an experiment. There will be a lot of glitches.  
And as you all know, I don't do well with extempore improvisation.  
Forgive me, then, if I read a lot.

As you know, at Bishop Kevin's directive, all parishes in the Diocese are mandated to remain closed through Easter at the earliest.  
Nonetheless we want to offer prayers, a message, and stay together as a community of faith.

Obviously, this is new for all of us - not going to Church and receiving Holy Communion.

It causes problems, and while I hate to talk finances anytime,  
at this point we know finances are difficult for everyone -  
including the Church.

We humbly ask if you are able to do so, to maintain your contributions  
to Grace Episcopal Church, through the mail,  
or as a couple have discovered,  
you can have your bank set up a direct contribution  
to the Church.

And do remember that you can call me at any time 24/7 with pastoral needs -  
prayer concerns *and* thanksgivings,  
and if you are comfortable and in need, a visit to your home.

Now, back to no Easter this year.

The daughter of a friend asked her, "If the Pope has canceled Easter this year,  
does Jesus stay dead?"

And I replied, "Of course not. He won't be arrested and killed, either.

Jesus was and is still alive!"

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Now let us pray:

Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Book of Common Prayer, p.817*

Holy God, holy and Mighty, holy Immortal One. Have mercy on us. (3x)

The Psalm appointed for today is the familiar 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which brings comfort to many in times of distress, say with me if you are able in the traditional wording of the KJV:

The Lord is my shepherd; \*  
I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; \*  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul; \*  
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil; \*  
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; \*  
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Hear now a portion of the Gospel for today from St. John's account:

When Jesus found the man whose sight he restored, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

*John 9:35-39*

*MEDITATION:*

The fourth book in my Lenten series based on the Church's Way of Love  
is titled just that, "*Worship.*"  
That is difficult for us these days - our Lenten desert walk through COVID-19 -  
as we struggle to worship together as a community of faith,  
a family of God.  
Which is why we are stepping out my comfort zone,  
and trying this "*Virtual Grace.*"

I once mentioned in a sermon the old quote, from Psalm 96:

"Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness"

*Psalm 96:9 KJV*

But I prefer it the other way around:

"Worship God in the holiness of beauty."

*Gospel according to Ed*

And in the Episcopal Church, we love beauty  
doing our best to offer and experience holiness,  
in our hymns, our prayers, artwork,  
even our theology, and hopefully my sermons.

My introduction to the Episcopal Church  
was substituting for my High School piano teacher  
to play Morning Prayer from the 1928 Prayer Book.  
A stone Victorian worship space, with Tiffany windows and a nice,  
though failing pipe organ.

Sound familiar?

After that Sunday, I went back to my Lutheran parish,  
where I landed after growing up in a New England Congregational Church,  
whose motto could have been the old Shaker hymn, "'tis a gift to be simple."

Then after college, another job in another Episcopal Church -  
stone Victorian, Tiffany windows, English Minton tile floors,  
a beautiful pipe organ and a choir who could sing through  
any Victorian, Baroque or modern anthem I threw at them.

An Anglo-catholic parish where I learned not only what to do,  
but they did all things worship-fully, and taught me why we do these things.  
I discovered that liturgy in the Episcopal Church was all about beauty,  
and the worship of God who made "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

But I learned from my father that God's creation is the most beautiful.  
Though a Church-goer, Dad would just as soon have been camping in the woods.  
Now you know from where or whom I come.  
Over the years, and remember I'm a modified Anglo-Catholic,  
    I've Baptized someone in reservoir pond;  
    I've offered communion on top of a 12 thousand 500-foot mountain,  
        and once 3 hours north of nowhere in Canada  
    Communion for a group of Scouts with grape drink and saltine crackers!

You do what you can,  
    you modify as you need.

We worship God in the holiness of beauty -  
    whether it be on a lake-side, a mountain-top,  
        a white colonial clapboard,  
            at the National Cathedral,  
    in the family room or at the dinner table.  
Maybe even with a technologically-challenged rector on the Internet.  
Even in these days of isolation due to Covid-19/Coronavirus,  
    when we at home open our Prayer Book  
        and pray the words we use every week,  
    we are assured that we are joining with Anglican - and others -  
        around the world.  
Whether it is your 'private' devotion of Morning or Evening Prayer  
    Compline ("bed-time prayers")  
        here are joined together you, God,  
    and the whole company of heaven and earth, saints and angels.

I urge you in these days to "Worship God in the holiness of beauty" -  
    the beauty of the love you share with those you love -  
        whether in person, or virtually.

Have you looked up, *virtual*?  
    From the Latin root for 'virtue'  
        "In effect or essence"  
    And isn't that how we describe Holy Communion, as the "essence" of Christ?

+ 5 +

So whether we are physically present,  
we are in essence together,  
as the Body of Christ.

Christ is present, though we may not see him physically.

So is your Church.

Hmm... Did God set the precedence?

Worship God in the holiness of beauty and in the beauty of holiness.

AMEN.

Let us now pray together in the words which Christ himself taught us”

Our Father...

*Blessing*

And now, may the peace of God Almighty which surpasses anything we can humanly understand, may that peace keep your hearts, your souls and your minds in the knowledge and love of God our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer. Amen and amen.

Organ Postlude - 1 stanza of “’tis the Gift to be Simple” (*Hymnal 1982, #554*)

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22 March 2020

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