

Christ Episcopal Church
2 Emerson Street (at the corner of
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East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855-1330

The Second Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 5 (B)

June 6, 2021

DRAFT

“Will we ever be church again?”

9 AM Sermon

by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 3:20-35

The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up

against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit." Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was

sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Help us, Dear Lord, to see in each other your face, your love, and your care.

Amen.

About three years ago I preached at another church the day after I had been “a part of a large scale response team of over 180 Red Cross volunteers for a mock Category 3 hurricane called Mauricio that was to hit New Jersey and New York City [and Connecticut] today. It was a drill, or as we continuously said as we communicated to others on this big team, “This is an exercise.” It was not the real thing. And as I mentioned, the exercise was sponsored by the American Red Cross. We were testing our response readiness and making plans for an actual disaster that, God willing, will

never hit us. But the probability of such a hurricane is not zero, as we have seen in the fairly recent past. I have also participated in two other major disaster exercises, a mock thermonuclear explosion in Secaucus, New Jersey, that supposedly would destroy the entire West Side of Manhattan, and much of New Jersey; and there was another exercise about an 8.0 Magnitude earthquake that was to occur along 125th Street in Manhattan. These were all ‘exercises’, not the real things.

No one on June 9, 2018, when I preached that sermon had an inkling of the disaster

that did hit the entire world January 2019, only six months later. We were focused on what the Red Cross could do: the Red Cross takes care of victims of physical disasters daily—fires, floods, hurricanes, tornados, explosions, war. No one was prepared for a biological disaster, not any government, not the United Nations, not the Red Cross, not anybody. The church I supplied at for the Christmas Eve service in 2018 was located a few miles south of here in Westchester County. The Senior Warden had just completed having the whole sanctuary painted for the first time in six years for the

Christmas Eve service. A month later he would be dead of covid. This virus which had very little mercy laid the world at the edge of death for well over a year. The hospital in Queens nearest where we live in Manhattan was overrun by sick and dying patients by April 2019. It would have the largest death toll of any hospital in America.

A friend from Hong Kong, a priest, found her long lost brother, once a translator for the United Nations, in a nursing home in New Jersey. He wanted to be baptized, and she asked me to come do the baptism, which I did. A short time later he would be

another victim of covid—he was in the nursing home that had so many death they were putting the bodies in a shed at the back of the facility. It was very nice nursing home, but it had the largest death toll of any nursing home in New Jersey. He would become one of the victims of covid.

I did see a news clip of President George W. Bush, a classmate of my wife in Harvard Business School, who had pleaded for a multibillion program to prepare America for a biological disaster such as the one we have experienced. He was ignored. And he was our President.

As a disaster chaplain for the Red Cross, I have undergone training for mass warfare incidents involving nuclear weapons and nerve gas weapons. There is a containment suit that works for about a day, the cost then was around thirty thousand dollars; none of us chaplains were deemed worthy of such protection, but we all five Episcopal priests were put in the immediate response unit; there are three units, immediate, mid-response, and follow-up. We called ourselves the Black Canaries. None of us in the first wave would survive. And every police, fire fighter, and EMS worker in New

York City was assigned to one of those categories; only Category Three would likely survive the worst disaster. It was a bold, but naïve plan, as it turned out for the covid crisis. No disaster plan was in place for covid. It struck us in our most vulnerable places, the old and infirm went first, and so on.

So what does this say about churches; how did we do?

I think, given the circumstances, we did pretty good. We figured out how to stay in communication with our fellow parishioners by Zoom and a variety of other internet

platforms. We responded as we were able to provide funerals, weddings, and a very few baptisms. Confirmations ceased, and the Bishops' responsibility changed to be liaisons to public officials giving us directions for what we as churches could or could not do. Baptist churches on the other hand do not have bishops, so they each responded as independent units. A Baptist but formerly Swedish church in our neighborhood in Manhattan kept church services going, the only one we found anywhere that did so; they had communion wafers and wine in sealed containers each

Sunday and took Communion every Sunday. Every one wore masks; the singers and congregation still sang; we took covid seriously, but we never stopped in building church. They continued two services each Sunday as before, a 9 am and a 10:30 am. But searching high and low I did not find any other church that was open in Manhattan. For what it's worth, the Swedish church has the longest pure unbroken succession of bishops of any church in the world. But years ago the church had become a Baptist church that continued to worship in somewhat similar

manner to its founding forefathers and foremothers. But it was an incredible exception. My former church in Elizabeth, New Jersey, also very independent minded, continued most services unabated as did an Episcopal Church in Cranford, nearby Elizabeth. But of the 140 churches in the Diocese of New Jersey, they were the only churches that remained open for almost all of the crisis.

We have joked that Episcopal churches have substituted alcohol sanitizer for the wine, as we for many Sundays after reopening would ask parishioners to douse

their hands with sanitizer before coming up for latex-glove-handed Communion wafers. So we have had to imagine the vapors of the Blood of Christ and receive it before the Body of Christ, rather than afterwards. And we Zoom Christians have become priests in our own homes, blessing and giving the bread and sometimes wine too, as we watched intently a priest giving us instructions each Sunday.

So the body of Christ has managed somehow to hang together, more electronically and virtually than we were used to. But by and large the church as a

church has survived. The next steps will determine how much life is still left in us. Can we grow back into our church buildings? Can we continue them.

After I left Christ Church here in December of 2019, I began a new personal journey that I had wanted to pursue since I was in college, and I began medical school in the American University of Antigua School of Medicine in the Caribbean. I have just completed my third semester and am heading for the fourth semester in July. A fifth semester will take me into the summer of next year when I have to pass a test called

Step One that is required of all US medical students; given that I can pass Step, Lord willing I go for two years to some location or locations for my clinical experience in the various medical specialties. My studies have been absolutely fabulous—every day I learn something about the human body I could not even imagine before. The past year has been conducted entirely at our homes as the Island of Antigua closed to all tourists. But with the help of a high school classmate doctor for the past few months I have spent time shadowing a nephrologist, a highly skilled kidney doctor, on her rounds

at dialysis clinics, in the ICU, and office visits with both new and old patients. I have learned some of the plusses and minuses of scientific medicine: some of our patients who by all clinical means should be very sick are not feeling much sickness at all; and others even with our best medical skills have not survived. Covid hit kidney patients very hard; in this practice about one of every ten were infected by covid, about ten times worse than the general public; however, most survived. The first patient I saw had had gotten both Pfizer vaccinations and still

got a very serious case of covid; that can happen. But she survived.

Will we as churches survive: I certainly hope so. We were the bulwark that helped keep society alive; we had ‘connections’ that were strained but not broken. Amazing things happened in every congregation. The Spirit of Christ was there and is still here.

Praise be to God for God’s many mercies and kindness.

Amen.

Description:

Jesus calls his followers his closest family members. Our families during covid may have been those of our church, those who love and serve the Lord together with us.

Tags:

Family, disaster, covid, Red Cross, Holy,
Spirit, hurricane, earthquake, nuclear, New
Jersey, Connecticut, New York, survivors,
Christ, Bread, sanitizer